

# All that Glitters

By Loren K. Jones

Twilight Times Books

Kingsport Tennessee

Loren K. Jones

All that Glitters

*This is a work of fiction. All concepts, characters and events portrayed in this book are used fictitiously and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.*

Copyright © 2016 by Loren K. Jones. Expanded and revised from a previous electronic edition published by e-Quill Publishing, Brisbane, Australia 2010 with title "All that Glitters."

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except brief extracts for the purpose of review, without the permission of the publisher and copyright owner.

Twilight Times Books  
P O Box 3340  
Kingsport, TN 37664  
[www.twilighttimesbooks.com/](http://www.twilighttimesbooks.com/)

Revised Electronic Edition: July 2016. Author's preferred version.

Published in the United States of America

## Chapter 1

Stavin Kel'Aniston struggled up the steep slope of the crater's side, through deep snow and line after line of thicket, trying to get to the cave located on the crater's highest peak. He paused and scraped the top layer of snow off a drift in search of some clean snow to quench his thirst. He had started with a full water bottle and enough food for five days, but the climb had been harder than he expected and his water had run out after just three days. His food would last only one more day, but that didn't matter. He was determined to succeed, or die trying.

He looked down at the valley, through a gap where the trees had been scoured away by a landslide, and gazed at the smoke rising from the chimneys of distant Kavinston. He clenched his fists in anger as he looked at his home. The town was nearly obscured by the distance, but he imagined he could see the people in the streets. Hear their laughter at the idea that *he* might dare the cave. Hear the derisive laughter of the only person who mattered to him as she called him a runt.

Turning away, he looked at the last thicket he must cross to reach the cave. The thicket was a long, straight line of juniper trees that looked like they had been deliberately planted by someone. Legend claimed they had been, but not by a man. Supposedly, they had been planted by a dragon as his hedges. Stavin discounted that as pure fancy.

What he didn't discount was the legend of the dragon's gold.

Everyone knew there had been dragons in the old days. After all, the Empire of Luxand had been founded by the dragon Dandarshandrake. Other dragons had been seen through the centuries, though few humans had been blessed by their attention. A dragon had often been seen soaring majestically above the valley back when Kavinston was being built, but it had been ages since it had last been spotted.

The stories of the dragon's gold had been around since an intrepid youngster had chased a wounded deer into the cave more than a hundred and fifty years ago. He'd gone in after it, then stopped in his tracks when he saw a huge pile of gold. Supposedly, terror had gripped the boy's heart as a long, low moan filled the cave, and he'd run for his life, forgetting the wounded deer and the gold in his fright. He had run all the way down the mountain to the village and told the Elders what had happened.

The Elders of Kavinston had sent a band of stout warriors to investigate the cave. Only four returned three days later. They confirmed the boy's story of a dragon's hoard of gold, and added to the legend of the terror.

Their leader had been much farther into the cave than the rest when the terror hit, and he hadn't won free to the sunlight with the others. His screams had echoed horribly, only to be followed by an even more ominous silence. The survivors had fled down the mountain as fast as their horses would carry them, and none of them would ever climb that mountain again.

Some years after that incident, two foolish boys had dared one another to go into the cave and prove their bravery. They had both entered as their friends watched. But both had reportedly emerged at a dead run just a few moments later. The second to emerge claimed to be the bravest because he had stayed the longest. And so had begun the foolish tradition of boys proving their bravery in the dragon's cave: That was why Stavin was making his lonely journey now.

Stavin struggled through the last line of thicket and saw the mouth of the cave, just as it had been described. It was a pitch-black, irregular circle in the side of the mountain, near the summit. The edges of the opening were smooth, as if they had been worn down by the passage of countless hands. A shiver of fear shook his slight frame, and he made no effort to hide it. There was no one to hide it from. No one had come with him. No one believed that he'd really do it.

*No one believes I have the courage,* he thought.

That thought burned in his mind and started his legs moving once again. Stavín approached from the side and peeked around the edge into the darkness, but he could see little of the interior. Gathering the last shreds of his courage, he crept into the cave.

Stavín walked until he couldn't see where he was stepping, then stopped and let his eyes adjust for a few moments. When the impenetrable darkness had been replaced by a deep gloom, he walked forward. Then, suddenly, as if it had been hidden by an outcropping of stone, he saw the treasure glinting in a shaft of sunlight. The mound of gold was as tall as two grown men standing one on the other's shoulders, and as long as the cave was wide. Then The Terror struck.

Wild, unreasoning fear grabbed Stavín's heart and squeezed. He gasped for breath as his knees shook uncontrollably. His bladder and bowels threatened to let loose and shame him. Yet, for all his fear, he didn't run. He couldn't. *I'd rather die than go back without proof that I really went into the cave.* Gathering his breath, he shouted, "I won't run! I won't!"

New terrors assaulted his senses. Barely seen shapes flitted through the darkness at the corners of his sight. Shadows moved and writhed as if they were tormented spirits. The sounds of moaning and screaming assaulted his ears, and still he stood his ground.

"No!" he screamed. "I won't let you frighten me away!" Suddenly the fear was gone, and Stavín fell to his knees in relief, gasping for breath.

"You really won't run?" a deep, echoing voice asked.

"N-No!" Stavín shouted.

"You are alone," the voice said softly. "Who do you think to prove your bravery to?"

"Myself!" Stavín shouted, bolder now that he was still alive. He struggled to his feet once again and stared at the pile of gold.

A sound like a gigantic sigh filled the cave. "Kids," muttered the voice. "And what do you desire as proof of your bravery?"

"Gold! As much as I can carry," Stavín shouted into the darkness. *That'll show 'em. That'll prove how brave I am.*

Harsh laughter echoed through the cave. "Is that what the last hundred and sixty years have been about? You have indeed come on a fool's errand, boy, for there is no gold here."

Stavín got angry when he heard that. He could see it plainly before him. He shouted, "No gold? What's that if it's not gold?" as his hands balled into fists.

The mound of gold seemed to shimmer, then it moved. It rose toward the roof of the cave, and part of it unfolded toward him. The center lifted from the floor, and he could see what looked like legs underneath. Then a long, sinuous neck swung a wagon-sized head around to bring two golden eyes the size of battle-shields to focus on him.

"You mean me?" the voice asked, and Stavín realized how foolish they had all been. It wasn't the dragon's gold that they had been trying to steal: it was the dragon itself.

Stavín stumbled backwards and tripped on a rock, landing on his backside. "Don't eat me. Please don't eat me," he pleaded in a little boy's voice as the dragon's head swung closer.

The dragon considered him for a moment, then snorted. "I don't eat humans. You surprise me, boy. Most grown men would have run screaming for the sunlight, messing their britches the whole way if I turned on them like that. You are braver than you believe."

"But no one else believes," Stavín whispered. "None of them believed enough to come and see if I'd even enter the cave. Not one of them. Not even — you wouldn't understand."

The dragon's head nodded. "I understand better than you might think."

"And now I'll go back empty-handed, and no one will believe that I really came in here."

"There you are wrong, boy." The dragon shook itself like a wet hound and a sprinkling of golden scales fell to the cave's floor. "Be a good lad and gather those up," it

commanded, and Stavin automatically did as he was told. "Good enough. What are you?"

"I'm a human," Stavin answered softly.

"Don't try my patience, boy, or you'll be bear-bait," the dragon snapped. "What do you do? Are you a warrior?"

"Yes. Or, I will be when the spring draft comes and I take my place with the others."

"What is your weapon?" the dragon asked.

"The Dragon's Tongue," Stavin answered, then wished he hadn't.

"What is that? I've never heard of it before," the dragon asked, tilting his head to the side.

Stavin was relieved to still be alive, so he explained. "It's a quarterstaff with a spear point at each end."

"Odd name," the dragon commented. "Why is it called that?"

Stavin thought for a moment before answering, "Because it has two points, is very sharp, and can cut both ways."

The dragon actually chuckled. "Heh. Now that's truth if I ever heard it. What armor do you wear?"

"Breast and back plates, thigh and shin guards, chain-mail leggings, a long chain-mail coat and cap, a helmet, and armored gauntlets," Stavin answered. "Why do you want to know?"

"You'll see. Now shut up for a moment."

Stavin suddenly found himself in the center of a circle of bright light, surrounded by a whirlwind made of the dragon scales he had collected. His arms were abruptly pulled out straight from his sides and his clothes vanished. As he was taking a breath to protest, he was magically clothed head to toe in a soft, felt-like material that looked like spun gold. Golden chain-mail rattled and chimed as it made itself around him. Tall gauntlets formed around his hands, but only the backs of the gloves were armored. Breast and back plates snapped around him like a mussel shell. Thigh guards wrapped

his upper legs, and shin guards with knee cups wrapped his lower legs. There were even plates that extended out over his boots.

As he looked up at the dragon, he could see the reflection of his armor in its eyes. He was filled with wonder as a helmet formed around his head in the shape of a dragon, its body forming the dome of the helmet while its wings formed cheek guards and the neck and head formed a nasal guard. When Stavín looked at his hands, a brightly shining staff appeared, then transmuted into a Dragon's Tongue.

"You have all the proof you need, and more courage than any man before you. Now get out of my cave."

The light was suddenly gone, and Stavín stumbled and swore as he made his way to the circle of light that marked the entrance of the cave. He stopped at the edge of the light and shouted back over his shoulder, "Thank you," but he received no reply.

He stood with his back against the edge of the cave for a moment as his knees shook. He'd done it. He'd done what no one had ever done. *I faced The Fear*. And he was alive to tell the tale.

*Now Barvil will say yes. Now Dorvina will accept me, even if I'm not as tall as her chin. Now everyone will have to accept me as a real man, and not a runt. Now I have proof no one can deny.*



## Chapter 2

The people of Kavinston didn't recognize the gold-clad figure that walked into town near the middle of the next day. Warriors came running with weapons in their hands as the Elders hurried to confront the intruder just inside the town gates.

"Halt where you are, stranger," the Chief Elder said, holding up his hand, palm out.

Stavin stopped as commanded, but he was puzzled. Then he realized that they couldn't see his face and removed his helmet. "Chief Elder Kel'Davin, it's me, Stavin. I've been to the dragon's cave."

Another of the Elders pushed forward and looked down at him. "You expect us to believe *that*? Where did you get that armor?"

Stavin looked up at the Elder and, for the first time in his life, found that the man's aggression didn't frighten him. "I'm wearing my proof, Elder Barvil Kel'Carin. The dragon gave it to me because I faced the fear and didn't run away."

"The dragon has been gone for decades," the Elder snapped. The crowd murmured and laughed.

Stavin shook his head as he answered, "No, Elder Kel'Carin, he has been there. The great mound of gold that everyone has seen isn't his hoard of gold coins. It's his scales. That's what he made this armor out of."

"Liar," Elder Kel'Carin snarled, then stepped forward and reached for the Dragon's Tongue in Stavin's hands. Stavin stepped back and brought the weapon to the ready, stopping the angry Elder in his tracks.

"You dare challenge me?" the Elder hissed, then held out his hand imperiously to one of the warriors. "If you won't surrender it, I'm just going to have to take it from you." He caught the weapon that had been tossed to him without looking at it and took a ready stance.

Stavin put his helmet back on and flexed his knees. "I will not let you take what is rightfully mine," he snarled defiantly as he prepared to fight one of the mightiest warriors in the valley.

Elder Kel'Carin sneered and took a contemptuous swipe at Stavin's legs, but Stavin met the attack with ease. Instead of backing away, he attacked, following the maxim that it is always better to lead when dancing with steel. The staccato clacking as the two weapons met was the only sound as they fought. Stavin was just trying to keep the Elder at bay and not dishonor his name, while Elder Kel'Carin's face was turning red and an expression of rage was twisting his features.

Stavin fought with all the skill he had, trying to keep Elder Kel'Carin from scoring on him. This was the man he most wanted to impress, the man who had driven him to the extreme of going to the dragon's cave in the first place. The man he had faced in a different arena twice already and been turned away. The father of the lovely Dorvina Kel'Carin, the girl Stavin wanted for his wife.

The lack of food and sleep coming down the mountain was making Stavin slower than usual and he let his guard down for just a moment. In that instant Elder Kel'Carin struck, driving his borrowed Dragon's Tongue forward as hard as he could, through Stavin's defenses, and into Stavin's chest, where it—stopped. The finest steel the smith could produce met dragon scale and failed. A point that would pierce the finest armor made by man turned when it hit armor made by a dragon.

Stavin was knocked back a step by the force of the blow and stunned by the implications. Elder Kel'Carin wasn't just trying to score a blow against him. The thought, *He's trying to kill me!* flitted through Stavin's mind as he staggered backwards.

Elder Kel'Carin was standing still, as if frozen by the implications of what he had just tried to do. He had just tried to kill a child of the people, an untested boy of the Cat Clan of Aniston. To kill a child was the most dishonorable act a man could commit.

The crowd roared in protest, but Stavin was focused on the vile act of the man before him. *That's dishonorable! How could an Elder do that! I've proven myself!* Anger that had been smoldering burst into flame and the Dragon's Tongue in his hands flashed in

the sun, slicing off one, then the other point from the frozen Elder's weapon, then flashed a third time to cut the haft of the weapon in half in contempt.

