

THE
SCEPTER
OF AMON
The Hero's Path Book I
The Path of Reason

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The Scepter of Amon
The Hero's Path Book I: The Path of Reason
by David Pontier

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Prologue

“Razor, come!”

The magnificent hawk responded to the call at once, flying over to his master and alighting on the ranger’s shoulder. Reanald Dortius turned his back on the chaos behind him, confident that none of the orcs would be so foolish as to attack him from behind. They had wanted his fabulous bow as payment to see their dark lord, Eb Kath’Eshetheron, which was orcish for The Shadow Demon, but Reanald had negotiated with them. Instead of his bow, he had offered them arrows.

At first, the orcs had refused, but after the ranger had given them a dozen of the arrows, shot from his bow in the blink of an eye, they saw the light and decided to accept his generous offer. The hawk had been eager to negotiate also, swooping down on the orcs, slashing them with his talons and beak, letting them know why his master called him Razor.

“You can have your fun once we return, my friend,” Reanald told the bird as it settled on his shoulder, the hawk’s claws gripping onto the padding he wore for just that purpose. “Once we return with the scepter, I’ll let you terrorize as many orcs as you want. What do you think of that?”

When the bird didn’t respond, Reanald turned to look at him. The hawk held a bloody ear in his beak. Reanald laughed at his companion and held out an open hand to catch the trophy. Razor let it go and then let his master know what he thought about orcs.

“Very good,” the ranger chuckled. “But for now, I will need your eyes. I am guessing that the orcs do not keep this passageway as well-lit as the monks did.” Razor agreed with a stifled chirp and concentrated his keen eyes on the blackness before them.

The monastery existed in two parts. The outer half had been built on the side of the mountain and consisted of large halls supported by great pillars. It could be seen from dozens of miles away, its gray exterior rising above the mountain’s tree line. But it got cold in the winter, and the monks had extended their home deep into the mountain. The hallways inside were not as grand in size but had once been so in design. Fabulous banners had been hung in the relatively narrow halls, and the stone had been crafted and shaped as if the dwarves themselves had lent their expertise. The halls were filled with grand fireplaces and luxurious accommodations. Torches had hung in every corner, and lamps were suspended from the ceilings of the larger rooms.

Now it was dark. The banners had fallen apart. The torches were nothing but burnt sticks, broken and rotted on the ground. The orcs didn’t come down here. The passage into the heart of the mountain was not hidden and had been a prominent gateway in its day, but the orcs, as dumb as they were, did not venture out of the upper monastery no matter how cold it became.

The monks had been wise to create this elaborate fortress, but they had gone too deep. In his research, Reanald read that the monks had awoken a hell beast. It stormed through the halls, but they managed to magically seal it within one of the large lower chambers. There was no good description of the monster in the books, but Reanald had faced off

against dragons and worse, so he felt confident as he made his way down the dark corridors.

If what the orcs had said were true and this creature was a shadow demon, then the ranger was happy he had not traded in his bow. He gripped the weapon tightly in his right hand, the sun gems at either end of the bow glowing slightly. He relaxed his grip quickly once he saw the dim light surround him. He did not want to give away his location if he did not have to. If those before him had walked these halls carrying a torch, it was no wonder they had failed.

“Razor,” he whispered, “fly ahead and be my eyes.” The hawk soundlessly took to the air, gliding gently down the hall and out of sight. Reanald closed his eyes, fell into the link with his companion, and continued forward. He had seen that the floor was clear of debris, and the ranger walked confidently along, his eyes seeing the tunnels ahead of him.

The sensation of flying was nothing new to the ranger, for he and Razor had perfected this union over many years. He had used the hawk’s vision not only to spy on adversaries but also to fire his bow accurately in the dead of night. The hawk flew forward quickly, spying every nook and cranny, eliminating any chance of an ambush and giving Reanald a complete look at each room before he entered.

It was not difficult to figure out which way they needed to go, and all they had to do was follow the darkness. Light, what little there was that made its way down the chimneys and from the entrance above was sucked into the bowels of the ancient monastery, and the two friends found themselves traveling within the current.

Reanald felt the chill first through Razor. Contrary to what one would assume, the temperature dropped considerably as they journeyed toward the center of the mountain. But this chill was more than a drop in air temperature. It was something that chilled the soul as well as the body.

As Razor flew into an old weapon room with the gym beyond, Reanald knew where the beast was kept. He sent a thought of warning to his pet but would never assume to control the hawk. Razor had a mind of his own, and despite the warning, he flew into the gym.

Reanald stopped, concentrating on his visual link. He was still a minute or two from the gym, but he needed to see what he was up against. The hawk could usually see in the darkest of caves, pulling light from the slightest reflection or the most minute heat source, but there was nothing in the monks’ old gym. Nothing but cold and shadow.

Reanald started walking again, taking it slowly while still casting his vision off ahead. The hawk circled about the open space, somehow sensing where the walls were but not seeing anything else. It was a noise – not a movement – that caught their attention. It was the sound of leather over stone, a faint rustle that could only be heard in the deepest of silence.

Their collective eyes turned to the sound, and they saw a pair of eyes staring back at them. They weren’t the fiery red of a demon but the frosty blue of an ice giant. However, they lacked the giant kind’s gentleness and were as tempestuous as a blizzard at sea.

Razor was frozen in place; Reanald could do nothing but watch. There were teeth suddenly, visible only because the hell beast wanted them to be. They were as sharp as frost blades, with a canine maw as hideous as Reanald had ever seen.

Then there was motion, a frantic blurring of shadow, as a clawed hand lashed out. Reanald sensed a flurry of wings and feathers, a sharp, bone-chilling pain, and then darkness. "Razor," Reanald whimpered, falling to his knees in shock.

The hawk was dead; Reanald knew it as surely as he could feel the cold stone floor beneath him. If he were just doing this for the wizard, he would have turned back now. Even the promise that Warrick Conquera had made to return him his lost honor, stolen by the arrogant duke, was not enough for him to continue. But this beast had killed his companion, for that Reanald would keep going.

Reanald stood up and blinked his eyes. He could not tell the difference between when his eyes were open or closed. He thought about using his bow to illuminate the area but didn't. His memory was good, and he had moved across much more uneven terrain than this leveled floor having only Razor's eyes to guide him. The ranger walked forward with a purpose.

He sensed the death more than anything else as he entered the weapon room. Reanald remembered seeing rotted staves and other polearms lying on the floor from when Razor had flown through the space and did his best to stay in the middle away from the walls where he might slip and fall on the round weapons.

Though he could not see his hand three inches from his face, he could see the doorway. In a room of inky blackness, a distinct rectangle was even darker. And even without that, Reanald could feel the rushing current of life being pulled into the larger room and swallowed whole.

Reanald almost lost his nerve right there. Fear consumed him, and he nearly turned and ran, but he couldn't. Whatever honor the duke might have stolen from him in the public's eye, he still held onto it in his heart, and he would not flee from this creature until he had tested it with his best. Whimpering in the dark was not his best.

The ranger pulled an arrow over his shoulder and lifted his bow, aiming into the adjoining room. His movements were silent and sure. He did not need to see to catch the end of his arrow on the bowstring, as it was a motion he had done a thousand times. He pulled the shaft back and waited a few short seconds as the sun gems at the top and bottom of the bow rotated into position.

The gems locked into place, and two beams of intense sunlight, no wider than a string shown into the gym. They struck the far wall of the large room some two hundred feet away, focusing into a tight circle of light the size of a child's ring. Reanald perceived movement to the right, adjusted his aim, heard a sharp sizzling sound, and fired.

Reanald retreated twenty quick steps back to the entrance of the small storage area. He had another arrow ready, and as a haze shot into the small room, the sunbeam shone again, and he fired. The shadow left the room just as quickly, and Reanald readied another arrow, his heart in his throat.

What was that thing? Had that been its arm? Its head? Its whole body? Reanald had not seen much through the eyes of Razor. All he remembered were the eyes and teeth, and as he focused on those, his body began to shake with fear. He tried to throw the images from his mind, but he was in total darkness and could see nothing else.

Reanald willed some more light from his bow. The sunbeams lit up only a tiny point on

the far wall, but soon the weapon storage room was bathed in a soft yellow glow. It was just as Razor had shown to him, weapons scattered about and racks in disarray. The darkness of the open doorway to the gym was impenetrable.