Stavin continued to whirl his weapon for a moment, then abruptly came to a stop with his weapon held vertically in front of his chest in the traditional salute of the victor to the vanquished. Relaxing, he let go with his right hand and put the weapon at rest against his left shoulder.

Looking past Elder Kel'Carin, he addressed the crowd. "No one would come with me to the dragon's cave six days ago. No one saw me enter the cave to get the treasure. I faced the fear alone, to prove my bravery to myself since none of you would let me prove it to you. I faced my fear and conquered it. I learned the truth: the dragon never left our valley, and he's still here. He gave me this armor and Dragon's Tongue, made from his own golden scales, as a reward for my courage. *I* was the only one who didn't run away."

Chief Elder Kel'Davin stepped past the disgraced Elder Kel'Carin and faced Stavin squarely. Even as shrunken and bent with age as he was, he had to look slightly down into Stavin's eyes, but his own eyes held nothing but respect.

"Stavin Kel'Aniston, you have indeed proven yourself this day. Your proof is not in the armor you wear or the weapon in your hand. Your proof is not in a cave on the mountain. Your proof is that you fought honorably against Elder Kel'Carin and remembered the law of our people when he had clearly forgotten it. He tried to kill you, but you spared him when the advantage came to you. Honor, above all else, is the proof of a man." He glanced over his shoulder at the man who had been at his right hand for years, then walked away without another word.

When the Chief Elder turned away, the rest of the town's folk turned away as well and returned to their interrupted lives, discussing what they had seen and the revelations that Stavin had presented them with. Only three people remained where they had been standing.

Karlit and Marinis Kel'Aniston stood straight and proud as their youngest child, and greatest heartache, was accepted as a man by their people. Barvil Kel'Carin remained where he had been standing since his dishonorable act, head down in shame.

Stavin walked around the shamed Elder to face his parents. His voice was soft as he said, "I told you I would return a man, or not at all."

Karlit reached out and grasped his son by the upper arm. "That you did, and I'm ashamed to admit that I never thought I'd see you again."

Marinis clasped her son's other arm with a grip that was stronger than her husband's. "I was afraid that you would keep going over the mountain and down into Kavadia, or that the next bunch to go up there would find your bones." She smiled through her tears and tapped his golden breast plate. "I certainly never expected this."

Stavin removed his helmet again and smiled sheepishly. "I didn't either. I thought I was going to die in the cave or go mad. Either would have been better than living here, scorned as a coward and never being anything but a servant in someone else's household."

Karlit looked past Stavin to where Barvil Kel'Carin still stood staring at the ground. "And now?" he asked as Stavin followed his gaze.

"And now," Stavin repeated softly. Turning, he stood squarely looking at the man's back. "Face me," he commanded, and the shamed elder turned, head still down. "Do you have something to say to me, Elder Kel'Carin?"

"I am no longer an Elder. You have dishonored me in the eyes of our people."

"You dishonored yourself," Stavin snarled as he looked the man up and down. "By the customs of our ancestors, your life and all that you possess now belong to me. Also by custom, you have the choice of accepting me as your master or taking your own life to regain your honor."

Barvil finally looked up and stared Stavin straight in the eye. "I will live with the shame my pride has brought upon me. I will regain my honor as a man may, servant or no."

Stavin nodded once. "So be it. You may present me to my household."

Barvil nodded and motioned for his new master to precede him. "My – *Your* house awaits you. I believe you know the way."

Stavin nodded, then turned to look at his parents. "I – "

"We know. Go settle your household. If you need us, we are close by," Marinis said as her husband nodded.

### Chapter 3

Stavin walked away with Barvil a respectful step behind. The walk was a long one, all the way across town, and just about everyone turned away when they saw the pair. Barvil's shame was a raw wound for the entire population. He had been the favorite to replace Sorval Kel'Davin as Chief Elder when the other retired or died.

When they reached the house, all of the Kel'Carins were lined up on the front porch waiting for them. Barvil stepped forward to face his family. "My family, I have dishonored myself, and placed us in servitude to Stavin Kel'Aniston. He is now master of this house and all who dwell within."

Sahrena Kel'Carin nodded. "We saw your dishonor, my husband." Turning to Stavin, she bowed deeply. "Master Stavin, we welcome you. This house and all in it now belong to you, but I would presume to remind you of this: Custom forbids a man congress with a girl of his household who is not his wife."

As Stavin looked into her eyes he felt his heartache renewed. "And so you remind me that even though I *have* proven myself, Dorvina can still never be mine, for no honorable man may take to wife any girl or woman of his own household." He looked past Sahrena to the Kel'Carin's oldest child and felt the emptiness in his belly grow. "Even so, you get your way," he whispered.

Dorvina answered him boldly. "Not entirely, and not in the way I would have chosen, but it will do." Her words burned like acid on Stavin's bleeding heart, and Sahrena took control before anything unfortunate could happen.

"I have already moved our things out of the master's suite. If you will follow me, I will see you settled."

Stavin nodded and followed Sahrena through the house. Though he had been there dozens of times in the past, he had never entered Barvil and Sahrena's rooms. The master's suite was made up of three rooms. The first room was the library. Shelves of

books lined the walls, though there were bare places where books and small objects had obviously been removed. Next was the bedroom, and again it was obvious that many small items had been removed, but Stavín said nothing. While custom made everything in the house his, custom also allowed servants belongings of their own. By not saying anything now, Stavín was acknowledging that those missing items belonged to Barvil and Sahrena. Last was the armory. This room was bare except for the armor stand. Barvil's armor and weapons remained his so he could regain his honor in service to the town.

"If you will stand here, Master Stavín, I will help you with your armor," Sahrena said in a soft voice, but Stavín shook his head.

"Send Kar to help me, please. I'm—I don't want—"

"As you wish, Master Stavín," Sahrena replied with another bow.

As she turned to go, Stavín thought of something. "Please send someone to my parents' house for my clothes."

Sahrena again nodded and said, "As you wish, Master Stavín." Then she left, closing the door behind her.

Sahrena had only been gone for a few moments when there was a knock at the bedroom door. Stavín said, "Come," without looking. He heard the door open and turned to find a figure standing by the armory door.

"You sent for me, Stave—Master Stavín?" Karvik asked in a near whisper.

Stavín waved a hand for him to enter the room. "I need help with my armor, Kar, and I was embarrassed when your mom tried to undress me."

"Mom's that way. You know that. Stand tall," Karvik commanded and Stavín raised his arms slightly so Karvik could get to the straps on his sides. Even though Stavín was older by nearly two years, he still had to look up into Karvik's eyes.

Karvik reached up and started undoing the shoulder straps that held the breast plate to the back plate. "How did you manage on your own coming down the mountain, Master?"

Stavin sighed deeply. "This is so awkward. Coming down the mountain was easy: I didn't take it off. I only had one night, and it wasn't that bad sleeping in it. Not that I slept all that much." When the breast and back plates were off and hung on the rack, Karvik helped remove the rest of the armor. Then came the mail.

"This is finely woven mail. It fits you like a glove. What are you going to do when you start growing again?"

Stavin shrugged as he squirmed out of the mail coat and leggings. "I don't know, Kar. A year ago I was taller than you, but now you're taller by a hand. I haven't grown a finger in five years." Stavin finally got all the mail off, revealing the fine golden cloth beneath. "At least the dragon made the bottom half easy to get down."

That comment drew a snort of amusement from the younger boy. "First rule when choosing armor: Make sure you can squat in a hurry if you need to."

Stavin laughed. "Warmaster Kel'Horval certainly makes that lesson memorable, doesn't he?" he said with a grin. "I don't know how the dragon knew, but he obviously did. Do you know who your mother sent to get my clothes?"

"Zahri," Karvik replied with a grimace.

Stavin groaned. "Great! She might be back by sundown. I'll just have to wear this until then."

Karvik grinned. "She's not really *that* bad, Stave. Master Stavin. Do I have to keep calling you 'master' all the time?"

Stavin shrugged. "I don't think so, but we'd better ask your mom. I don't care what's changed, I'm still afraid of her. I don't want to make her mad."

Karvik nodded. "Good idea. Not making her mad is always a good plan, even if she can't really do anything to you anymore."

Stavin collapsed on to the bench and put his head in his hands. "Why did your dad try to kill me? I still don't understand. It's against all of our customs."

Karvik leaned against the wall. "I don't know, Stave. He probably just got mad and lost his temper when you defied him. Defiance really infuriates him, and he's been getting plenty of that from Dorvi lately. Or he may have thought you were lying about



staying in the cave. You know how all of the Elders get when they think someone is lying to them."

"But I wasn't lying," Stavín whispered. "I did stay. Look at this cloth. Have you ever seen anything like it?"

Karvík shook his head. "No. It looks like spun gold. It feels like fluffy cloth, but it's shiny like metal. Stave, no one has ever stayed in the cave. *Never*. Dad didn't when he was a boy." Karvík paused and pursed his lips. "*That* may be what made him so mad. You're claiming that you are braver than he was."

"Now *that*, my friend, sounds more reasonable than him thinking I was lying. The last time I got caught lying I had to haul water for a moon."

"You're probably right," Karvík agreed, but was interrupted by a knock at the door before he could say anything else.

They both went out to the bedroom and Stavín said, "Come in." The door opened to reveal a bundle of clothes with a pair of skinny legs sticking out of the bottom.

"Here are your clothes, Master Stavín," a voice said from somewhere as the legs started forward.

Karvík saw the wrinkle in the carpet and said, "Zahri, be careful, you're going to—" Zahrinis's foot hit the wrinkle and sent her and the clothes tumbling to the floor. "—trip."

Zahrinis scrambled to her feet, snarling at her brother, then turned shame-faced to Stavín. "Please forgive my clumsiness, Master Stavín."

Stavín was struggling not to laugh as he said, "It's all right, Zahri. Why don't you go help your mother?"

Zahrinis bowed very low and said, "Yes, Master Stavín. Thank you." The look she gave her brother said far more as she turned away.

Stavín and Karvík managed to stifle their laughter until she had closed the door, then they picked up the clothes. Karvík put out a hand to stop Stavín when he tried to help. "You're the master here. Let me do it."

"I don't know how to be a master, Kar. I've always just been the third boy. I follow orders, not give them."

Karvik fought not to sneer at Stavin's self-pitying tone. "You have to learn. Master. All of the decisions about how this household is run are now yours to make. Master."

Stavin sat on the edge of the bed and put his head in his hands. "I'm not ready to be the head of a household, Kar. I don't even have my trade yet. I've never won in battle. I've never even fought in a real battle."

"You fought and won against my dad," Karvik said hotly. "Master."

Stavin looked up at the tone of Karvik's voice, then looked down again. "I wish I hadn't."

## Chapter 4

Neither boy had noticed that the door had opened again until a deep voice said, "I'm glad you did," from the doorway. They both immediately scrambled to their feet. "If I had killed you, we would have been outlawed. Dispossessed, cast out of our home and people, bereft of everything. Your armor saved me from condemning my family, and for that I am truly grateful. With your permission, Master Stavín, Kar is needed in the kitchen. I'll see to you now."

Stavín nodded and said, "Yes, Sir," automatically, then flushed with embarrassment when Barvil raised an eyebrow. "I meant, very well, Eld – Barvil. Kar, go do whatever your mother needs you to do."

Karvík turned and started walking toward the door, but his father's growl of anger made him turn around. Barvil angled his body slightly, and Karvík remembered his manners enough to bow deeply to Stavín before he left.

"I don't care if he doesn't do that," Stavín said as Karvík closed the door.

"You should, Master Stavín. I certainly do. He has to help regain the family honor, and he can't do that if he doesn't remember his place at all times. You two are no longer friends and equals, Master Stavín. You are the master, he is the servant, not just here, but throughout the town. Our status has changed, and he must remember that. At all times."

Stavín looked at Barvil for a moment, then said, "Yes, s – Barvil. But it's hard."

Barvil nodded sagely. "Responsibility always is, Master Stavín. Shall I help you dress?"

For a moment Stavín was horrified and enraged by the notion that Barvil didn't think he could dress himself, but he quickly realized that Barvil was just doing what tradition required him to do: Being a servant. "No, thank you. I'd prefer to do it myself. You can go do – whatever you think needs to be done. I'll be along shortly."

Barvil bowed deeply and said, "Yes, Master Stavin. Sahrena should have the mid day meal prepared soon." He turned and left the room silently, closing the door softly behind him.

When he was alone again, Stavin sat on the edge of the bed and put his head in his hands. He'd made so many plans on the long trek down the mountain. He'd planned on presenting the proof of his bravery to Barvil and Sahrena and petitioning once again for Dorvina to be his wife. They would live with his parents. He would make his trips to the lowlands and apprentice in the off season with Master Scribe Kel'Zorgan, and would become the town scribe in his turn. During the warm season he would join the draft of young warriors who were hired out as caravan guards. Warmaster Kel'Horval said he was ready, though he'd taken an extra year to get there. Now, because he'd decided to stand up for himself, those plans were just so much smoke up the chimney.

Stavin shook his head sharply, then stood and squirmed out of the soft golden undergarment. He hadn't noticed that the room was chilly until he pulled the golden cloth away from his skin. He hurried to the bed and found some warm clothes, and dressed quickly. Once he looked like himself, he went to the kitchen.

Once he arrived, he immediately felt self-conscious. Everyone was staring at him. Worse, the only person in the room who was smaller than him was Zahrinis, but that was because she was only ten years old. Even so, she was only half a hand shorter than he was. Barvil was four hands taller and Sahrena was only half a hand shorter than her husband. Dorvina was only a finger shorter than her mother.

"Gods Above protect this house," he said automatically.

The others replied, "And its master."

Swallowing his embarrassment, Stavin nodded and stepped forward, toward Karvik's side, but Sahrena's cleared throat stopped him in his tracks. "The head of the table awaits you, Master Stavin," she said pointedly.

Barvil stood behind the chair and held it for him as Stavin cautiously sat, then walked to the chair at Sahrena's left hand, where a guest would normally sit. Dorvina

sat at her mother's right hand, as the oldest daughter. Karvik sat at Stavin's right hand, where he would have been at his father's side as the eldest son, and Zahrinis sat at Stavin's left.

Stavin finally found himself in a situation where he knew what to do, because the guest's role was the same as the master's. "We offer thanks to the Gods Above for the bounty of the Harvest, the success of the Hunt, and the comfort of the Hearth."

"Land, Air, Fire, and Water bless this house," the others replied, completing the blessing.

Sahrena looked to her right and nodded. "Dorvi?"

Dorvina stood and went to the side-board to begin serving the light mid day meal. Her expression was carefully neutral as she served Stavin first. Beans and corn, a piece of hard sausage, a bit of yellow cheese, and a piece of bread made up the traditional meal, and everyone waited for Dorvina to return to her seat before looking expectantly at Stavin.

Stavin nodded, then began eating. Once he had taken a bite, everyone else began eating as well. The only thing that made this meal different from all the other times Stavin had shared a meal with the Kel'Carins was the silence. He was too distracted to start a conversation, and tradition demanded that everyone remain silent if the master did not speak first.

Once everyone had finished eating, Stavin addressed Barvil. "I am going to go talk with my parents for a while. I don't know what to tell you to do, so I'm leaving you in charge. You know what is needed far better than I do."

Barvil nodded. "Very well, Master Stavin. Everything will be in order when you return."

Stavin stood and almost bowed to Sahrena, turning the mistake into a deep nod instead. "Thank you, Madam Kel'Carin, that was very good." He smiled at her, then left quickly before he made another mistake.

\* \* \*

Once Stavin was gone, the atmosphere in the room became even tenser. "This isn't right!" Dorvina said hotly. "He isn't fit to be the master of our clan."

"Be quiet, Dorvi!" Sahrena snapped. "Tradition will be honored."

"But Mother – "

"No buts, Dorvina," Barvil snapped. "What's done is done, and all we can do now is make the best of it. Stavin is young, but he's old enough to join the expedition and quite skilled with his weapon. We've proof enough of that. If I hadn't been so quick to disbelieve his story, we'd be having a far different argument right now. With that armor and Dragon's Tongue as proof of his courage, I'd have had a hard time finding a reason not to grant his petition for you as his wife. The Kel'Aniston clan might not rank with us, but he's the highest-ranking young man that has approached me about you."

"And now the Kel'Aniston clan is far above us," Sahrena added. "Whoever your father finally approves of will have to be approved of by Stavin as well. By right, he could approve of someone without consulting us at all."

Dorvina's eyes narrowed. "He wouldn't dare."

"Sure he would," Karvik said from across the table. "You're no longer available to him in any way, and he can't like being around you. Every time he sees you, he's reminded that the thing he wanted most in life is farther away than ever before." Karvik's face twisted into a sour grimace. "Though I can't see why he'd want to be married to a shrew like you. He's seen your temper."

Dorvina snarled and picked up her knife, but Sahrena snapped, "Dorvi!" and she put it down.

"There are better men who want me."

"Not many. And now, possibly none," Barvil said softly. "Your station has fallen, Dorvina. My fault, I know, but true nonetheless. You are no longer an Elder's daughter. You're a servant and the daughter of servants. The parents of several of the boys who have unofficially approached me would never accept you now. Franik I'm sure of. Elvar Kel'Coris would never allow you in his home, and Arvinis probably wouldn't even acknowledge your existence. Harner is less likely to have a problem with his parents,

but Jorvan and Coriannis would treat you like a servant while he was away with the rest of the youngsters in the lowlands."

Dorvina was looking back and forth between her parents in disbelief. "No! It can't be! It can't! I thought I was finally free to marry who *I* wanted, but now you're telling me that I'm actually in a worse position?"

"Precisely so," her mother said. "Now, you and Zahri clear the table and wash the dishes."

## Chapter 5

Stavin walked to his parents' house and paused at the door. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the door open and found his family still at the table.

"You're a bit late, son, but there's still bread and cheese to be had," his father said as he waved him to a seat.

Stavin took the seat, but shook his head when his sister tried to serve him. "I've already eaten, Sora. Thank you. Mom, Dad, I'm so confused by this. I don't know how to run a household. I'm already making mistakes. Barvil said he's grateful that he was only dishonored and not dispossessed. Sahrena is being quiet, which frightens me. Kar and Zahri are acting like themselves, but Dorvi is so smug about there not being any way she could be mine now and she's the reason I went up the mountain in the *first place!*" he finished hotly.

Marinis nodded her understanding. "You went up there to prove your bravery to Barvil. He would have accepted you, but Dorvina is so much like her mother that she'd have refused you. I'm six years older than Sahrena, and I remember how she was when the boys came calling. She was the hardest to please of her sisters. She only agreed to Barvil when she had managed to drive all the other eligible young men into the arms of other girls."

"Barvil had actually made his first trip to the lowlands before he petitioned Sahrena's father for her," Karlit said with a wry grin. "She'd driven all the other young men away, and she hadn't had a suitor in three moons. Her father said yes as soon as Barvil formally asked and had some short words for *her* when he announced his decision."

Marinis chuckled. "We never would have dreamed of telling you this before, but you should know what you were trying to get yourself into. Like they say, even the worst storm brings rain to the fields."



Sorandis reached over and ruffled his hair, then laughed when he swatted at her hand. "Now you can settle down with a *nice* girl and be happy." Sorandis was the youngest of his three older sisters and two older brothers, and she had come over to their parents' house in hopes of seeing him. She was two years older than Stavin, and her husband was one of the hunters out trying to bring in some fresh meat now that the winter was ebbing toward spring.

"But she was the only one I wanted," Stavin whispered.

Sorandis exchanged glances with her parents before continuing. "Stavi, there are girls who like you, you know. Girls who would have accepted you a moon ago, dragon's cave be damned. Not all of us are dead-set on marrying some muscle-head like Harner."

"But Dorvi is," Stavin said softly as he stared at his lap.

"True, but think about this instead. You, baby brother, are now the *head* of a household, not the youngest boy. Several of the highest-ranking girls who wouldn't have given you a second look a week ago will say yes today if you ask. Orana Kel'Davin would. She's a year younger than you, she's the highest-ranking girl of age right now, and she's being picky because she's the Chief Elder's granddaughter."

"And Kar would knife me in my sleep if I did," Stavin said gloomily. "She's being picky because she and Kar have an arrangement. Kar was just waiting for Warmaster Kel'Horval to pass him before he asked. Changed status or no, Kar will ask for Orana. He might have to wait until our first season in the lowlands is done and he's won his own honor, but she'll wait for him and say yes when we return."

Sorandis was rapidly looking back and forth between her brother and their stunned parents. "Since when?"

"Since last spring," Stavin answered, finally looking up into her eyes. "I didn't get to go with the expedition last spring because of my size, and Kar and I ended up in the same final class. He was actually trying to help me with Dorvina. He wants her married off so she'll move away." He paused to smile sourly. "I should have known. Anyway, he told me what he and Orana have arranged."

"That arrangement won't matter anymore if I know Sharvan Kel'Davin," Karlit said thoughtfully. "He won't let his daughter marry a servant, no matter who he was yesterday."

"Very well then," Marinis said primly, changing the subject. "So you won't court Orana for the sake of Karvik's friendship. There *are* other girls. Have you considered Sharindis Kel'Horval?"

"*Shari?*" Stavín almost shouted in shock. "She can hardly see! She spends all of her time with her books or —"

"—Or with Master Scribe Kel'Zorgan, who *you* want to be apprenticed to, working in the scribe's office in the town hall," Sorandis pointed out. "Her eyes aren't getting better, but they aren't getting worse either. She won't pass bad eyes to her children. After all, the fall from that horse wasn't her fault. She's two years older than you and she's resigned to being an old maid."

"And she's one of *your* oldest friends," Stavín pointed out suspiciously.

"And someone *we* would have suggested earlier," their mother interjected, "if you hadn't been so obsessed with Dorvina."

That stopped Stavín in his tracks. "You really think Sharindis would be a good wife for me?" he asked softly, looking back and forth between his parents and his sister.

"We do," Karlit said as Marinis and Sorandis nodded.

Sorandis grinned and nudged his leg with a toe under the table. "There's also this to consider; she likes you. You are the only boy in town who shares her interest in the scribe's art. And there's one other thing that I have to point out, in fairness; Shari needs someone to look after her, and you suddenly have servants to do that. No other young man has that going for him."

"She's almost helpless," Stavín muttered stubbornly.

Sorandis looked at him sideways. "Have you ever seen her with that staff she uses as a walking stick? Gods Above, her father is the *Warmaster*. I've seen her embarrass warrior students with Dragon's Tongues. Her father has taught her to use every sense, and she does. She sees shadows enough to know where they are, and she

hears the rest." Sorandis suddenly chuckled. "Gods Above help you in the dark, little brother."

"I haven't spoken to her father yet," Stavín stubbornly maintained.

"But you're thinking about it instead of obsessing over Dorvina," his father said matter-of-factly.

\* \* \*

Stavín returned to the Kel'Carin house and stopped at the door, his hand automatically reaching for the knocker. He paused before he touched it, took a deep breath to bolster his nerve, and reached for the latch instead. He opened the door and stepped resolutely inside.

Zahrinis was striding toward the door and stopped in her tracks when she saw him. "I saw you coming and was going to let you in, Stave – Master Stavín."

Stavín shrugged one shoulder. "I guess I'm not the only one who's going to have to get used to me living here. Where's your father?"

Zahrinis tossed a glance over her shoulder. "Upstairs. He and Mom are making plans."

Stavín nodded and started toward the stairs, saying, "Thank you, Zahri."

"Stavi," Zahrinis said in a small voice, "you aren't going to be mean about Dorvi, are you?"

Stavín stopped and looked her in the eye, then shook his head. "No. No, I'm not going to be mean. I just had a long talk with my parents about Dorvi. I've been given a lot to think about, and I need to talk with your parents before I make a decision."

"Thank you, Stave – *Master Stavín*."

"That sounds so strange," Stavín muttered to himself as he once again headed up the stairs. He found Barvil and Sahrena in what had been the guest's bedroom. "Barvil, Sahrena, may I have a few moments of your time?" he asked cautiously.

"Of course, Master Stavín," Barvil said and they both turned to face him.

Stavín couldn't hide his grimace at their instant obedience. "Sahrena, how well do you know Nahrana Kel'Horval?"

Sahrena considered him carefully for a moment before she answered. "Quite well, Master Stavin. We have both been on the town's Defense Planning Council for several years."

Stavin nodded and looked at Barvil. "I know that you and the Warmaster are close friends and allies in the Council of Elders, Barvil," Stavin said, then reddened in embarrassment at reminding the man how far he had fallen today. "Sorry. Anyway, it's good that you both know them so well because – what do you think of me asking Warmaster Kel'Horval for Sharindis to be my wife?" he finished in a rush, then held his breath.

Barvil and Sahrena shared a glance, then Sahrena stepped forward and put a hand on Stavin's shoulder. "Are you seriously considering her, or do you just want to know what we think?" she asked, then added, "Master Stavin," almost as an afterthought.

"Sora said, well, Sora said that Shari likes me."

"And you are asking us why, Master Stavin? It isn't our place to advise you on such things. You are the master of this house." Barvil spoke softly, but he was completely serious.

"I know," Stavin almost cried, "but I don't *know!* I don't feel it. If I ask for Shari, she will become Mistress of the house when Kar and I go to the lowlands with the other caravan guards. I guess what I'm asking is how you feel about it. If I was at home – but I'm home here now – she'd be mistress, but she has to be cared for –"

"I understand, Master Stavin," Sahrena said gently, smiling softly for the first time. "You are concerned about taking Sharindis from her family and placing her in a position where her lack of sight would place her at our mercy. Don't trouble yourself, Master Stavin. Shari is my Goddaughter. I would care for her as my own, mistress or child." Evidently seeing the confusion on Stavin's face, she went on to explain, "I was far closer to Charvil than Nahrana. We are of an age, and were all but inseparable when we were little, but we knew each other far too well to marry when our turn came. If you are truly serious, I can think of no other girl I would rather have as mistress here."