The ranger crept toward the opening, aiming his cocked bow through the doorway as soon as he had a firing angle. The sunbeams hit the far wall of the gym again. He moved the dot of light about slowly, his right hand twitching on the string, ready to let fly as soon as the sunbeams found the hazy flesh of this hideous creature. He moved it all about, but the room appeared to be empty.

What if it had circled around and was now behind him? Frantically, Reanald turned back the way he had come. Nothing. But now it could be coming through from the gym! He turned back, taking several hasty steps to put the wall at his back, forgetting about the weapons on the floor. Reanald slipped, his bow going high and firing. The arrow skittered off the nearby ceiling as he flailed his arms and fell back against the rotted weapon racks.

He regained his footing as quickly as he could, his heart pounding. Crouching low amongst the broken wood, the cold wall against his back, he had another arrow out, his magical bow peering into the darkness in front of him. He felt suddenly alone.

“I have come for the Scepter of Amon,” he cried out, his voice startling him as it echoed in the cold, dark cavern. “My bow can hurt you. Give me the scepter, and I will be on my way.”

AS YOU WISH.

The voice was nothing more than a whisper, yet it reverberated through the room. Reanald shivered in the cold as he waited. He heard the rushing air of something flying at him and dodged to the side as a heavy object crashed into the wooden rods behind him. As Reanald reached down for the item, he realized that this creature must be able to see him as clear as day to make such an accurate throw.

His hand closed on something soft and covered with feathers.

In a flash, the ranger stood from the jumbled wood, anger dominating his actions. He strode forward, walking straight into the gym with his bow up and shining bright. For once, the light penetrated the darkness. The intensity of the shadow retreated just for a moment, giving Reanald a full view of what he faced. The teeth, the eyes, the scales, the wings, the despair . . . it all washed over him in an instant, and he dropped his bow.

The shadow took him.

Chapter 1

The Human Dream

The fire consumed.

It seemed to come from inside the wood as if the log was in some way breathing fire. Individual jets hovered fractions of an inch over and around the porous wood, joining together into flames and creating the miracle of chemistry that was fire. But few saw it that way, and few paid it the respect it was due. For it was a miracle.

Most saw fire as an everyday event. It was how water was heated and food cooked. It was light for reading and warmth in the winter. It was easily started with a match and even more easily doused with a bucket of water.

Life, too, was taken for granted. While not so easy to create, it was effortless to snuff out in the wild and dangerous world. And only at either end, only at birth and death, did anyone ever see the inescapable miracle that was life – the precious flame that burned in every living thing. The simple complexity – if such a concept could exist – was too often overlooked as commonplace.

Fire fell into that category too. That it existed, people could not deny, but how it existed was something most would just as soon ignore. Evokers could specialize in casting fire, and they retained some knowledge of its power, but theirs was a magical fire akin to a necromancer raising an undead creature. For magical fire was a flame without fuel, a life without a soul. It was an energy that had a will and purpose. A true fire existed for just one purpose: to exist.

Over time, the log would burn and crumble apart, but in a snapshot of time, it seemed to be alive with flame, dancing and glowing with unexplainable energy. Though not a breath of air moved about the wood, still the fire rose and fell, flickered and danced about, reading the minute textures and fibers of the wood upon which it lived, upon which it fed.

Few paid it the respect it was due. Kevrin was one of the few. The man reached out tentatively toward the flames like a vampire carefully squinting into a sunrise. He felt the heat and yanked his hand back. He wasn't cold. He wasn't hungry. He didn't need the light. He was just curious.

A long twig lay next to him on the ground, and Kevrin picked it up. Fire grabbed hold to the end of the stick quickly once he poked it into the hot embers. Ever so carefully, he pulled it back to himself, the tip aglow with a single flame. He brought it as close to his face as he dared, watching as the previously brown twig slowly turned black, the flame creeping down along the length of the stick.

The fire was now only inches from his sensitive eyes, but Kevrin kept them open, trying to unravel the mystery of the weightless, massless energy sustained on the end of the stick. He moved it ever closer to him . . .

“Boo!!!”

The high-pitched cry lacked any real strength or power, but Kevrin reacted no less than if a dragon had just landed in front of him. He cried out and jumped back, dropping the flaming stick into his lap. He leaped up, dancing about, hands flapping at his legs, trying to pound out any potential flames. The fiery end of the stick hadn't even had the opportunity to touch against his pants yet and fell harmlessly to the dusty ground. Still, Kevrin hopped about, stamping out the fire with his boots and grinding it into the ground.

It was many long seconds after the initial scare before Kevrin settled down and became aware of the shrill laughter coming at him so quickly that it sounded like one long, high-pitched tone. A sprite lay on the ground a few feet away from the fire, slapping his tiny thighs in a fit of uncontrollable laughter. His wings flapped about, spinning his body around and creating a mini dust cloud.

He wasn't in such an uncontrolled state that he didn't notice the much bigger man stalking toward him, the bottom of his boot poised to stamp the sprite into a pulp. The tiny creature, not more than a foot tall, sprang off the ground, ran a few feet, flew a few more, and hopped the last couple, stopping on the opposite side of the fire just as Kevrin's boot slammed down where he had been. He still hadn't stopped laughing.

"Leave me alone, Sprits. Why do you make fun of me?" Kevrin growled across the fire. Despite his fear of the flames, he almost leaped through them to throttle the annoying creature. But he knew that the sprite would be a dozen feet away within a second.

The sprite cleared his throat several times a second, trying to rid his body of the convulsive laughter. "Please, I beg your forgiveness, oh noble Krvgrn," he said as slowly as he could.

"My name is Kevrin!"

"Again, my sincerest apologies. I fear my redundant failures regarding quintessential information are further evidence of my intellectual inferiorities next to your own vast knowledge."

Kevrin growled ominously. "Use smaller words."

"Sprite, sorry. Troll, angry." Sprits used his lowest and slowest voice possible.

Kevrin rushed at him again, first to the left and then to the right, trying to catch the sprite off guard. To the man's credit, the sprite did bite on the first fake, but he was already racing past the slower man when he realized it and just kept going until he was on the opposite side of the fire again.

"I am not a troll," Kevrin said once his eyes had located his elusive enemy.

"Oh, no? Catch." Sprits' tiny hands reached into the fire and withdrew a flaming piece of wood. The creature's motions were so fast as he threw the wood at Kevrin that the fire never had a chance to burn the sprite.

The wood never had a chance to burn Kevrin either. He leaped out of the way at the first hint of an attack. It was only a tiny piece of bark, but his reaction was as if a mage's fireball had been thrown at him. Kevrin stumbled to the dirt and rolled into a sitting position. His eyes looked back at the small piece of wood that had already burned out on the ground.

It couldn't have harmed him; he knew that. But his reaction had been instinctual and hadn't involved rational thought. There was something deep inside of him that feared fire

above all things. Trolls were abominations of nature with supernatural strength and endurance that mocked the rules that governed the rest of life. Nature depended on a circle of life; a troll's regenerative powers directly contradicted that balance. As with any blemish in nature, the only answer was to burn it out. Acid and fire were the best ways to purge trolls and keep them from coming back.

But Kevrin didn't want to be a troll. He looked down at his hands. His fingers were short and fat, his palm soft. The back of his hand had hair and a few freckles.

"I am not a troll," he repeated quietly, more to convince himself than argue with the sprite. "Anymore."

Kevrin could remember that his hands had not always looked like they did now. They used to be thin and elongated, the bones and blood vessels visible beneath the translucent, thin, gray skin. His fingers had been long with three knuckles and hideous claws instead of the smooth pink fingernails he now had.

He had been seven feet tall, with long, sinewy limbs. His kind usually walked hunched over, their knuckles dragging on the ground, but Kevrin had tried to take pride in himself and walked more upright. It was a posture that looked better as a human, something he was still experimenting with.

He was getting used to the clothes as well. Though the trousers and cotton shirt were high quality, they scratched his skin and made him feel encumbered. He was used to wearing little more than a loincloth. He appreciated the boots when walking on the rocky ground, and a hat kept the sun out of his eyes, but it would take a while to get accustomed to the whole ensemble.