Barvil was staring at his wife. "Nineteen years, and still you have secrets." He turned his attention to Stavin and bowed. "You should wear that armor, Master Stavin." He gave a wry grin. "Charvil is going to want to inspect it anyway, and it does look impressive."

Stavin automatically bobbed his head and said, "Yes, Sir."

Barvil managed not to roll his eyes as he motioned toward the door. "After you, Master Stavin."

## Chapter 6

Stavin and Barvil left the house a short time later. There were curious stares now, and Stavin felt very self-conscious, but no one approached them as they made their way to the center of town. There stood the ancient fortress that was the last-bastion defensive position in case of attack and that also served as the town hall and academy. The school where all of the children learned to read, write, and figure was under the control of the Master Scribe. The training grounds where boys became warriors were also there, under the constant gaze of the Warmaster.

Charvil Kel'Horval saw them enter and immediately left his pupils under the supervision of an assistant. "Well, this is convenient, Stavin. I was going to stop by this evening and ask for a closer look at your new armor."

Stavin came to attention and froze as the Warmaster inspected his armor in minute detail, checking the straps and the fit of the plate. He fingered the mail appreciatively, and hummed a little when he checked the helmet.

"Magnificent. Absolutely magnificent. You say it's made of dragon scale? If what I've heard is true, only magic or time can scratch dragon scales. Allow me to check your weapon," he commanded. Obediently Stavin raised the Dragon's Tongue and presented it to the Warmaster on his open palms with his head bowed.

Charvil took the weapon and stepped back, then ran through a series of moves that tested the weapon in every way possible, ending with a lightning-fast strike at a wooden post. The dragon-wrought edge sheared cleanly through the two-hand thick tree trunk. The Warmaster stared at the piece of post in awe for a moment, then studied the weapon in his hands. He returned it to Stavin's upturned hands with a deep nod. "It is superior to any weapon I have ever used."

Stavin looked at his weapon with pride, then the sound of a cleared throat from behind him reminded him of why they were there. Dropping to his knees, he placed his forehead against the ground, but carefully kept his weapon in his hands.

"Charvil Kel'Horval," Stavin said loudly so there could be no confusion about what he was doing. "I petition you for Sharindis, your daughter, to be my wife." He was fully aware that all activity on the practice grounds had stopped the moment he went to his knees.

Charvil looked down at the boy kneeling in front of him, then up at the man standing behind the boy. Barvil grinned and shrugged, then looked down at Stavin to get Charvil's attention back where it belonged.

Remembering his duty, Charvil continued the ritual. "Stavin Kel'Aniston, why do you choose my daughter?"

Stavin again spoke loudly. "I choose Sharindis for love. I choose Sharindis for life. I choose Sharindis for the mother of my children."

Charvil thought for a moment, then departed from the ritual. "Do your mother and father know about this?"

"They do, Warmaster," Stavin answered without looking up.

"Very well. Stavin Kel'Aniston, you have proven yourself to be a courageous and honorable young man." To his credit, he didn't glance at Barvil. "I grant you Sharindis, my daughter, for love, for life, and for the mother of your children."

Stavin quickly scrambled to his feet and bowed deeply. "I thank you, Warmaster."

Charvil chuckled. "I suppose I should be thanking you, Stavin. I'm curious, though. You've never shown any real interest in Shari before. Why did you decide to ask for her now?"

Stavin looked down and sighed. "Sora. Dorvi can never be mine, and with my mind clear of my obsession, Sora pointed out what I think I've known all along. Shari and I are cut from the same cloth, if not the same pattern. Once I could see her clearly, I

saw someone who can probably tolerate me and my books." He looked up at Charvil's puzzled expression and smiled sheepishly.

"With your permission, Master Stavín?" Barvil asked, and at Stavín's nod, said to his cousin, "We've talked about this over beer often enough, Char. Shari isn't going to be able to run a household and manage children by herself. Master Stavín, through the agency of my bull-headed pride, has a household where Shari will have the help she needs. When Master Stavín completes his five summers in the lowlands, he will be free to follow his scholarly bent. By taking Shari to wife, Stavín is setting up a household where he will have someone who understands him far better than if he had succeeded in his desire for Dorvi."

Charvil gave Barvil a quizzical look and said, "You aren't his father, Bar. Besides, I already said yes."

Barvil looked chagrined. "It seems that the children aren't the only ones who have some adjusting to do." Turning to Stavín, he bowed deeply. "My apologies if I have overstepped myself, Master Stavín."

Stavín was caught off-guard, but recovered quickly. "You meant well, Barvil. There is nothing to apologize for." Turning to the Warmaster, Stavín bowed again. "I ask you to come with me to your daughter so that she may hear this news from your lips."

"As is proper," Charvil agreed, then added, "and prudent. Shari doesn't always take surprises very well."

The three men walked the short distance to the town hall archive. Sharindis was in a corner of the scribe's office where the window provided bright sunlight for most of the day. She was using a large magnifying crystal to let her read the parchment she was copying.

Raising her head at the sound of the door opening, she could see three shadows by the door in the overall gloom of the room. "May I help you?" she asked courteously.

"Shari, Stavín Kel'Aniston has petitioned for you to be his wife," Charvil said. "I have granted his petition."



Sharindis looked at the three shadows and focused her attention on the short one. "So, your first choice said no, and now you turn to me, the poor second? Or am I even that far up your list?" she asked sarcastically.

Stavin looked at the floor and cleared his throat. "Shari, I beg your forgiveness for my inattention and obtuseness. I had considered no other women to be my wife while I was pursuing Dorvina. My obsession was such that no other woman registered on my consciousness, but now I see that you have always been there, always at the edge of my perception." He took a deep breath and said, "I give you right of refusal without reservation."

Sharindis' gaze stayed on the short figure between the two tall ones. "And if I should refuse you, who then will you ask?"

"No one." Stavin looked at her from across the room, knowing she couldn't see his eyes but not caring. "I will go to the lowlands and seek an outlander bride, for no other girl of our people draws me."

Sharindis let the silence grow for a moment, then said, "I do not refuse you, Stavin."

Stavin let out a breath that he didn't know he had been holding and heard two other sighs of relief as well. "I greet you, wife, and give to you my name, and with my name all that I possess."

Sharindis completed the ceremony in a voice that was strangely muffled. "I greet you, husband, and receive from you your name, returning my father's name to him as a woman must. My dowry is modest, but I do not come empty-handed."

That caught Stavin off-guard and he looked at Barvil and Charvil, but neither man seemed fazed in the least. Taking a breath, he answered, "Your dowry is yours to do with as you wish."

Sharindis suddenly giggled. "That's good, since it's mostly bedclothes and a goose-down comforter. There is some coin, though not much, and a few knick-knacks as well." She transferred her attention to the third shadow. "Who is there?"

"Barvil," he answered, then added, "Mistress Sharindis," after a brief pause.

"It's true, then?" she asked in a breathy voice. "I heard people talking—"

"It is true, Mistress Sharindis," he assured her.

"Shari, take the rest of today and the next two off to settle your household," a voice said from the doorway, and the men turned to find the Master Scribe behind them. "Allow me to be the first to offer you my congratulations on your marriage."

"Thank you, Master Kel'Zorgan," Sharindis replied in a bright, happy tone.

Stavin bowed and said, "I also thank you, Master Kel'Zorgan. Since I have others to see to my needs, I will not be depriving you of your assistant."

"I wouldn't have allowed you to, Stavin. Shari is much too valuable to me to allow that." Glancing at Barvil, he nodded once, sharply. "You'll see to it that I'm not deprived of my assistant, won't you?"

"As my master and mistress command, Master Scribe," Barvil said. His voice was properly respectful, but there was a gleam in his eyes.

"Considering how hard I had to lobby the Elders to get her, I find that comforting." Turning his attention back to Sharindis, he let his smile show. "Run along now, Shari, and tend to your household."

Sharindis had been putting away the tools of her trade while the others were talking, taking extra care to put her crystal in its box and latch the lid. Her hand reached out unerringly to grasp her staff as she stood, but she didn't use it as she threaded her way confidently through the cluttered office to Stavin's side. She reached out to grasp his arm, but stopped when her hand encountered his mail. Her fingertips explored it lightly, running up his arm and across his breast plate. "Armor?" she asked.

"He can explain when you get home, Shari," her father said. "It's a good tale, one I'm sure you're going to be writing several times."

Turning her head toward Stavin, she grasped his arm firmly now. "I shall be most interested to hear it."

## Chapter 7

Stavin and Sharindis didn't speak as they walked out of the town hall. They didn't need to. The news of their marriage had spread quickly. A large crowd had formed, but they were silent until a female voice shouted, "Good catch, Shari!" Then everyone started shouting their congratulations and good wishes to the young couple.

They walked back to their home amid continued shouts, and Sharindis held Stavin's arm possessively the whole way. Sahrena met them on the porch and bowed deeply.

She said, "Welcome home, Mistress Shari," her barely controlled joy bubbling in her voice.

Sharindis smiled and walked up the stairs on her own. "Sahrena, I—"

"You will grow accustomed to it, as will we."

"Perhaps," Sharindis agreed, "but it will take time. If you would be so kind, please send Dorvina and Karvik to my parents' house for my things. Mother will have them ready soon if I know her."

Sahrena nodded then said, "As you command, Mistress. With your permission, I would like to go as well. There are some things I would like to discuss with your mother."

Sharindis said, "Of course," immediately. The idea of Sahrena asking her for permission to do anything was more than enough to put her off-balance after all the other things that had happened in the last three spans. "I know this house, so long as you haven't moved the furniture again."

That made everyone laugh, including Stavin. "Let me show you to our suite, Shari."

Sharindis turned toward the sound of his voice and smiled. "Yes, and you can tell me the full tale of how you came to be master of this house."

Stavin took Sharindis' elbow and led her through the house to their suite. "This is our –"

"– Library. I know this house very well, Stavin. Next is the bedroom, and to the left the armory."

"You probably know it better than I do," he agreed. "Can you help me take off my armor?"

"Yes, and while I do you can tell me this tale. Don't leave out any detail. I want to hear it all."

A short time later, when Stavin's armor was safely stored and he was dressed in normal clothes, they went and sat on the edge of the bed together while Stavin finished the tale. "So that's how I became the master of this house and the Kel'Carins. Sora is going to be insufferably smug about this."

"Sora is already insufferably smug about this. Didn't you recognize her voice when she congratulated me?"

"You could tell that was her?" Stavin asked, mystified.

"I know your sister's voice very well. I know everyone's voices, even if I don't know their faces."

Stavin was looking at her with renewed respect. "I didn't know you could hear that well."

Sharindis smiled impishly at that. "A lot of people don't. It makes them say things they don't think I can hear."

Stavin muttered, "I'll have to remember that."

"You certainly will. Stavin, I want you to know that I – I've liked you for a long time. I understand about Dorvi, about how you felt about her. I even understand a little about why. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm happy that you chose me, but I still have to wonder why you did."

Stavin thought for a moment before he answered. "Shari, I've known you for as long as I can remember, and I've always looked up to you." He paused and chuckled. "Considering that you're older and have always been at least two hands taller than me,

that's literally true. You've always been nice to me. You never called me names like the other kids did. After your accident, I remember being very upset and telling Sora that I hoped you'd choose to live and not walk into the forest. Even then I considered you to be as much my friend as Sora's."

"I came close, Stavín," Sharindis almost whispered. "When the Healer said he couldn't fix my eyes, my first thought was to run away, out into the forest, and let the Gods take me as they chose. Uncle Arlen came and talked me out of it. He remembered that I was good with numbers and had mastered reading glyphs, even at just twelve, and he asked me to be his helper. I didn't know that he hadn't acquired the Elders' permission. Mom and Dad allowed it, and I think Dad and Barvil did some favor-trading to get it approved."

"Sahrena was probably behind that," Stavín suggested and she nodded.

"Sahrena is behind a lot of things. She's the one who got me my crystal. She would never tell anyone how much it cost, but mother says that since then she hasn't seen the diamond and emerald brooch that was Sahrena's favorite."

They were both quiet for a moment, then Stavín reached over and touched her hand. "I have dreamed of this moment, but now that it's here I don't know what to do."

Sharindis smiled gently at that admission. "Mothers teach their daughters the bedroom mysteries. I'll show you tonight."

Stavín blushed bright red and was both relieved and disappointed that she couldn't see it. "I—I didn't mean *that*, Shari," he stammered. "I meant I dreamed of the day when the past didn't matter and I was accepted as a man and—"

"The past always matters, Stavín. Who you are today is a reflection of who you were yesterday and all of the days that went before, just as who you will become tomorrow will be a reflection of who you are today."

A knock at the bedroom door interrupted their conversation. Stavín said, "Come in." Dorvina led the way with a large basket of clothes in her arms, and Sahrena was close on her heels with another. Karvik and Zahrinis brought up the rear with a large wooden trunk.

"We brought all of your things, Mistress Shari," Dorvina said as she moved toward the wardrobe next to the dressing table.

"Your mother is in a dither," Sahrena continued as she set her burden down beside Dorvina's. "Your father had just told her when we arrived. She's laughing and crying at the same time, and your little brother wanted to come with us to try out his new brother-in-law's golden Dragon's Tongue. I convinced him to give you a day or two."

"Where do you want your trunk, Mistress Shari?" Karvik asked.

"At the end of the bed, please," Shari replied, standing and using her staff to feel her way toward where she could hear Sahrena and Dorvina. "I'll put my own clothes away, Mi—Sahrena. That way I'll know where everything is."

"As you wish, Mistress Sharindis," Sahrena said with a hint of humor. "While you do, the girls and I will prepare the evening meal."

Sharindis nodded, and began sorting her clothes. When the door closed, she paused and said, "Stavin, will you help me, please?"

Stavin was up and at her side in an instant. "What do you need me to do?" he asked.

Sharindis was holding up a blouse and asked, "What color is this?"

The two continued sorting and storing Sharindis' clothes. It took a long time and they were not quite done when there was another knock at the door.

"Yes?" Sharindis answered loudly.

"The evening meal awaits you, Master and Mistress," Zahrinis' voice called through the wood.

Stavin's stomach answered with a growl that made Sharindis laugh. "We'll be right there, Zahri," she shouted and they headed for the door.

They arrived at the table to find the chairs rearranged. The three children were on one side and Barvil and Sahrena were on the other. This put Barvil at Stavin's right hand, but kept Dorvina at Sharindis' right, which meant that she still had to serve.

After the blessing, Sharindis felt Sahrena's toe nudge her foot and remembered her duty. "Dorvina, you may begin."

The meal was special and Sahrena had outdone herself – and Stavín could hardly have cared less. The true meaning of the day's events was finally becoming real to him and he was completely stunned. All he could do was look at the woman at the other end of the table with wonder and awe.

It was late by the time they had finished eating, and he led Sharindis back to their suite. Zahrinis brought two pitchers of hot water from the kitchen, and they both washed thoroughly before they went to bed. They had their backs to one another, and Stavín was continually being distracted by the little sounds that Sharindis was making, and especially by her occasional giggles. For reasons that he didn't want to examine too closely, he dawdled until he heard her get into bed. Then he extinguished the lamp on his bedside table and hurried into bed.

The only light came from the fire in the stove that warmed the room, and in that light Stavín saw the promises of a lifetime glittering in the eyes of his wife.

Sharindis smiled softly. She couldn't see him in this light, but she felt him staying back. "Come here, Stavín," she whispered. "Let me hold you, and teach you the mysteries of man and wife."

## Chapter 8

Stavin awoke to a strange sensation and froze while his senses probed the darkness for what had disturbed him. After a few seconds he identified what it was: there was something in his bed! Ancestral instincts flared to life as he prepared to attack the intruder. Then a high-pitched voice cried out, "Who's there?"

Memories flooded into Stavin's conscious mind and he simply said, "Stavin."

Sharindis struggled to a sitting position with the blankets pulled up to her chin. "Stavin! What are you – Oh, Gods, I forgot!" She was silent for a moment, then she began to laugh. "Oh, Stavi, I'm sorry. I forgot! I almost stabbed you! I always keep a knife in my bedside table. I didn't think of it last night, but Mom didn't send it with my other things. I wonder – ?"

Stavin had to laugh at that. "You said your mother taught you the bedroom mysteries. I'll bet that's one of them: No weapons near the marriage bed. Our people are predictable. I was about to attack you when you asked who I was. Gods Above, I haven't shared a bed with anyone since Sora moved out of the nursery fourteen years ago."

"That's comforting to know. What hour is it?"

Stavin thought, but his time-sense had never been very good. "Let me look," he said as he got out of bed and shivered his way across the room to a window. It was pitch-black outside, but he could see the outline of Hyvalin's Peak against the stars. There was no hint of dawn around the mountain and he hurried back to bed. "It's still a long time 'till dawn." He climbed under the covers and Sharindis hugged him close.

"Oh, you're frozen!"

Stavin wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled her hair. "I'm warming up now."



That made her giggle, then she sighed when his hands rubbed her back. "Stavin, that feels wonderful." They hugged and kissed, continuing last evening's explorations of one another until Stavin's hand slid between her legs and she gave a little cry of pain. He instantly backed away and looked into her eyes.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to —"

"Shhh, it's all right. I'm just a little sore there right now. I expected it."

"Why?"

Sharindis was quiet for a moment, then pulled him close. "The first time always hurts for a girl," she whispered. "There is something inside that gets torn. That's part of the reason a man who rapes a virgin is emasculated before he's beheaded."

"I didn't want to hurt you," Stavin whispered. "I never want to hurt you." He was almost in tears as he thought of his passion causing her pain.

Sharindis hugged him fiercely and held him as he tried to pull away. "Only the first time, Stavi. You might call it a rite of passage from girl to woman. Maybe not tonight, but soon you'll see that the pleasure later is worth the pain now." Stavin stopped trying to pull away and she eased her grip enough to let him lie down beside her again.

"Shari, I— There are stories, things boys say behind their hands. Things that get them a trip to the woodshed if their parents hear them." He had to chuckle at that memory. "I never knew what they really meant. Now I begin to see why mothers get so upset and fathers seem so — disappointed."

Sharindis found his lips with hers and silenced him with a kiss. "You are a man now, not a boy. Don't let such silliness concern you until *our* sons start saying it. I'm not sore here," she whispered as she moved his hand to where she wanted it. Sometime later a crowing cock announced the dawn. Sharindis immediately squirmed away from Stavin and started getting dressed.

"Where are you going?" Stavin asked sleepily.

"To the kitchen to help with breakfast, of course," Sharindis replied.

"She won't let you help, Shari."

Now Sharindis rounded on him. Her posture almost screamed her anger, but her voice was low and intense. "Just because I can hardly see doesn't mean I'm useless!"

Stavin held his hands up instinctively to ward off her anger. "I didn't mean it that way. She won't let you help, *Mistress Sharindis*, because it wouldn't be proper for her to."

Sharindis froze with her blouse half on. Her stunned whisper was barely audible as she asked, "I'm not even allowed to help make breakfast for my husband on our first morning?"

Stavin's voice was as sour as his expression. "If I know Sahrena, and you know her better than I do, I doubt you're going to be able to do much of anything around the house unless you make a fuss about it, and you *know* how she'll react to that."

Sharindis reached out with both hands, feeling the air in front of her for the bed. Once she found it again, she sat on the edge and stared blindly into the room. "I can't even help in the kitchen," she whispered. "You're right about Sahrena. *Her* honor demands that she be a dutiful servant, no matter what I might wish."

Her tone made Stavin let loose a bark of humorless laughter. "*Hah!* And did you ever think having servants would be so objectionable? Kar started on me yesterday. He wouldn't let me help pick up my clothes after Zahri tripped." He gave a sardonic smile. "I'm used to being put in my place, but not the place I'm being put *now*."

Sharindis chuckled. "I have to write that down for Master Kel'Zorgan. He loves little quips like that."

"Now *that* is something you can do. Let's get dressed and explore our library." He swung his legs out of bed and dressed quickly, then came around the bed and helped Sharindis with her shoes.

The two went to the library and Stavin brought a burning splinter to light the lamps. Sharindis said, "I know this library, Stavin. Sahrena let me come over and read a few of her books. She likes histories."

Stavin looked around. "There are a lot of empty slots, Shari. I figured they were books that were special to Barvil and Sahrena. It looks like she took about twenty books

when she cleared out their personal things. I didn't say anything about it. They are entitled to keep their personal belongings."

"Thank you," Sharindis said softly as she trailed her fingers across the spines of the books. "You're really a very nice man, Stavin."

Stavin was saved from having to answer that comment by a knock at the door. Before he could answer, the door opened and Zahrinis stuck her head in. "Mom says to tell you that breakfast is ready, Master and Mistress."

She stepped aside as Sharindis and Stavin walked toward her. Once they had passed, she blew out the lamps and closed the door, then hurried after them.

Breakfast was traditionally the largest meal of the day, but this late in the year even this meal was small. There was a thin slice of salted venison, two pickled eggs, and a large bowl of barley boiled in meat stock for each of them. Stavin led the blessing, and Sharindis led the traditional response, smiling at the thrill she felt to be responding to her husband on their first morning.

## Chapter 9

After breakfast, Stavin and Sharindis returned to the library. "I want to write down what you said this morning, as well as the story of your encounter with the dragon."

Stavin led her over to the desk and had her sit down. "Where is your crystal?"

"In my pack, on the bedside table."

Stavin hurried into their bedroom and brought her the whole pack. "Here you are," he said as he placed it on the desk beside her.

Sharindis pulled a piece of thin parchment from the desk and located the ink well and quill by feel. She brought out her crystal and tried, but she couldn't make out the one glyph that she wrote. "I still can't see. It's too dim. I need my sunlit desk at the archive."

Stavin considered the matter for a moment, then said, "Maybe so, but maybe not. Put your crystal away for a little while. I'll be right back." He was out of the room before she could ask what he was going to do.

Stavin returned a few moments later with Barvil; he was saying to him, "— so what I want to do is move the desk to the bedroom window."

Barvil looked at the desk, then shook his head. "I don't think we can, Master Stavin. I tried moving it once before, but when the founders built this house, they built the library as it is."

"That means that it's mage-bound in place, like the walls of the fortress," Sharindis said sadly. "It's no matter, Stavin. I can write at the archive."

Stavin regarded his wife and, in spite of her words, he could see her disappointment written clearly in her posture and hear it in her tone of voice. "Barvil," he said, "is there another table in the house that could be used as a desk? Something we *can* move?"

Barvil thought for a moment, then smiled. "There is indeed, Master Stavín. And I think Kar will be delighted to give it up." Stavín was puzzled by the barely controlled laughter in Barvil's voice, so he simply nodded and waved for Barvil to lead the way.

Barvil led Stavín to the boy's bedroom, which Karvík had had to himself since the death of his older brother four years ago. Stavín knew the room well, having spent many winter hours with Karvík making plans, and was puzzled when Barvil led him to the table in the corner. It was covered with an old blanket, and Karvík had once explained that it was just an old table that the cobbler had thrown out. Barvil uncovered it and Stavín could see that the side toward the room was solid almost to the floor. Barvil grasped one end, then glanced meaningfully at Stavín. Stavín took the hint and grasped the other end.

"Lift gently, Master Stavín. It's somewhat fragile." What they pulled away from the wall had never been cast off by anyone. It was an elegant lady's dressing table. Its legs were slender and ornately carved, and the carving continued up the sides and around the drawers. A top-piece and mirror sat on the floor against the wall.

"It's beautiful," Stavín breathed.

"It was a given to my great-grandmother after she'd had her seventh daughter. Girls run in my family. I understand that everyone was quite relieved when my grandfather was finally born. My father and his brothers covered it up, but used the mirror. My brothers and I turned it to the wall and made up the cobbler story. Kar knows what it really looks like, but prefers the cobbler's cast-off story. I believe this will make a fine desk for Mistress Shari. It's a pity about the mirror."

"Father, what have you done?" Karvík asked from the doorway.

"Mistress Shari needs a desk by her window for the light, Kar. I didn't think you'd mind giving up the cobbler's table for her," Barvil answered with more than a hint of humor.

"I'll take this end. Step aside please, Master Stavín. We can't keep the mistress waiting." All three of them laughed as Barvil and Karvík carried the table out of the

room. Stavín paused, then picked up the mirror and top-piece and followed them through the house.

Sharindis was standing by her window with a book in one hand and her crystal in the other when they arrived. "Mistress Shari, please step over to your dressing table," Karvik said as he backed into the bedroom.

Sharindis did as she was asked, cradling her crystal protectively against her breast. "What do you have there?" she asked, seeing the large dark object between the shadows of the men.

"A desk for you, Mistress Shari," Karvik said as he and his father set the table down. They spent a few moments clearing the space, then slid the table in. It took some huffing and puffing to do it, but the new desk fit snugly between Sharindis' bedside table and her dressing table, and was almost centered under the window.

Barvil saw Stavín with the mirror and cocked an inquiring eyebrow. Stavín answered the unasked question. "I thought we might be able to angle it to cast more light on the desk, but it won't work. I'll just put it in the armory."

Sharindis moved forward cautiously and put her book on the brightly lit surface of the table, then tried her crystal. "I can read," she said happily, and Karvik quickly brought her a chair from the library. Barvil went and gathered up the inkwell and blotter and soon they had her desk set up exactly as she wanted it. There were tears in her eyes when she looked up at the men that surrounded her and said, "Thank you. Thank you so very much."

Barvil and Karvik bowed and said, "Our pleasure, Mistress Shari," in unison, then left the room.

"I have what I need now, Stavín. I have dreamed of having this for so long, and now that dream has come true. Come over here and sit down. I want to write your story while it's still fresh in your mind."