"You will always be a troll," the sprite said from across the fire. "My master has simply put a human cloak about you to hide your hideous nature. Why he chose you, to begin with, is still a mystery to me."

"Warrick Conquera is smarter than you," Kevrin replied, dropping the name of the sprite's master. "He knows what I really am."

"You are a troll masquerading as a-," Sprits noticed the confused look on the man's face, "-pretending to be a human," he clarified.

"I talk like a human," Kevrin argued.

"Like an uneducated, stuttering idiot."

"I talk very good!" Kevrin shouted.

Very well, the sprite chuckled to himself but didn't bother correcting him out loud. "What did you eat tonight?"

Kevrin pointed toward the carcass of a deer under a nearby tree. The sprite raced over to examine the dead animal, noticing there was very little meat left. "Did you cook it?" Sprits asked when he returned.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because that is what a human would do, you disgusting troll. If a real man had eaten just a fraction of that much raw meat, he would be sick for a week."

"But," Kevrin started and stopped. He could not think of an adequate comeback. He slumped his shoulders and looked at his hands again. He knew better than to try and

argue with the sprite. The tiny creature was far too clever for a . . . a stupid troll like himself. "I should have been a human," he moped.

"And I should have been a dragon," Sprints replied, wasting one of his few spells to change his voice into a deep, booming roar momentarily. Kevrin looked up and saw that the sprite was aloft, his wings beating by his side like a hummingbird. He hovered just above the fire, the flickering light casting an eerie glow on his tiny body. For a moment, he did look like a dragon.

"I would rain fire upon all those beneath me," he continued in his false voice. "Kings and emperors would flee before me or offer treasures to sate me, but it would do no good. I would take anything I wanted and devour those who stood in my way."

His spell ended, and he alighted back on the ground. "But I am not a dragon. I am a sprite. And I would no sooner try to pass off as a dragon – especially amid real dragons – than I would advise you to try to pass off as human amid real humans."

"But your master said-"

"I know what my master said," Sprints cut him off. "Tomorrow, you will enter the city of Erronvale, the largest city along the Erron Mountains. It is a city of sophistication and splendor. In an environment where most towns are lucky to draw a few hundred residents and are then inevitably overrun by warlords or monsters, Erronvale has prospered and grown to a population of over 20,000 and challenges even Torrin as the most prominent city in all the lands of Everon. A troll will not be able to fit in."

"But your master said-"

"I know what my master said," Sprints repeated. "You will go into Erronvale, you will go to their library, and you will find information regarding the Scepter of Amon, or more likely, I will find the information, unless you have learned to read unbeknownst to me. And then you will leave the city, venturing into the mountains, where my master believes the scepter to be. You will not stay long in the city, and you will not speak to anyone unnecessarily. You will pass through the streets of Erronvale and be forgotten as soon as you leave. Master Conquera is in search of the Scepter of Amon, but he does not want anyone to know."

"Why not?"

"You would not understand," the sprite said, making no effort to hide the contempt from his voice.

Kevrin swallowed his anger. "I will do what your master asks as long as he helps me."

Sprints smiled. "Master Conquera said that he will investigate the potential for turning you into a human permanently, but that would require powerful magic, and he cannot guarantee anything."

"He will find a spell. I know he can."

"Whatever," the sprite replied, growing impatient with the direction the conversation had taken. He had said what he wanted, and spending time with Kevrin was not his favorite pastime. "I will return to check on you in time."

"In time for what?" Kevrin asked, but the sprite had already magically popped out of sight. "Stupid sprite," he muttered under his breath.

Kevrin had heard and understood most of what Sprints had said, but he only agreed with

some of it. He had not spent any time with humans, and he looked forward to seeing them interact within a city. Yet he also felt trepidation, for he knew he was a troll and would not fit well into the human culture. He hated the sprite because the tiny creature made him feel stupid. How much more stupid would he feel when the ways, cultures, and customs of the people of Erronvale showed him just how out of place he was? He looked like a grown man of over twenty years, but Kevrin knew his intellect was that of a child.

He looked over his camp, wondering how different a real human's site would look. His horse was tied to a tree almost out of view. Though his physical appearance had changed, he was still a monster, and the horse felt uncomfortable around him. There was the deer, ripped open and eaten raw. He had thought about cooking the meat, but his apprehension of fire kept him from experimenting. There were no other supplies or tools in the camp. There was no bedroll or shelter. His only weapon was a great sword. He had a horse, and on the horse was a pack with a few changes of clothes that Warrick had given him.

Kevrin shook his head. Tomorrow he would see how people acted. Tomorrow he would join a human society for a short while. Tomorrow he would realize a portion of his dream, and he would finally know if that dream was a fantasy or a nightmare.

* * *

Torrin was the capital city of Everon and had been built around the crossing of two rivers. The Gahlen and Belgum Rivers did not merge into one but crossed each other like two roads. No scholar believed that such a crossing could have occurred naturally, and many thought the gods themselves had carved the riverbeds.

As a result, the city was filled with fabulous temples and churches. It was a city of towering white buildings, paved streets, and numerous bridges. People called it The City on Water, for many businesses and homes were built into the bridges such that much of the population spent most of their day over the water. The rivers were the country's lifeblood, and Torrin was the heart that pumped food and goods along those rivers.

The Gahlen River flowed out of the Erron Mountains east through the Great Plains of Everon and into Torrin. The farmers in the plains used it to irrigate their crops and then shipped those crops into the city or further down one of the two rivers to be sold elsewhere.

The plains were vast, stretching three hundred miles west from the city into the foothills of the Erron Mountains, and were twice as wide north to south. The further west one went, the wilder the land became. Few farmers dared live more than one hundred miles west of Torrin. Several smaller villages along the river provided the farmers with supplies and shipping routes, and none of them carried much of a garrison.

Out in the foothills of the Erron Mountains, few people dared to make a living, and those who did lived along the Western Highway. The highway was a simple dirt road that stretched over two hundred miles from the last farming village along the Gahlen River to the city gates of Erronvale. It traveled across the flat plains and wove its way through the foothills. With the mountains and surrounding area filled with goblins, orcs, and the like,

the Western Highway was the only safe passage through the region. Though fundamentally stupid, the monsters of the land knew that any caravan traveling along the road would have a strong contingent of guards and should be ignored.

Erronvale should not have been able to survive. It was too far removed from civilization, isolated against the dangers of the land. The city's people knew this, and they knew that until they found a profitable way to ship goods up the Gahlen River, they would forever rely on the Western Highway. Thus, they worked hard to keep it open. Only during the winter months did it close, and then only for a short while, for they manually cleared it of snow during late fall and early spring. It was a task that was made manageable with the help of the city's mage.

Kevrin camped to the south of the highway, out of sight from anyone that might be passing by. The lone traveler awoke with the sun. He did not have a garrison or troupe of soldiers with him and was fair game for any tribe of roving goblins. Yet Kevrin was not worried. He carried only a simple sword, but he had the strength to drive that blade cleanly through a tree trunk as thick as a man's waist. He almost hoped something would attack him to break the monotonous days of traveling across the plains, but nothing did. The only fights had been with his horse.

Kevrin approached the animal cautiously, trying not to alarm it. After several days with the horse, Kevrin had realized that it must be able to see through his disguise. He could think of no other explanation for why the horse was always so restless around him. No matter how carefully Kevrin approached, he was still a troll, and the horse didn't like it.

Each morning, Kevrin felt like he had to break the horse anew as if it were a wild animal and not used to being ridden. The exact opposite was true. The horse was a fine animal and could carry the most regal of princesses. Kevrin was the wild one, or at least that's how the horse saw it.

The big animal began to neigh and nicker almost as soon as it saw its new owner approaching. "Easy, horse, easy." Kevrin didn't know if it had a name and didn't think to give it one. "Calm down. I am not going to hurt you."

The horse backed away, but it was tethered to a tree and could only go so far. It pulled hard against the rope, but the tree wasn't moving. Kevrin got close to the restless animal and grabbed at the reins. "Gotcha!"

The horse whinnied loudly and reared up, kicking out. One of the hooves clipped Kevrin on the shoulder, turning him to the side. An average man would have sustained a broken collarbone, but Kevrin just grimaced in pain and retaliated. The supernaturally strong man tugged down hard on the reins, bringing the horse's hooves back to the ground. He struck out with his free hand, slapping the horse across the head.