They spent the day like that, with Stavín reciting the story and Sharindis asking questions as she wrote it down. They only stopped for the mid day meal, then again for

the evening meal. They had returned to their room to continue when there was a knock at their door. Stavín said, "Come in."

Barvil came in and stopped three paces from the door. "The Elders Council's messenger was just here, Master Stavín. He brought the names of the members of the mercenaries draft for this year. As expected, you and Kar are both on it, as am I."

"You?" Stavín asked, standing and stepping toward him. "But you're exempt! You're an—"

"I am no longer an Elder, Master Stavín. I have no exemption, nor would I wish for one. Only through battle can I regain the honor of my name, and only with the expedition may I find that battle."

Stavín looked at him and sucked in a deep breath, then let his eyes fall. "You're right, of course, and it is your right to go even if your name wasn't on the list."

"Just so," Barvil said, nodding his head deeply. "The expedition leaves in three days. Good night to you, Master and Mistress."

Sharindis touched Stavín's shoulder and he turned to embrace her. "Only three days, Stavín. Only three days to be married before we are parted." She pulled his head against her breast and sighed. "You have a horrid sense of timing, my husband."

## Chapter 10

Stavin lay awake after Sharindis had gone to sleep and thought about the reasons he had to leave his new bride and the duty he owed his people.

The valley had been found in the early days of the old Empire of Luxand. It was the caldera of an ancient volcano that had filled with a lake until an earthquake had cracked the wall and let the water out. Animals had found the valley and grew large in its protected environment. Thermal springs kept part of the valley clear of snow, and grass grew year-round, saving the animals trapped within its walls from starvation.

The emperor at the time, Farind Zel'Varsal, had made it his own private hunting preserve as soon as he heard about it. The region was annexed by the empire and called the Land of Farind, and a fortress had been built across the crack to keep the animals in and everyone but the emperor out. After the fall of the Empire of Luxand, the men who became the Kings of Farindia claimed it for the same purpose.

The original fortress had been called Kel'Kavin, and King Alev Zel'Kanis had kept that name, applying it to the whole valley. He had staffed it with members of his Royal Guard, scions from some of the most powerful Cat Clans in his kingdom. When King Alev died, his daughter took the throne. She distrusted the men who had sworn eternal fealty to her father and replaced them all. Since she had no basis for condemning them, she transferred the entire Royal Guard, all five hundred of them and their families, and ordered them to settle the valley. For her lifetime and the lifetime of her son, they had remained there, maintaining the discipline and fighting skills that made them so dangerous.

Civil war erupted under the corrupt rule of King Haran Zel'Vordan, and word reached the valley with the first refugees. The old fort had been maintained, but a new fortress and the settlement that they called Kavinston had been built twenty dragon-lengths away, where there was better land for the women and servants to farm.



The first refugees to reach the valley were wealthy friends of the king. They told of the unrest and riots that had consumed the capital. They told of how they had fled for their very lives while the Royal Guards had fought a rear-guard action to try and save the king. They died on their knees, condemned as traitors and cowards for leaving the king to die at the hands of the mob. Their wives and children became servants in the households of honorable men.

No refugees were allowed into the valley after that. General Kel'Vardil, the commander of the garrison, ordered his men to prepare to march, anticipating orders that never came. After two years, word came that the kings of Farindia were no more and the kingdom had dissolved into anarchy.

The town and fort had been well supplied, but after two more years they were running short of almost everything. The commander made up his mind and sent a strong force out into the shattered kingdom to purchase supplies. One hundred warriors had taken almost all of the gold and silver from the valley and went to the lowlands in search of food and news.

The warriors had returned fifty days later guarding a long caravan of wagons. When the wagons were unloaded, the caravan's master had approached the commander.

"These men of yours are the best warriors I've ever seen. Would there be a chance of hiring a few hands for next season? I can pay well."

"We are servants of the king," the commander had answered coldly.

"Then you serve a ghost, good Sir. Farindia has no kings anymore. Those with the blood slaughtered one another fighting over the scraps." The trader had spoken softly, but he had still been overheard.

That was how the tradition of sending the young men of the valley into the lowlands to earn honor for themselves in battle and gold for their people in service had been born.

\* \* \*

The three days following the announcement were a blur of preparations. Of the forty-eight hundred inhabitants of the valley, one hundred young men and ten seasoned veterans were leaving their homes and families to earn the gold that would supply their people through the winter. There were twenty youths from each of the year-groups, from those who were making their fifth trip, to the first-year greenlings like Stavin and Karvik. Once they were in the lowlands they would split into groups of eleven: One veteran in charge of ten youths. It was called "Two Hands and a Brain," but only half in jest.

The Warmaster took advantage of the delay to run the men of the expedition through even more intense training. The hundred youngsters were kept in their year groups, sparring against one another under the supervision of the veterans who were going to be riding herd on them.

There were two very good reasons for this.

First, it let the veterans get an idea of the fighting skills of the men they were going to lead. Though each of the young men had been passed by the Warmaster, each veteran wanted to make his own assessment. Their lives depended on these young men being competent.

Second, it let the ten veterans get a good look at the twenty first-year men. Though it was seldom used, they had the power to reject any of the boys if they truly believed that they were unfit.

For Barvil, it was a hard job. He was sure of his son. Karvik had spent hours sparring with him, gaining extra experience with the Dragon's Tongue under his own experienced hands. Stavin was a different matter.

He *had* defeated Stavin, but he'd been hard-pressed to do it. Stavin's speed was phenomenal. Karvik had told him time and time again that Stavin was as good as anyone in their year group. He'd never believed it until the little imp was dancing in front of him, catching every strike he made, and returning as good as he got. He had been as mad at himself as he was at Stavin, and embarrassed to boot. Stavin the Runt had not only defied him but had proved him wrong in front of the entire town. Now,

watching Stavin easily defeat every member of his year-group, even Karvik, he had to clench his teeth to keep quiet.

The other veterans were watching as well. They watched the boys, and they watched Barvil as he watched them. Whatever their opinions were, they kept them to themselves. Of all of them, only Charvil showed what he thought. Every time he watched Stavin fight he wore a small, satisfied smile, as if he was proud of the boy who had married his daughter. What galled Barvil the most was the fact that he obviously had reason to be.

\* \* \*

The dawn of the third day found the draft of warriors standing beside their horses in the early morning chill. Chief Elder Kel'Davin walked down the line, clasping forearms with each of them before addressing the group.

"Men, and you are all men this day, we are indebted to you. It is your duty to leave, to earn the gold and silver that will provide our people with that which we cannot make for ourselves. Remember that if you fall, you will be remembered with honor." The Chief Elder looked at Barvil for a long moment, then moved his gaze on to a younger man. "Arvin Kel'Eves, I charge you to take them out and bring them back again."

Arvin bowed deeply, then swung into his saddle. "Mount up!" he shouted. Then, with a final wave to his wife and young son, he turned and led the way out of the valley.

\* \* \*

The group rode with the veterans in front, of course, and the youths aligned behind them in order of seniority. That meant that Stavin and Karvik, along with the eighteen other first-year boys, were bringing up the tail.

Everyone rode in armor, and soon Stavin's golden armor was the same dust-grey as everyone else's. The road to the trade-town near the old city of Skykon was six days by horse from the valley, so long as the weather held. Previous expeditions had established campsites along the road at one day's ride intervals.

Near sundown, they reached the first campsite. It was a large clearing off the side of the road that had been widened and improved by generations of warriors. A nearby spring provided them with a ready supply of fresh water, and the first thing everyone did was water and feed their horses. Then, and only then, were they allowed to see to themselves.

Everyone paired up to help each other with their armor, and Karvik and Stavin immediately chose one another. "Here, Kar, let me get your straps," Stavin said, reaching up to unbuckle Karvik's side straps and one shoulder.

Karvik returned the favor, then both of them stripped out of their plate, but kept their mail on. Once they were away from the safety of the valley, none of the warriors really felt safe without at least some armor.

The rule of the road was that you kept your armor clean all the time, and Stavin had begun cleaning his armor almost immediately, but Karvik interrupted him. "Leave that to me, Master Stavin. It's my duty."

Stavin was about to argue when Barvil walked up with an armload of firewood. "Here is wood for your fire, Master Stavin. Where shall I set up your tent?"

Something that had been festering in the back of Stavin's mind came to a head and burst as the men around them stared. Standing, Stavin raised his hands and called out to the rest of the group.

"Hear me! Comrades and friends, I call on you to gather around and hear what I have to say so there can be no confusion." He waited until he had everyone's attention, especially that of the plainly irritated group of veterans, before he continued. Turning to Barvil, he bowed.

"Barvil Kel'Carin, you are my servant by the customs of our people until you regain your honor. However, it does none of us honor to have a warrior of your stature serving a greenling in front of strangers. I therefore order you, in front of these witnesses, to stop being my servant until we return to the valley." Looking to the side, he glared at Karvik. "Stand up, Kar," he snapped and Karvik scrambled to his feet.

"Karvik Kel'Carin, you and I are both as green as spring grass. The purpose of this expedition is to make warriors out of us, but I can't do that with you being my servant. As with your father, I order you to stop being my servant until we return to the valley."

Stavin looked around at the faces of his people and asked, "Does anyone know of a reason why Barvil and Karvik should not obey my order?"

Barvil was looking at him with a hint of new respect when he answered, "No, Master Stavin, you are quite correct that it does not serve the honor of our people to have a young warrior with servants. We will obey your orders until we once again pass through the gap into the valley." Barvil looked around and shouted, "Everyone back to work! Your armor is to be clean before you eat! Get to it!" Then he turned and walked back to the veterans' fire.

Stavin sat and grabbed his breast-plate and began cleaning as Karvik sat next to him. "Gods Below, Stave, that was some speech. Green as spring grass? Where did that come from?"

Stavin chuckled. "I heard Charv – I mean, the Warmaster call me that when he was talking to my dad. You done?"

"No, I was working on yours," Karvik said sourly.

Stavin shrugged and grabbed Karvik's back plate and started scrubbing. When they were both ready, they made their way to the cook tent.

Beans boiled with elk bone, a piece of hard sausage, and hard journey bread made up the standard fare of the warriors on the road. Everyone grumbled about it, the veterans loudest of all.

## Chapter 11

The trade town was simply called Trade Town. The ruins of Skykon were off to the east, but no one spoke of them. It was considered bad luck. A band of raiders had slaughtered the inhabitants and torched the town during the civil war, and it had been considered a haunted place ever since.

The group split up into teams of eleven: two boys from each year-group and one veteran. No one was surprised when Stavín and Karvík were put under Barvíl's watchful eye. The eight other men were all older, with progressively more experience. That made Stavín and Karvík the group's do-boys, but it was a role they were both used to. Stavín was the youngest in his family, and Karvík had been the only boy in his family for years as well as being Stavín's servant for a hand of days.

The groups of youths milled about, laughing and telling forbidden jokes, while the veterans went in search of employment. Mid day had passed and it was well toward sundown before Barvíl returned.

"We have our first caravan, men. The Weaver's Guild of Arinston is sending twenty wagons of goods south to Twin Bridges. It spreads us a little thin, but not enough to warrant a second group. Our employer is already south of town, so we need to make our way down there. Lead your horses and keep a tight rein on them – and a tighter hand on your pouch." Barvíl smiled because the last was supposed to be a joke. No sane cutpurse would try a mercenary this early in the season. They were all broke. After they had escorted a few caravans, that would change.

Stavín and Karvík gawked as they walked through the town. They couldn't help it. There were literally hundreds of new sights for them to absorb, and even more new smells. Languages from all over the continent were spoken here, and for the first time in their lives they overheard voices shouting words that they didn't understand.

Their caravan was waiting and Barvil had them set up their own camp before he led them in amongst the wagons. A portly man with more salt than pepper in his hair greeted Barvil loudly.

"Ah, there you are at last. Come, bring your men. The cook prepared extra. My, a fine-looking bunch of— Is that *gold*?" he suddenly asked as Stavín came into view.

"No, it's dragon scale," Barvil answered lightly. "Gold's too soft and heavy to make decent armor."

"Dragon scale indeed," the trader mused. "How is it that you came to be so magnificently outfitted, young man?"

"That tale will wait until we are on the road, Master Trader," Barvil said, preventing Stavín from answering. "Trust me when I say it's well worth the wait."

The trader looked him in the eye and nodded. "I look forward to hearing it. I hope this lot isn't like the last bunch of you I hired. Those boys ate so much I almost had to slaughter a mule to feed them." One of the older boys sniggered and he focused his attention on him. "Were you in that group?"

The boy answered, "No, Sir, I was in the one before. You made the same complaint then."

The trader smiled at that. "Still true, nonetheless. Come along now. "

In spite of his complaint, the trader fed them well. The meat in the stew probably wouldn't bear up under too close an inspection, but it was tender and savory, well-seasoned, and thick with vegetables and tubers. The bread was hard-crusteD, but soft in the middle, and they each received a measure of sweet butter with it.