The horse cried out again, but now it was more of a whimper as it shied away. Kevrin growled and pulled its head back in line with his own. He was about to rebuke the animal but noticed the fear in its eyes. It was a look he had received all too often in his life, from animal and human alike. He had cried out at the injustice of it in the past, but how could he argue with it now? The horse was judging him for what he was: an angry troll who had just lost his temper.

"I am sorry," Kevrin said, his tone suddenly soothing. "I did not mean to . . ." He didn't

mean to what? He didn't mean to hit the horse? Then why had he? It was his trollish nature, he knew. It was a nature that, if left unchecked, might have killed the horse. It was a nature that clashed violently with the kind of person he wanted to be. He stroked the mane of the magnificent animal as gently as he could, watching as a welt rose on the horse's cheekbone.

"You need some water." Kevrin untied the horse from the tree and led the reluctant animal to a small stream. The horse understood its owner's intentions when it saw the water and was slightly more cooperative.

As Kevrin stood beside the horse, rubbing its neck as it drank, he glanced down into the slow-moving water. He nearly jumped back when he saw his reflection. A troll stared back at him from the rippling water. Kevrin took a few moments to compose himself, reminding him that this was how the spell worked. He didn't know why the wizard had set it up this way, but he could not see his human reflection. To him, he looked every bit a troll. Warrick had assured him that if someone else saw his reflection, they would see his human disguise, but Kevrin would never get to see what others saw.

He unbuttoned his shirt and looked down at his bare chest. There, inverted to his eyes, was a crude tattoo of a man. This was the spell that Warrick had cast on him; a permanent marking that would not fade with time. Still, Kevrin knew it could be dispelled or countered, and in searching for a magical item like the Scepter of Amon, he would likely encounter people powerful enough to see through his disguise.

Around his neck, he wore an amulet that hung down inside his shirt. Warrick had told him that this necklace would offer him extra protection. Protection from what the wizard hadn't said, but Kevrin did not question him.

Seeing that his horse had finished, Kevrin buttoned his shirt and walked the animal back to the road, stroking it and speaking in a soothing tone all the way. He climbed into the saddle, and the odd couple made their way down the Western Highway toward Erronvale.

Chapter 2

The Prophecy

A middle-aged couple and a thin cow stood on the clean red carpet. Warrick tried not to frown.

“Oh, Master Conquera, we come humbly before you,” the husband began. “We bring a gift from our meager holdings and ask for your aid.” Throughout the greeting, neither man nor woman looked up from their feet.

“Please, stop,” Warrick said in a warm tone, rising from behind his desk. He walked around to stand next to the couple. The powerful wizard towered over his guests. “There is no need for such humility. Please, look me in the eyes and tell me your need.”

The man looked up. “My name is Howard Swalyon, and this is my wife, Elsa. We have a small farm about five miles west of here.”

“I remember you well, Howard. How is your son, Eric? He must be nearly 18 by now?”

“Our son is healthy and strong, sir, thank you.”

“Now, please,” Warrick said, placing a hand on the man’s shoulder, “enough with the formalities. I am here to help. What is your problem?”

“We did not do well last year. The drought hit us hard, and we were not able to sell our crops. Now we have nearly nothing and cannot afford to buy seed if we are not sure that this year will be better.”

Warrick nodded as he listened. “What would you have me do?”

“We need rain, sir,” the woman said. “We need the promise of a good harvest.”

“Good people, I cannot promise that you will have a good harvest,” Warrick raised his hand when he saw their dejected looks, “but I can help.”

Husband and wife looked up eagerly to hear what the wizard would say. “I remember your land, I think. You live north of the river, correct?”

Howard nodded. “There are two farms between the Gahlen and us, and they will not let us use their water.”

“You shall have your own water this year. You and your son and anyone else you can get to help must dig a pond. Place it east of your home on the land just above your field. Dig it as deep and as wide as you can. I shall fill it with water in three days, and you shall use it to irrigate your crops this year and every year after. Can you do this?”

“I can, and I shall. Thank you, Master Conquera. Please accept this animal as a gift.”

Warrick looked at the cow they had brought with them. “I cannot.”

Howard became suddenly firm. “I will not have it said that the Swalyon family came to the White Tower begging. We will pay you for your help.”

“If that is the case, then keep the cow for another year. You will have water for it to drink and corn for it to eat over the winter. When you have fattened it up, sell it at the market next spring, and I will accept whatever portion of the sale you feel is adequate.”

“You are generous indeed. We will do as you say.” With that, the couple bowed and left the office, their cow in tow.

When they had left the tower, Warrick called into the entry for his apprentice. “Simon, can you come in here, please?”

The young man responded to the beckon quickly. “Yes, Master?”

“Close the door,” Warrick motioned with his hand as he leaned against his desk. The apprentice turned and shut the door.

“Never, ever allow anyone to bring livestock into my office!” Warrick sprang away from his desk as he shouted, the young man quivering before him, pressed against the closed door. “What in Everon made you think it was a good idea to allow that pathetic couple to bring their bag of bones cow into my office?”

“Y-you s-said that any-wa-wa-one who came to see you sh-should be allowed in.”

“I wasn’t talking about livestock! You imbecile! Look at the mud on this carpet!”

Simon strained his eyes toward the carpet but could see nothing. The cow’s feet had only been dusty from the dry road. “I don’t see-”

Warrick sent a minor bolt of energy into the youth’s legs. His knees buckled, and he fell forward, catching himself with his hands. With his face now only a foot from the red carpet, he could see trace amounts of dust and dirt.

“I only pray it isn’t ruined. You will see to it that the carpet is thoroughly cleaned before you go to bed tonight. Now get up.”

Simon got to his feet and prepared to leave. “Simon,” Warrick stopped him before he left, “how much can you get for a good cow at the market?”

“A healthy cow should bring in around fifty or sixty for shipment to Torrin.”

“Mark in the ledger that the Swalyons owe fifty gold pieces by next spring. I will be in my private quarters for the rest of the morning.”

“Yes, sir,” Simon bowed slightly and left.

Warrick sighed and shook his head in frustration. “I need a real apprentice,” he muttered to himself. The wizard shrugged off the scarlet trimmed black robe he wore when meeting with the people and draped it over the back of his chair. While he had many robes with magical enchantments and unique attributes, he preferred to walk around in a simple tunic and pants.

He walked over to the corner of the room – if one could consider a room in a round tower to have a corner – where a circular hole had been cut in the ceiling. The wizard looked up and saw to the top of his 13-story tower. Warrick no longer needed to speak the enchantment out loud and just willed himself upward, gaining speed as he rose, passing each level of the tower faster and faster, only slowing once he reached the top.

“And how fare your loyal subjects this morning?” Sprits greeted Warrick as he stepped out of the transporting shaft and onto the solid floor of his private quarters. The room was filled with tables, shelves, and a few other pieces of furniture. Warrick was working on half a dozen spells at any given time, and their components lay scattered about the room to be completed later.

“The Swalyons are idiots,” he replied as he plopped himself into an overstuffed chair.

“Pray tell?” the sprite asked with mock interest.

Warrick pretended not to pick up on the tone. “Their neighbors have terraced their land well, creating a swale between their farms that carries the irrigation water between them to feed their crops. Every rainstorm we get, the swale overflows and floods the Swalyon farm. Most years, they complain about the flooding. Last year we did not have a significant rainstorm, and they complained about a drought. I told them to build a retaining pond to collect the runoff and protect their field from flooding, something they should have done a long time ago.”

“And you promised to give them rain in three days?” the sprite asked.

Warrick nodded.

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with the thunderheads I saw over the Erron Mountains last night? I believe we will have rain in three days. And how much did we get from the Swalyons?”

“Fifty gold for next spring.”

“We should have enough to hire another filthy mercenary next year then.”

At this, Warrick looked up with concern on his face. “Has Kevrin failed already?”

“The stupid troll hasn’t even made it to Erronvale yet. He travels slowly.”

“He fights with his horse,” Warrick said. “Crystal is a good horse, but I fear she can see Kevrin’s true nature. When they left here, she did not carry him willingly.”

“He should arrive in the city by midday, but I would not hold on to hope that he will be successful.”

“Do not sell him short. He will surprise you.”

Sprites had been peering into one of the wizard’s crystal balls, making funny faces, and only giving the conversation half his attention, but now, he raced across the cluttered room of tables, potions, and books, to perch on the edge of the desk right next to his seated master.

“Why do you give him such credit? He is just a stupid troll, but you sound more confident in him than all the mercenaries we have sent before. You even gave him your personal horse.”

“How many men have we sent out in search of the scepter?”

“The troll is lucky number thirteen.”

“He has the best chance of any of the previous twelve to fulfill the prophecy.”

The sprite sighed, which with his quick movements seemed almost a hiccup. “The prophecy, the prophecy, you don’t know anything of the prophecy.”

“Born in beauty,
Then fell from grace,
With strength of arm,
But hideous face.”

“We have one verse from a prophecy that might have one hundred,” Sprints commented.

“It is all that was legible from the torn and burnt scroll I recovered,” Warrick replied as always.

“And that single verse has caused you to hire the most disreputable and ugly collection of mercenaries over the past 20 years that I have ever seen.”

“Reanald was respectable.”

“Maybe he used to be,” Sprints argued, “but not when we hired him. We had to catch him after he had the misfortune of impregnating the duchess. Duke Eliot made sure he wouldn’t get any respectable work again.”

“Then fell from grace,” Warrick quoted the line from the prophecy.

“Oh, he fell all right,” Sprints agreed. “They all fell. So now we hire a troll. Surely there is nothing more hideous, but how can he succeed where the others have failed?”

“It matters not!” Warrick said suddenly, standing from his chair. “I must have the Scepter of Amon! I am a Conquera, descended from a long line of Conqueras, ancient conquerors and rulers of this land.”

Sprints rolled his eyes and retreated to the crystal ball, watching his reflection as he mouthed the words of the all too familiar litany.

“I am tired of being lord over a bunch of peasant farmers. With that scepter, I could rule over all Torrin and more. Over all Everon even. With the power in my hand, nothing could . . .”

Sprints tuned him out now, having heard it all before. The sprite didn’t think much of his master. Warrick was good with magical devices, and he came from a long line of powerful wizards, so there was definite magical potential there, but he spent too much time dreaming of what he could be instead of concentrating on improving what he was. Warrick rarely had more than a handful of spells memorized at a time and never tested himself against anything. He spent all his time in the safety of his tower with no actual knowledge of how the world worked outside.

Still, Sprints appreciated the link he had with Warrick. It was entertaining to watch him interact with the people who lived around his tower if nothing else. And this hunt for the Scepter of Amon had been enjoyable as well. Some of the adventurers they had sent out had a lot of potential, and while finding the scepter was still a distant dream, it would only mean good things if fulfilled. Sprints didn’t share his master’s optimism about their most recent hire, though. Kevrin would fail. They all failed. No one ever survived.

* * *

Alec Kroll was a survivor. It hadn’t always been easy, and it hadn’t always been pretty, but he had survived. Alec was tired of just surviving. Years in the wild, fighting his way through life, living by the sword, and beholding to no one had taken their toll. He had gone after one too many treasures, had answered the call to one too many quests, and it had left him with an existence that hardly qualified as life.

He was left scarred and ugly. His companions had all been killed, and any recollection of family was gone. His days were spent in the taverns now, drowning his sorrows in a flood of ale, as if the white foam could somehow wipe clean or at least fog over his memories. So far, it hadn’t worked, but the one benefit from a life of adventuring was that he had the money to keep trying. He just should have picked a better city in which to try.

Erronvale did not have many homeless or vagrants. Its poor section was only called that because the residents there did not have as much money as the rich, and not because there was any degree of poverty. There was no collection of drunks wandering from tavern

to tavern, trying to convince the bartenders to extend them some credit.

Alec was the lone blemish in the city, something at which he was astonished and just a little bit proud. He was used to a town where he could raise some hell and have a good time, but Erronvale wasn't the place to do it. The barmaids dressed modestly, and all had fathers or husbands looking out for them. They wouldn't dream of complying with any of Alec's lewd suggestions, not only because he was a hideous creature but also because, as they had told him on many occasions, "It wouldn't be proper."

Not only that, but each tavern he went to limited how much they would serve him. Money wasn't the issue, for he always paid, but they cut him off after three or four drinks. It didn't matter; he just picked up and went to the next tavern.

As he slammed down his fourth empty mug on the table, Alec decided that today would be different. He wouldn't take no for an answer. He wanted another drink, and he didn't want to walk four blocks to get it.

Cindy, the barmaid, came by to pick up the empty mug, and Alec caught her by the arm. "Bring me another one, pretty lass."

"I'm sorry, sir," she replied, not making eye contact with the big man, "but Mr. Hentery said you've had enough."

"Bah, what does he know 'bout how much I can drink? I used to drink six of these just to get started. Bring me another one."

Cindy said nothing further but hurried away from the table. "You better hurry back with another drink, 'cuz I'm not leavin' till I get one!"

A few patrons sitting nearby got up quietly and left the tavern. Alec sneered at them, but they avoided eye contact. Soon he was the only one there, and Cindy had retreated to the back room and had not returned with a drink.

"I can wait all night, 'cuz I got the time!" he yelled at the empty room. "I want another drink!"

The tavern was silent for several more minutes. "I'm waiting!"

The doors to the outside opened, and Alec's face fell. The bright blue tunics of the Erronvale city guard were easily recognizable. Alec had quite a reputation with the city guard, and the crusty fighter even recognized one of the three men that approached him now.

"I swear, Rainey, you guys must follow me around to show up so quickly."

"Either that or when you get into trouble, you make so much noise that we just can't help but hear it no matter where we are," Rainey replied. Lieutenant Rainey Trevers said it with a smile, knowing there was little danger here.

"Trouble? You call this trouble?" Alec motioned around the room.

"I see an empty building only half an hour before the dinner rush. Why do you suppose that is?"

"You think I scared 'em off?"

"Did you?" Rainey pressed.

"Bah, none of you all understand me. You tell me to shut up or stop drinking or clean up, but do you even know me? Have you taken the time?"

Rainey just looked on stoically, letting the man say his piece, having heard it all before.

He had to admit the man was right, and there was a part of him that wanted to know where this man had come from and why he was so vile most of the time, but that's not why he got paid. The restaurant owner paid his taxes, and those taxes paid Rainey's salary, so he was duty-bound to make sure this was a safe and profitable place.

“. . . just good ol' Alec, causing trouble again. Who's looking out for me? No one, that's who. No one brings me nothing around here 'cept for that pretty barmaid. No one 'cept her and she . . .”

Alec's voice suddenly trailed off as his eyes rolled back in his head. “'Cept her. Scepter. That awful scepter. He, he, ha, ha,” he started to laugh to himself and then grew suddenly quiet and somber. He looked up with a transformed face at Rainey, standing next to his table.

“I'm sorry if I've caused you any trouble here.” Alec stood, and the guards parted to let him through. “I'll be going now.”

Rainey looked at the man dumbstruck as he walked across the room and out the front door. That was new. While Rainey had always gotten Alec to cooperate, it usually took a bit more persuading. The idea that he didn't know who this man was or what he had been through had never really mattered before. Now the second lieutenant of the city guard was curious.

“What was that about?” one of the other two guards asked.

Rainey shook his head. “I have no idea.” Alec had always been a big vagrant who had been more of a nuisance than a real problem. He was strong and used to wear a large sword that had seen plenty of action before the captain of city guards had confronted him about it, enforcing the city-wide policy of not carrying weapons in public. But while he seemed imposing, he had never physically resisted the guards.

Now Rainey saw that on top of his annoying alcohol problem, the man was not entirely stable. Something he had said had triggered a memory that had frightened and sobered him. Could his past have the opposite effect on him as well? Could he fly off into fits of rage at a moment's notice?

“I have no idea,” Rainey repeated after several moments of contemplation, “but I intend to find out.”

Chapter 3

The Jester, the Scholar, and the Dreamer

The trip should have taken six hours, but Kevrin did it in ten.

The troll-turned-human had mixed emotions about mingling with other men. Down deep inside, he felt as if he had always been human. He was kind, compassionate, thoughtful, and loathed the destructive nature of his kin. But he also shared many traits with the trolls. His temper was short and his appetite voracious. His body had regenerative powers, and he had an unnatural fear of fire.