Lavin Kel'Farin, the man who had traveled with the trader before, grinned and said, "He'll feed us like this the whole trip. He says he wants us happy with him so we'll take better care of his goods."

Stavín and Karvik shared glances with the other junior members of the group as Barvil sat down with his plate and nodded. "He will indeed. It's part of our pay, and it's the same as his men get. Don't gorge, though. Just because we're still in Trade Town doesn't mean we're safe. We'll be setting sentries once we've eaten. Stavín, Kar, I'm

splitting you two up for this. You'll pair with Davel and Kahndar." He nodded to the two fifth-year warriors. "I count on you two to keep these impetuous youths on a short leash."

Kahndar Kel'Horval spoke first. "I'll take Stavín. Shari will never forgive me if I let something happen to her husband."

Stavín blushed as he looked up at his big-brother-in-law and said quietly, "Thanks, Kahn."

Barvil nodded sharply. "Good, then you can take first watch. Carry your weapons, but don't use them unless you have to."

"Yes, Sir," Kahndar and Stavín snapped in unison, then Kahndar led the way back to their tents. He let Stavín get his Dragon's Tongue first, then belted on his sword. Once they were ready to go, he led Stavín to the outermost wagons.

"We want to be seen, Stave. In Trade Town or near a city the caravan is really pretty safe. Our function is mostly to discourage youngsters and ne'er-do-wells from trying to sneak little things off the wagons. Even harness rings can be valuable in quantity."

Stavín nodded. "That is especially true if you *have* to have them because someone stole yours. That's your father's standard lecture."

Kahndar laughed and clouted him on the shoulder. "You're pretty spunky for a greenling. It's still true, and the advice bears repeating."

They walked side-by-side with Stavín on Kahndar's left. That kept Stavín clear of Kahndar's sword arm, and Kahndar clear of the point of Stavín's Dragon's Tongue. The fact that their direction of travel put Kahndar in the more dangerous outside position was lost on Stavín. He was overloaded with new sights, sounds, and smells, and it never occurred to him that Kahn would try to protect him.

They had completed two circuits of the wagons and were starting a third when Kahndar spotted a shadow that moved. He shouted, "Halt!" in an excellent impression of his father's training-ground bellow.



The shadow became two as it burst out from under a wagon, but Stavín and Kahndar were faster, interposing themselves between the intruders and the surrounding darkness.

"Stop or die," Kahndar snarled, his hand on his sword hilt.

"You don't scare me none, cat boy," the larger of the two snarled back.

The other was staring at Stavín. "That armor'd look mighty pretty on my sister. Is that what you got, cat boy? A little kitty so's you can get some – *EEP!*" Suddenly the thief was faced with a razor-sharp, three-hand-long, willow-leaf-shaped blade just a finger's-width from his eyes.

Stavín snarled, "You should be quiet." He had come to face the men with his Dragon's Tongue at the ready, held in both hands across his chest. Hearing the jeering tone of the intruder's voice caused him to flash from excitement to fury.

The first man looked at Kahndar and said, "Tell your –"

"Shut your mouth," Kahndar snapped. "Arms straight out to the sides where I can see them, then turn around and start walking. The traders are going to want to talk to you."

Stavín stepped back and motioned for his prisoner to join his friend, then they escorted the two in amongst the wagons. Kahndar waited until he could see the cook's fire, then said loudly, "We caught these men under one of your wagons, Master Trader," alerting everyone.

The master trader walked over and looked them up and down for a moment. "I might have known. Who do you work for now, fool?" he asked the older man.

"Don't work for no one," the man replied, sneering at the trader.

"We wasn't doin' nothing," the smart-mouth said, stepping forward. "We was just walkin' by when these two jumped us."

The trader looked at him and said, "Horse crap." Turning back to the first man, he frowned. "I told you what I'd do if I ever found you near my wagons again, Firth. You're a thief and a liar, and any debt I owed you is long since paid. It's time and past time for you to pay for your crimes." Looking at his men, he simply said, "Bring them,"

as he turned away. Four burly teamsters jumped forward and grabbed the two thieves, dragging them behind the trader as he walked away.

Stavin watched them go, then looked up at Kahndar. "What will happen to them?"

"*The hand of a thief, the tongue of a liar,*" Kahndar quoted. "Trade Towns are supposed to be sacrosanct." He gave a harsh bark of laughter at that. "The thieves have to have someplace to sell their stolen goods. The traders in power here take a dim view of anyone who breaks *their* rules."

Stavin remained silent as they resumed their rounds. They had time to make five more circuits before they were met by Davel and Karvik.

"We heard about your encounter, Kahn," Davel said as they walked up.

Kahndar laughed. "It certainly gave Stave a good initiation."

"True," Davel agreed, "and gave warning that this caravan is well protected. We'll see you in the morning." With that he led Karvik away into the darkness, following the pattern that Kahndar had set.

Kahndar led Stavin back to their tents. "Quietly, Stave," he whispered. "Let me unbuckle your armor, then you do mine. Sleep in your mail and keep your Tongue in reach. The excitement may not be over."

Stavin did as he was told and stretched out on his bedroll, but he didn't sleep. He'd come very close to killing that man for insulting him. If the fool hadn't squeaked like a terrified mouse he would have. The thought, *Maybe I do have my mother's temper,* rolled around in his mind. He was still awake when Karvik came back to the tent late in the night.

"Anything?" he asked softly.

"Nothing," Karvik answered as he lay down.

"Night," they both said, then laughed before rolling over to sleep.

## Chapter 12

While not every man in town had been taken for the draft, for Stavín and Sharindis' fledgling household it felt like they had. Shari returned to work at the archive immediately to distract herself from her sudden loneliness, but found that her mind drifted in unaccustomed ways. Sahrena had faced the loneliness many times before, but found that the absence of both Barvil and Karvik was far worse than she remembered.

Dorvina, on the other hand, was relieved. Harner Kel'Chamlin had not been called to duty. The year-group that he shared with Karvik and Stavín had contained twenty-three youths, and he and two others had been skipped this time. He wasn't particularly happy about it since he wasn't out gathering glory with the rest, but it did give him nearly uncontested access to Dorvina.

Harner arrived on the front porch of Stavín's house two days after the expedition had departed. His knock at the door was answered by Sahrena.

"Harner, it's a surprise to see you. I didn't know you'd been skipped," she said, standing in the doorway to keep him from trying to enter.

"I've come to see Dorvi," he said and looked at Sahrena expectantly.

"That is improper, Harner, and you know it. Barvil and Master Stavín are both on the expedition. There is no one to speak for her."

Harner took a half step backwards and stared at her in shock. "Madam Kel'Carin, I don't understand. I thought —"

"You thought you could see Dorvina anytime with no restrictions since she is a servant. That is not the case. If you wish to see her, you must get permission from Mistress Sharindis."

"No — Madam Kel'Carin, I don't care that Dorvi is a servant. I still want to marry her."

Sahrena looked him in the eye as she answered. "You may not marry Dorvina until Barvil and Master Stavin return. You may not see her without Mistress Sharindis' permission. You know the customs, Harner."

Harner was visibly upset now and took another step back. "We'll see what my father has to say about this. We'll just see." He turned and fled toward his home while Sahrena calmly shut the door.

"Mother, what did you do?" Dorvina snarled angrily from the kitchen doorway.

"What custom decrees, Dorvina. Don't worry, he'll be back. I know the signs. He'll have words with his father, they'll fight, then he'll go to Shari and ask to come to see you – as he should have done in the first place."

"Mother –" Dorvina began angrily, but Sahrena silenced her with a look.

"He can't marry you without your father's permission. Servant or not, that custom must be obeyed. And don't you think to hop the fence and go to him without your father's blessing. If you were truly a servant, born of a servant clan in some outland village, you might get away with it so long as your father didn't feel dishonored by your actions. You, Dorvina Kel'Carin, are not a servant born of a servant clan. Your father would kill Harner as soon as he returned, and if he didn't, then Stavin or Karvik would. That is the price of honor. Now get back to the dishes."

\* \* \*

Harner went and found his father immediately. "Dad, Sahrena won't let me see Dorvi! She said I had to get permission from Shari because Barvil and the Runt are gone."

"And?" his father asked without taking his eyes off his task.

"And what? I never had to ask Barvil to see Dorvi. Why should I ask Shari? It's not like I'm –"

"You're a fool, son," his father interrupted, finally looking at his son. "You didn't have to ask Barvil because you and everyone else knew he'd kill you if you dishonored his family." Jorvan Kel'Chamlin stood up from his cobbler's bench and grabbed his son's shoulders with both hands. "Dorvina isn't just Barvil's daughter, and don't for a second

think he won't win back his honor quickly. She's a servant in the household of Stavín Kel'Aniston. The Kel'Anistons rank – "

"The Runt doesn't rank *me*, Dad."

Jorvan's grip tightened until his son's mouth opened in pain. "Stavín Kel'Aniston is the head of a household, not the youngest son in one. He has proven himself in an unusual way, but he's proven himself nonetheless. He's also out with the expedition while you chose to remain here. You could have joined anyway. Many a man has gone without being drafted. Stavín is out there making his name and honor while you are here trying to sneak around custom and see a girl of his household without his consent. He's also the man you have to ask for Dorvina after you get her father's permission."

Jorvan let go of Harner's shoulders and pushed him back. "All that aside, your mother is having fits about the possibility of her darling son marrying a servant. I know her servitude to Stavín won't last. It doesn't matter. She – "

"No, it doesn't matter!" Harner all but shouted, interrupting his father once again. "She's still the daughter of Barvil Kel'Carin, one of the highest-ranking warriors alive. He'll come back with his honor restored and the Runt will be back where he belongs, in his father's house."

"Not in one season he won't. He'll have to earn his fourth star to clear the shadow from his name. That'll take nineteen more kills, and not even Charvil ever managed that feat in just one season. If you want to see the girl, go ask Sharindis. After you do your chores."

Harner took several deep breaths and finally nodded and muttered, "Yes, Sir." He turned and went out to fetch the buckets so he could refill the family's water barrel.

Jorvan turned to find Coriannis standing behind him. "You heard that, I take it?"

"The neighbors heard that, Jor. I don't want my son marrying a common servant."

Jorvan smiled and shook his head. "He isn't, Cor. He's right about Barvil earning his name back. Given his situation, he may very well manage nineteen kills in one season. Or he may not manage any. In any case, Stavín is still going to play a role in this

situation. He went into the cave and faced a dragon to win the girl. It's only the fact that he married Sharindis that makes me think he won't stop Harner from marrying Dorvina."

Coriannis smiled sourly. "Given how Harner and the other boys have treated him in the past, I wouldn't be surprised if Stavín did stop them out of spite. Oh, I know he'd find an honorable reason, but it would be in revenge no matter how he cloaked it. Not that I don't think he doesn't deserve a little of it. I tried—"

"I know. *Beware of those you treat poorly, for one day you may need their help.* Harner and the rest of the boys who've been chewing Stavín's tail may regret it."

\* \* \*

Harner worked his anger out while hauling water. Even his father was against him, so he was going to have to bend to the will of a blind girl and her runt of a husband. When his chores were completed, he went to the archive and approached Sharindis.

"Shari, may I speak with you for a moment?" he asked, sticking his head into the archive.

"Harner?" Sharindis said, raising her head but not looking at the door. "I thought you were—no, that's right. You weren't drafted this year."

"No, I wasn't. Shari, I have come to ask permission to see Dorvina."

Sharindis paused for a moment, then nodded. "You may come to the evening meal with us, Harner. In fact, if you wouldn't mind, I would appreciate it if you would walk me home. I still haven't memorized all of the tripping stones between here and there."

"As you wish. When will you be ready?" Harner asked.

"Now will do. The sun is being blocked by the clouds, so I can't do much. Just a moment." She quickly packed up her crystal and closed her inkwell, then made her way to the door. "Not too fast, please."

Harner started out of the archive at a slow walk, but was puzzled by Sharindis' chuckle once they reached the street. "Shari?"

"I'm not that feeble, Harner. You can walk a bit faster. Just warn me when we reach a rough spot," Sharindis said, walking faster to get him moving.

The two made it across town without Sharindis tripping or stubbing her toe, and soon Harner was saying, "The steps are just ahead, Shari."

"Thank you, Harner. Come in with me and we'll talk until Sahrena calls us to eat."

Harner and Sharindis hadn't reached the door before it opened and Dorvina said, "You're home early, Mistress Shari. Is there a problem?"

"No, Dorvi, no problem that anyone but the Gods Above can solve. The clouds are blocking too much sun for me to work. Harner will be joining us for the evening meal. Inform Sahrena and ensure we have enough prepared."

Dorvina bowed deeply and said, "Yes, Mistress Shari." She gave Harner a brilliant smile before she turned away.

Sharindis chuckled again. "I didn't need to *see* that to see that. After we eat, you two may sit and talk on the front porch. I'd set Zahri on you, but I have my suspicions about where her loyalties lay." She turned her eyes on Harner and shook her head slowly. "Stavin and Barvil are gone, but there are men of both families here, as well as my father. Don't give them a reason to bring you before the Elders Council."