Kevrin had attempted to mingle with humans before, always with catastrophic results. Farmers and townspeople chased him away with weapons and torches, not caring in the least as he pleaded with them in their language that he wanted peace. The ability to speak the common tongue was not unique among trolls, several others of his kin had learned it, but Kevrin took pride in his speech and tried to speak as correctly as possible.

He remembered his last encounter with humans vividly. It was less than two weeks ago. Kevrin had become convinced his life as a troll was some colossal mistake. He was sure he had been cursed, or some spell had been cast on him many years ago. He thought if he could only find a sympathetic wizard, the curse could be broken, or at least his theory could be confirmed.

Kevrin had heard many tales about the great wizard of the plains. Warrick Conquera's tower was visible from many miles away, and Kevrin had sat on a distant hilltop gazing at the building for months before he gathered the courage to approach. If it had been just the wizard, Kevrin would never have sat in contemplation, but between him and the tower lay miles and miles of farmland dotted with houses and shops.

At night Kevrin traced paths through the land with his eyes, trying to find a route that would avoid as many of the lights as possible. But in the last few miles before the tower, the homes were clustered together, and all it took was one dog or a restless horse to sound the alarm, and the townsfolk would be up in arms against him.

It had to work the first time. If Kevrin were turned away, they would be aware of his presence, and he would not be able to approach again. All he wanted was to talk with the wizard. He felt that if a magic wielder could see him, he would know instantly that the troll intended no harm and would be able to right whatever curse had befallen Kevrin and end his torment.

Maybe it would be best if the townspeople did see him coming. Would they not call out their wizard to defend them against the troll? It was this line of thought that had finally given Kevrin the courage to make the journey.

He chose a dark, cloudy night. It was over fifteen miles from his observation hill to the tower, but his long, tireless gate covered the distance easily. His memory from studying

the land these past few weeks was good, and he was able to move from landmark to landmark, running over creeks and around trees, avoiding detection until the last mile of his journey.

As expected, a dog gave him away. One barking animal quickly became two, then four, then ten. Lights went on in the houses, and people began to stick their heads out of windows. Kevrin stopped behind one of the few trees left, for the landscape had primarily become houses and streets. Lampposts every fifty feet gave him nowhere to hide, for the road to the tower was well-lit and very wide.

Kevrin watched from behind his tree as men ventured outside. Most of them held torches, and a few had dogs on leashes. As the animals sniffed at the air, the troll could see he would be tracked down quickly. His heart pounded in his chest, and his breath came in short gasps. Though he had just covered a great distance in a little over an hour, his condition was not due to exhaustion but nervousness.

He almost gave up right there. He had cover behind him and knew he could retrace his steps and be back in the safety of the hills before dawn. But this was his only chance, and he needed to see the wizard. If he gave up now, would he have the courage to try again?

Taking a deep breath, he bolted from behind the tree and raced down the street. The chaos he created was instantaneous. Cries of “Troll!” and “Monster!” rang out all around him, but Kevrin kept his eyes focused on his goal: the base of the white tower. Rocks and wood flew at him from the doors and windows of the buildings he ran past as more and more of the townspeople woke up. A few arrows even clipped at his feet, and like an avalanche chasing a sled, the rush of people came at him from the sides and behind, but the path before him remained clear – for a while at least.

Soon the commotion of his passage preceded him, and lights in buildings several blocks ahead illuminated his path. Men emptied into the streets carrying torches and swords, blocking his way. Kevrin had half a mind to plow right through them, but they stood three deep with torches, and he was forced to a stop.

He stood in the middle of the street, with a swarm of men encircling him. They shouted warnings to each other, confident they would defeat this monster but understanding they would suffer losses as well. It was a stalemate. Kevrin turned to look them all in the eye, growling as he stared them down. For each group that took a step forward, another took a step back.

Finally, Kevrin’s frustration boiled over. “Warrick Conquera!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. “Warrick Conquera, help me!”

The people were stunned. While the troll’s diction was not perfect, there could be no doubt of what he had said. Was he here to attack their wizard? Had he just asked for help? All eyes turned to the tower just a few blocks away and saw that a light had been turned on in one of the top levels. Everyone, including Kevrin, breathed a sigh of relief.

The men did not advance any further and held their torches forward in a defensive position. Master Conquera was coming, and he would figure out what to do with this troll. No one would have to die tonight.

Warrick took his time descending from the top level of his home and then walked deliberately up the street to the swarm of people. Only when he got close and the crowd

parted to give him access to the troll did he realize what was happening. The wizard took one look at the troll and understood everything. Kevrin could see that right away, and all the tension left him.

“You have come to see me?” Warrick asked.

“I have,” Kevrin responded.

“What is your name?”

“Krvgrn,” he replied with his troll name.

“Indeed,” Warrick said. “Come with me.” Kevrin obeyed.

Warrick had heard his tale and given him a quest, a more human-sounding name, a disguise, and then sent him on his way, letting him know that he would do everything he could to find a cure for the curse that had turned him into a troll.

So now Kevrin sat on his horse – another gift – traveling the Western Highway to complete the first leg of his journey. The first leg of his journey to becoming human.

Kevrin rounded another hillock and pulled his horse up short. The road angled down before him, cutting through the valley of two steep hills. At its lowest and narrowest point, about five hundred yards away, stood two men at a guard outpost. This was the entrance to Erronvale. Foothills surrounded the valley in which the city lay, and although several other paths led into the city, this was the most direct route from the highway and the only one maintained for carts and wagons.

The two guards saw Kevrin moments after he saw them. The sun was just setting over the mountains to the west and shone like a spotlight on the lone horseman. To turn around now would look suspicious, and to try to enter the city during the night or by another means would look even more suspicious. But the longer Kevrin hesitated, the harder he found it to move the horse forward. Finally, his mount decided for him and began trotting.

“No!” Kevrin whispered harshly. “Wait! I am not ready!”

The horse ignored the tugs and prods of its rider and continued forward. Kevrin suddenly realized he had no idea how to steer the animal and wondered how the horse had known where to go from the beginning of his trip.

Kevrin didn’t have much time to contemplate that, for already he was within shouting distance of the two guards. Was his disguise still intact? Sudden panic! His hands flew to his cheeks, and he could feel the smooth skin and smallish features of a human face. Still, was the horse trying to turn him in? Could the animal communicate to the guards that its rider wasn’t human? What was he supposed to say to these men?

“Hello there,” one of the guards called out when the horse was still twenty feet away. “What is your name?”

“Kevrin,” the rider answered the easy question, hoping his horse would continue right past the guards and through the open gate beyond. It didn’t. The horse stopped short, giving the guards a chance to question its rider.

“Well met, Kevrin. What brings you to Erronvale this evening?”

“My horse,” Kevrin replied, somewhat tentatively, thinking it an odd question to ask and not sure he had answered it correctly.

The two guards looked at each other briefly and then burst out laughing. “Of course, of

course, and a fine animal it is too.” The two of them chuckled again, and Kevrin tried to join in. He had never laughed before, and it sounded more like a coughing fit.

“Are you here on business then, or just to tell jokes?”

Kevrin was pretty sure he was here on his horse but felt that was the wrong answer. “Yes. Business.”

“Are you a merchant?” the guard asked, not confident in his question, for he could see nothing that Kevrin could be selling as the traveler was packed light.

“No,” Kevrin responded, for once understanding the question. “I am here to look at the library.”

“Ah,” the guard said. “A scholar as well as a jester. Well, please enjoy your stay in our city.” The guards stepped aside and let Kevrin pass through the open gate behind.

“Thank you,” Kevrin replied, not able to keep the smile from his face. He had passed his first test, and he had done quite well despite a rocky beginning.

* * *

Rachel Blume escorted her companion to a secluded park bench in one of the many gardens that populated Erronvale’s central district. The wooden bench sat next to an artificial brook trickling down several flat stones. The sun had set, and the scene before them was shrouded in darkness save for the few lanterns that hung about the park. It was late spring, and had it been several hours earlier, they would have seen the flowers blooming along the brook’s edge surrounded by an intricate stone border beside a dirt path.

If it had been a few hours earlier, Trent, Rachel’s companion, might have tried to compare the beauty of the flowers to that of the woman with him; but, as it was, all he could hear was the trickling of water and the muffled thump of the windmill-operated pump that kept the artificial brook flowing. They had just finished dinner in one of the nicer restaurants in Erronvale, a going-away present of sorts, for Trent was preparing for a trip that would take him out of town for several days. Rachel had thanked him after the meal and then informed him that they needed to talk. At this point, Trent realized any flattery he might offer would be no different than making beds in a burning building.

“We could have gone to my house,” Trent offered once they were seated. “The park is pleasant, but not as much so at night, and it would be much warmer in front of a fireplace.”

Rachel turned to him and smiled. “I like it here; it’s nice and peaceful. I come out here at night by myself when I need to think. It’s very relaxing.”

Rachel had gone there often to get away from the stress of the day, and she hoped the relaxing aspects of the park would infuse some calm into the conversation they were about to have.

Trent saw it as the calm before the storm.

“I don’t think we should see each other anymore.”

Though it was expected, it was still unexplained. “Might I ask why?” Trent pressed.

“You aren’t stable right now.”

“I’m not stable?” Trent asked incredulously.

“Shh, let me finish. You are always traveling, and your future is unsure right now. You

don't know where you will be next year or even next month. You don't know where your next wage will come from."

"Is it about money? You're not happy with how much money I have? Didn't we just eat in the nicest restaurant in the city? Yes, I am only 24 years old, and I wasn't born into money. You come from a family that has had money for two or three generations, so I understand how you can see my lifestyle as risky, but I'm telling you it is not."

"My father said . . ."

Trent got up and walked a few steps away from the bench with his arms in the air. "Your father?"

"He said that he's seen lots of merchants like you come and go. You are rich one day and poor the next."

"Your father is a wise man, and I know he cares a great deal for you, but can't you see he is controlling you? He rules the city, but he doesn't have to rule you too."

"He does not rule the city," Rachel corrected. "He is on the council, yes, but there are two councilmen with more seniority than him." There had been three older council members until a week ago, but the most senior had retired, and the city had just hosted a special election to bring in a new member.

"Your father is probably the most influential member of that council, regardless of age. He has clearly influenced you."

Now Rachel stood, stretching out her tall frame so she could stare Trent in the eyes. "Now you are just being unreasonable."

"What? I'm being unreasonable? I'm the only one using reason here. Yes, I travel a lot, but that doesn't mean you can't travel with me. Yes, there will be times when I do better financially than other times; but if money is all you care about, then I'll save you the trouble and end this relationship for you."

"It's not about money," she clarified.

"Then what is it about? What do you crave, Rachel Blume? What fantasies play out in your head when you sit and dream of the future? Do you dream of adventure and excitement? I know you've been reading those books in the library about that female ranger – what's her name? – Elorin. Trained by elves, spent her life traveling the world, hunting down evil where it lives . . ."

"Have you ever seen an elf? I have. They make the most exquisite wine you've ever tasted, and they have barrels and barrels of it. Do you know what they don't have? Fruit. I can trade them fruit for wine and then sell the wine for ten times what I paid for the fruit.

"I've seen you practicing with your bow, but have you ever shot at anything more exciting than a bale of hay with a target painted on it? I know an old fletcher – a retired ranger, to hear him tell it – who lives twenty miles south of Vel Enor who makes arrows for fun. All he wants from me is a couple of books to pass the time, and I get hundreds of the straightest arrows you've ever fired. My customers know it, and they pay me well for those arrows.

"Tell me that life doesn't excite you, and I'll leave you alone. Tell me you don't crave adventure. Have you ever even been to Torrin, the City on Water? It's a fabulous place

with high art and fashion, the likes of which you have never seen. I have 100 fur coats in my wagon right now, ready for the journey to Torrin. It is spring here, so no one needs a heavy coat anymore, so the stores practically gave them to me, but in the capital city, they think fur coats are a fashion statement and wear them all year long. And let me tell you, they pay a hefty sum for them. Tell me there isn't some part of you that wants to see the world."

Rachel stood silently listening to Trent's "reasoning" and had to admit there was a part of her that longed to see and do the things he described. She did read the adventure books and secretly longed to wear the boots of Elorin, to fire her magnificent bow, to wield her elven blade, and to race across the plains on the back of her elegant steed. Rachel was not like most of the girls in Erronvale. She was tall and strong, not always strapping herself into the tightest corset she could find to achieve the tiny waist the men of the town seemed to prefer. Hers was a rugged beauty, visible in her eyes and mouth, not her waist and hips. She felt she was destined for the road, not a fancy dress.

But on the occasions when her father caught her in such reveries, he would tell her those stories were in books for a reason. They were fiction and fantasy, not reality.

Life on the road meant you had no home and no family. You never knew when or where your next meal would be. When it rained, you got wet. When it snowed, you were cold. When it was hot, you were thirsty. It was no life for a woman and not much of a life for a man either. In town, close to home, you had protection. You had stability and safety.

Rachel's father pointed out each adventurer that came to town. They were all dirty and homely. They came to town alone, and they left alone. Is that what Rachel wanted?

"How much money do you have right now?" Rachel asked.

Trent sighed. "So, it is about money. I didn't think-

"How much?" Rachel interrupted.

Trent knew where she was going and humored her. He pulled aside his jacket to show her the coin pouch hanging at his belt. It wasn't very big or full. "But I have a cart full of fur coats that will turn this pouch into a dozen."

"And what if the boat to Torrin overturns? What if all your coats sink to the bottom of the river?"

Trent didn't bother giving voice to that possibility. In all honesty, he had nightmares about something like that happening. He dreamed of the day when he would be able to retain some capital from his sales, but he wasn't in that position yet.

"I need stability right now," Rachel said after several seconds of silence.

Trent stood there stoically for a few moments, digesting her words. "I am leaving at first light tomorrow for Torrin," he said calmly. "I shall return to Erronvale within two weeks. May I call on you when I return?"

Rachel shook her head. "I think it best if you didn't."

Trent nodded. "Very well, then. I wish for you the best in whatever life you choose." He turned and walked away into the night.

Rachel sighed, feelings of remorse and relief flooding through her. She was 21 and unmarried. Many different men had courted her over the years, but fewer and fewer were interested in a woman over twenty when there were so many still in their teens.

Yes, her father was picky, but she understood he only wanted the best for her. That's all he ever wanted. Still, she hoped she would find the right man soon.

* * *

The menu had no pictures.

Kevrin stared at the words written eloquently across the three-page fold-out menu. He saw the prices beside each item and had enough knowledge of money to know that Warrick had given him plenty of coin to live for a week or two in this city. But though Kevrin spoke the common language reasonably well, he could not read. The trolls of the land were not advanced enough to have developed their own language, and since they mainly preyed on humans, they used the common tongue. They did not need a written language.

Kevrin had never been to a library before, but he had seen and fumbled over plenty of books. He was used to large picture books taken from farmhouses and traveling caravans his old tribe had attacked. Though he had detested the practice, he enjoyed the spoils they collected. Through the pictures of cities and towns in the books, he had developed his longing to be part of human society. He had ignored the captions and accompanying text at the time, realizing it must have some significance, but the pictures were what held his interest.

The menu had no pictures.

Kevrin was pleased with himself so far. He had conversed with the guards at the gate to the city and been granted entrance. Past the gate and into the central valley that housed the town, Kevrin had ridden slowly through the outlying regions. The valley was three miles long from north to south along the Erron Mountains and a bit over a mile wide. Erronvale did its best to fill that valley.

Once he rode past the outer region, the city was set up in standard blocks with a dozen houses on each block and an occasional park or shop interspersed. Kevrin nodded and smiled at several people as they acknowledged his passage with a wave or greeting. It was a much warmer reception than he was used to getting, and no one raised a pitchfork in his direction.

With the hills encroaching at its edges, there wasn't much area for the city to expand save in the vertical direction. As Kevrin entered the heart of the city, he saw that buildings two and three stories tall filled the main streets. Each had a torch-lit sign that Kevrin couldn't read, but he recognized a stable easily enough.

Kevrin asked the stable boy for a good place to eat and spend the night. The boy told him his boss owned the neighboring hotel, and it had a restaurant on the main floor.

Now Kevrin was sitting at a lovely table complete with a tablecloth, candles, and more silverware than the former troll knew what to do with. While there was no actual bar in this restaurant, there was a more informal section with tables and booths. There, people laughed and talked, drinking ale and eating food with their fingers. Kevrin wondered if he wouldn't feel more comfortable over there, but the host had seated him here. Warrick had given him a nice set of clothes, and the spring rains had kept the dust down on the road, making Kevrin look clean.

As he looked at this other section, three women caught his attention. They weren't laughing with the others but were instead looking his way and whispering amongst themselves. Kevrin began to panic again. Was there something wrong with his appearance? Was his troll visage visible? His eyes darted about, wondering if there would soon be an outcry. Men and women sat around him, eating and drinking quietly. He had heard the cry of women and children before, and the sound sent chills down his spine. He braced himself for that sound now, but it didn't come. No one paid him more than a glance, and there was no look of fear upon their faces.

Kevrin turned back to the three young women across the room. They weren't looking at him in fear. Having never experienced any other human emotion directed at him, it took him a while to identify this one. They seemed amused. The longer he held their gaze, the more they talked and giggled. He gave them a reassuring smile, something he was getting good at, and they broke eye contact with him to look at each other and laughed some more.

Kevrin wondered why he was so curious about these girls. He had spied on humans before, watching from a distance as men and women worked on their farms and in the fields. He had been interested to see how they interacted with each other, but something about these girls was different. He could feel a warmth growing deep inside him. The way they pursed their lips and batted their eyes, the way their hair hung in curls about their round faces, was bringing forth a new emotion for him.

It was a human emotion, Kevrin knew, but as he tried to embrace the feeling, his trollish instincts took over. His stomach growled, and he couldn't help but notice how good the three girls looked. He had tasted human flesh before. As a youth, he knew no better than to eat what was given to him, and despite its rich flavor, as he had gotten older, he changed his diet exclusively to animals. Still, he knew that young women, such as these three, who had not seen much hard labor, would have the most tender thighs and –

No! Kevrin turned away from the women, trying to rid his head of the images that flashed through it. He heard their screams as he threw their flailing bodies to the ground. He beat them into sedation and tore off their clothes. He lingered for a moment on their bodies, that warmth rising within him again, but this close to his trollish nature, the sensation in his stomach could not be discerned from hunger, and the image quickly changed to torn flesh and splattered blood. He shook his head and focused on the menu, trying to ease his hunger with pictures of real food.

The menu had no pictures.

“Good evening, sir. May I start you out with something to drink?”

Kevrin looked up suddenly and saw a man dressed in uniform with a white apron around his waist.

“A large glass of water, please,” he said with his best voice.

The waiter was not impressed. “Just water? And would you like an appetizer to start with?”

Kevrin smiled. “Yes, thank you.”

The man waited to the point of embarrassment and then a few agonizing moments beyond. “Which one?”

Kevrin's smile faded. Apparently, an appetizer was not a food but a type of food. He looked down at the menu as if he could read it. He looked up suddenly and remembered how he had dealt with the stable boy. "I just came to town. What do you suggest?"

"The shrimp is rather popular."

"I will have that, thank you," Kevrin replied, putting on a new smile.

The waiter nodded and left. Kevrin had no idea what he was doing and decided to look around him for advice. He saw the men all had cloth on their laps and sipped their drinks, something Kevrin would have to remember when he got his water. They weren't drinking water but a colored liquid that didn't look like ale.

Kevrin looked at his table, seeing the napkin under his silverware. He carefully slipped it out without disturbing the utensils and spread it on his lap. Shortly, a serving girl came by with a large mug of water that usually held a pint and a half of ale. Kevrin thanked the girl and picked the cup up gently by the handle. With one eye on another man two tables away, sipping his wine, Kevrin mimicked the motions and daintily drank his water.

On a whim, he cast a glance back at the three women he had seen earlier and saw they were giggling merrily at his drinking style. He smiled at them between sips and eventually put the mug down. The shrimp came, and after several failed attempts with a spoon, Kevrin found he could stab the appetizer quite well with one of his forks. He was rather pleased with himself until he looked around and saw others eating the shrimp with their fingers.

The waiter was back shortly. "Have you decided on the main course?"

"What do you suggest?" Kevrin asked.

The waiter had half-expected this answer. "Our steaks are quite popular."

Kevrin knew what a steak was, and he nodded his head a little too eagerly. "Yes, that would be good."

"And how would you like that cooked?" the waiter asked, though he knew he shouldn't have.

"No, thank you," Kevrin responded with a smile.

"No, thank you, what, sir?"

"You do not need to cook it."

"We do not serve raw meat here, sir," the man responded curtly. "I will have it prepared rare for you." He took the menu and left with a huff.

Kevrin realized he wasn't doing so well with the waiter, and he had a lot to learn. While he waited for his meal, he looked around at how others handled their forks and knives. He saw how they used their napkins and held their idle hands. He practiced these motions with his knife and fork, even though there was no food on his plate yet. The only people in the restaurant who were paying him any attention were the three girls, who were now almost beside themselves with laughter.

The meat came, and the waiter set it before him. Kevrin looked at it for a long while, trying to figure out why it was so small. There were diced potatoes and carrots alongside it, so food filled the plate, but Kevrin thought the plate was also rather small.

"Is there something else you would like?" the waiter asked hesitantly.

"Can I have another one?"

“Another steak, sir?”

Kevrin paused in thought. “Are they all this small?”

“That is 14 ounces, sir. Our steaks are some of the most generous in the city.”

“Can I have three more?”

The waiter stood there, dumbfounded. He toyed with the idea of saying no but decided against it. “I’ll bring you four more.”

Kevrin smiled sincerely and nodded. “Thank you.”

* * *

The Blume house was on the northern edge of Erronvale. Unlike the southeast portion of the city, the homes on the north and western borders were large with lots of land. The land was uneven in the north and west sections, and it was challenging to build structured roads and city blocks, but not too bad for open corrals and large houses.

Rachel appreciated the distance from the busy streets of downtown Erronvale, and she could easily ride her horse the short way to the northern foothills for a little taste of the wilderness. She often rode two miles to the top of the tallest hill in the area and looked down on the city. It was quiet in the outskirts, away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Rachel was usually tempted to keep going into the wilder lands and leave the city behind, but she knew her home and always returned.

As she returned now, she noticed that several lights were still on in the house, even at this late hour. She reached for the front door, but it burst open before she could grab the knob, and only her quick reflexes allowed her to spin out of the way and avoid being trampled by the man racing out of the house.

Rachel did not recognize him, but she could tell he was someone important in the city by the way he dressed. Her father often entertained such guests, but she did not remember him saying anything about company this evening. The man did not even notice Rachel as he hurried off the front porch and into the street, heading back into town, muttering to himself the whole way.

She cast a curious glance at him but then continued inside. Her father and two council members were standing in the middle of the family room, staring at the open door and the recently departed man. They were scowling. Behind them was the study, its door open and the lights on. Rachel realized that it hadn’t been a social call, but the men had been discussing business.

“Who was that?” Rachel asked.

“Fredrick Alston,” her father replied, still looking out the door.

Rachel knew the name. He was the new councilman, elected just a day ago in the special election. “What’s his problem?”

“He was being unreasonable,” he said, finally turning to look at his daughter and smiling. “How was your dinner with young Mr. . . ?” her father asked, searching for the name.

“Polluck. Trent Polluck. And not good. He was unreasonable, too. He wants me to travel the land with him. I told him he wasn’t stable, and he proved me right by losing his temper.”

“Where is he headed now?”

“He’s off to Torrin to sell some fur coats. I think he is going to return with a bunch of fish. I told him not to look for me when he gets back.”

Her father walked over and embraced her. “You’ll always be Daddy’s girl. Now run off and get yourself to bed. We have a bit more to discuss tonight,” he glanced back at the other men, “don’t we?”

Rachel kissed her father’s cheek and did as she was told. The older Blume turned back to his associates. “We do have more to discuss,” his tone suddenly serious.

The other men were still scowling as the arrival of Rachel did not lighten their moods, and soon Blume assumed a frown as well. He motioned to the study, and the councilmen followed the suggestion, closing the door behind them.