Harner shook his head. "No, Shari, I won't."

The meal was unremarkable except for the almost exultant tone of Dorvina's voice whenever she was asked a question. Sahrena asked Sharindis' permission to dismiss Dorvina and Harner as soon as the meal was completed. Sharindis' nod of assent was met with the sound of two sliding chairs and the patter of running feet.

Sahrena chuckled and both Sharindis and Zahrinis joined in. "I warned him to be good, or Karlit or Dad will take him before the Council," Sharindis said with a grin.

"Ah, young love. Do you need any help, Mistress Shari?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm more tired than anything else right now, so I think I'll go to bed early. Good night to you both. Send Harner on his way when you feel they've had enough time."

\* \* \*

Harner reported to the training grounds on his third day, as required, and joined the final year group. He was tired of the Warmaster treating him like he could barely hold a Dragon's Tongue. He'd passed, scoring a strike against the Warmaster before the Warmaster had struck him the third time. It was galling to be required to practice with the boys.

"Form up!" Darak Kel'Norlan snapped, and everyone snapped to attention at their place. Darak had two hollowed stars on his shoulder, and Harner couldn't help but dream of the day he'd be sporting stars like that.

"Pair off," Darak commanded and Harner looked around. There were twenty-three boys in this group and he stepped toward one of them, but another boy paired with that individual. Even Jallav paired off with someone else. Within moments Harner was standing alone. That meant –

"Well, Harner, it looks like you and me," Warleader Kel'Norlan said with a hint of humor in his voice.

"Yes, Warleader," Harner replied, snapping to attention.

Darak nodded with satisfaction. "We'll go last. Wallan and Devero, take the circle." The boys did as he commanded and entered the dueling circle. "Begin!"

The boys attacked with the ferocity of their ancestors, striking and catching the rebounds in a lightning-fast exchange. Darak called the score, and when Devero struck Wallan the third time he shouted, "Done! Devero is the winner."

Two by two, the boys entered the circle and sparred, until all eleven pairs had finished. "Our turn, Harner," Darak said as he stepped into the circle.

Harner entered the circle and crouched at the ready. Darak said, "Anytime, Harner," and Harner attacked.

Darak blocked Harner's strikes easily, then struck him in the chest. "You can do better, Harner. Make it real." Harner redoubled his efforts, but Darak's weapon hit his armored chest twice more without an answering blow. "Done. Join the losers, Harner. You boys know the forfeit. Begin." The losing group resolutely began jogging around



the training ground. There were worse punishments than being required to run in full armor, but not many.

When their twenty laps were done, Darak dismissed them and Harner slogged away to his father's house. He was exhausted and resentful. It wasn't fair that he always ended up facing whoever was leading their group. The rest of the boys were afraid of him. That's all it was. They knew he'd beat them easily.

\* \* \*

The Warmaster watched his students as they practiced. His boys. It was hard not to think of them that way. He'd been Warmaster for nine years, and that meant that only one of the year groups he was teaching had started under Warmaster Kel'Pardlin. He smiled as he thought of the fourteen-year-olds, then frowned as another thought crossed his mind. He had two spares in that group: Harner and Jallav.

At least Jallav had a reason for staying back when he wasn't drafted. His father was sick, and Jallav, as the only son, was seeing to the needs of his family. That was an honorable thing to do, and no one thought less of him for doing it.

Harner was another story, and was keeping that story to himself. As far as Charvil or anyone else had been able to find out, he'd never even told his father why he hadn't volunteered to go. He had, however, gone to see Dorvina as soon as the expedition, including Barvil and Stavin, was gone. That was worrisome, but unless Shari asked him to intercede, he would stay out of it. A smile crossed his lips as another thought crossed his mind. Sahrena was formidable enough to keep the boy on his best behavior, no matter what her status. Harner had best keep his intentions and actions absolutely honorable, or she'd flay him alive.

## Chapter 13

Morning was announced by the ringing of a bell somewhere in the distance. Stavín and Karvík were up in a flash and quickly dressed. Even so, they weren't the first to the privy, and had to join the line of warriors and traders on their way to take care of that most common of morning rituals.

Breakfast was next, and the warriors were delighted. Pork bacon, duck eggs scrambled in the bacon grease, and thick oat porridge with honey made a meal that no one could complain about.

No one dawdled over the meal, and the first six teamsters to finish eating jumped in to help the cook stow his gear. The trader walked over to where Barvíl inspected his men.

"We'll be ready to roll in short order," he said as he looked over the warriors and nodded in satisfaction. "A fine pair of hands you have here, Barvíl. Always true of your people."

Barvíl nodded his acknowledgement of the compliment. "We're ready."

"Master Trader?" Stavín asked, stepping forward. "What happened to those men last night?"

The trader looked him straight in the eye and said, "Firth lost his head. His fool accomplice only lost his tongue."

Stavín nodded and stepped back, unconsciously seeking the protection of his peers.

Barvíl snapped, "Mount up!" and the warriors immediately obeyed. Once everyone was mounted, Barvíl gave his marching orders. "Dav, Kahn, I need your experience in the rear. I'll be in the front on the left side of the lead wagon. Stavín, I want you on the right of number three. Kar, left of number five. The rest of you spread out, opposite sides of the odd wagons, Kahn and Dav last. Pick up your wagons as they

leave. Questions?" When no one spoke, he nodded and said, "We'll confer tonight," then rode off to fall in beside the trader and their cook in the lead wagon.

One by one the wagons rolled past, and one by one the valley warriors took their places.

\* \* \*

Stavin's number three slot put him far enough back that his view was limited to the right side of the road. The wagon was too high for him to see over, and the teamster had simply sneered when he had tried to strike up a conversation. He scanned the countryside around them, but the forest blocked his view after just a few dragon-lengths. He was bored, dusty, and to make matters worse, it wasn't even halfway to mid day yet!

Mid day came at last and a man rode back along the line of wagons with bundles for everyone, but the wagons showed no sign of stopping. The man told him, "Bring the cloth back at supper. That's what we call the even' meal in these parts." Then he rode on down the line. Stavin found that his bundle held a hunk of cheese, a piece of sausage, and half a loaf of bread. Sighing mightily, he ate slowly and drank water from his flask.

Stavin tried to amuse himself as he rode through the day. He'd been warned that boredom was the lot of a caravan guard, but he'd never really believed it. He tried playing mind games, but he'd never been very good at those. He talked to Tru, his horse, and she swiveled an ear to listen. She'd been his only companion, the only living being willing to listen to him, for a long time before he and Karvik had become friends.

The young warriors received their horses as barely weaned colts or fillies in the spring of their tenth year, when they ascended from Child to Youth and became full-time warrior students. He'd picked Tru, a golden-tan filly, and they had been trained in horsemanship together. He spent all but the three weeks he'd been sick tending her that first year, becoming her friend and leader.

Their second spring, the horses had been broken using the ancient gentling techniques of their forefathers. No one wanted to ride a horse with a broken spirit into

battle. Tru had only bucked once when he first saddled her, and he'd kept his seat in spite of it. She really didn't seem to mind his slight weight on her back, and even when he added his old steel armor she'd carried him easily.

After all of the young warriors had gentled their horses, training outside the valley began. The entire year-group, under the watchful eye of the Warmaster and four additional veterans, made at least one long circuit around the outside of Kel'Kavin every moon during the summer. The route was never the same two moons in a row, but the main purpose of the rides was to get the young men and their mounts accustomed to riding in rough country together. The subtle communication between horse and rider, the shifting of weight or a lean in a direction, had to be learned through experience.

Tru had learned all of Stavin's signals, and he'd learned hers to the point that he could drop his reins and still remain in control. The fact that he had stayed small, and now wore armor that weighed less than half what his steel armor had, made the task even easier. If he stopped thinking about it, they truly became one.

Finally, as the sun was touching the distant hills, the lead wagon headed off the road into an open meadow. Barvil met him as he followed his wagon into the grass. "Tether your horse to the wagon, strip your saddle, then start hauling water. There's a stream along that line of trees. Take a rope, the trader says the water is low this time of year."

Stavin bowed his head and did as he was told. The stream was indeed low, and Stavin tied the rope to one bucket and tossed it down into the clear water. He used that bucket to fill the other and tossed it down again. Before he got it up the second time, Karvik was beside him with two more buckets.

"Fill one of mine and I'll take the first two back, then you can fill the second two," he said, grabbing the already full bucket and holding another out for Stavin to fill. He hurried off while Stavin filled the other two and then followed. They made three more trips each before Barvil told them that it was enough.

"That's good, now stand by to help Dav and Kahn." Barvil looked back up the road to where the last six wagons were still waiting to turn off into the meadow.

Davel and Kahndar finally rode in together with the last wagon. They and their horses were a uniform dust-grey except where they had tied bandanas around their faces.

Stavin and Karvik met them with buckets of water and took their horses while the next most junior pair started helping them with their armor. Barvil stood back and supervised as his young men followed the procedures that had been drilled into them since they had entered the academy at age five.

By the time Stavin and Karvik had seen to the seniors' horses, their own horses, their armor, and set up their tent, they had to haul four more buckets of water in order to wash themselves and prepare for the night. The field discipline of the valley warriors was new and exciting enough for the two that they remained in high spirits in spite of the hard work.

Barvil was inspecting the tents when a man walked over and stopped by his side. "Warrior, the Master Trader would like a word with you before we eat. This way, please," he said, gesturing back the way he had come with a slight bow.

Looking over at Kahndar, Barvil nodded sharply. "Take the men to eat, then set patrols. Same pairing as last night."

Kahndar snapped to attention and bowed his head. "Yes, Sir!" When Barvil was out of sight he turned to the junior members of the group. "You heard him. Let's eat. Stave and I had first watch last night, so Dav and Kar lead off tonight." He didn't wait for an answer. He just walked off, following his nose to the food.

Stavin followed along and was surprised to find more good stew, similar but slightly different from what they'd had the night before. The bread was also fresh, which puzzled him, so he questioned Kahndar while they ate.

"Kahn, how can they have stew and fresh bread ready so fast? We just barely arrived."

Kahndar gave him one of those *Pity the poor greenling* looks and pointed toward the lead wagon with his nose. "Lead wagon's also the cook's wagon. It has a stone hearth in it and they cook for most of the day. The wind was too strong to smell the bread today, but most days that's all you'll smell. They'll start a cauldron of stew tonight along with the remains of this stew and keep it hot all day till we stop. That's why this meat is so tender. There's another reason why the cook's wagon is the lead wagon: we eat less dust that way."

They had almost finished eating when Barvil and the trader joined them. Both men got their food and found places on the benches with the others. The trader took a few bites and then waved his spoon at Stavín.

"We're down the road, and my curiosity is getting hard to contain. Give us the tale of how you came by that fine golden armor, young warrior, and we'll all sleep better for knowing."

Stavín looked at Barvil and received a nod of permission. Looking back at the trader, he saw that every eye in the camp was on him. "High on the peaks that surround the Kel'Kavin valley there is a cave – " He told the whole story of his encounter with the dragon, only omitting why he had gone alone and the events that occurred after his return to Kavínston.

The trader was nodding by the time he finished. "Dragon scale armor shaped by dragon magic. That's a fine tale, young warrior, and the proof you wear is impressive. Have you had occasion to test it against good steel?"

"He has," Barvil answered, "and by my hand. That armor turned a steel point that would have pierced the finest plate in the old empire. The blades on his Dragon's Tongue also sheared cleanly through the oak haft of another Dragon's Tongue. The only thing he has to worry about is growing or gaining weight and becoming too big for it."

The trader sighed and patted his overly ample middle. "I was as skinny as you once, young warrior, though it was so long ago I can hardly remember it. My curiosity is satisfied, so I'll bid you all pleasant dreams and retire. Nights on the road are always short nights." With that he stood, bowed slightly, then walked away.

Barvil watched him go, then turned back to his men. "He's right about short nights on the road, so sack out early." He stood and waited until everyone was headed toward their tents before heading toward his own.

Stavin looked around for Karvik, but Kahndar shook his head. "Kar is with Dav. They already know your story, so they went out on their circuit as soon as they finished eating. We're last tonight, so to bed with you. I'll wake you when it's our turn."

Stavin crawled into the tent he shared with Karvik and lay down, but he was too excited to sleep. They were on the road and headed toward Evandia and the fabled city of Twin Bridges. He was still awake when Karvik returned from his circuit.

"Did anything happen, Kar?"

Karvik yawned mightily before he answered. "Not a thing."

"I can't wait till we get to the lower kingdom. Then we'll see some action."

"Yes, and then we can start making our own names and honor," Karvik agreed. "Not that you aren't doing fine already."

Stavin blushed in the darkness. "You'll do as well by the time we —"

"Go to sleep or you'll spend the whole night walking circuit," Barvil's voice interrupted from the next tent.

Stavin and Karvik exchanged wide-eyed stares in the dark, but didn't say anything else. It suddenly occurred to Stavin that *this* was the real reason that the most junior pair's tent was always set up next to the leader's tent. They lay back and quietly thought of their day, each making plans for the glorious future that awaited them. Soon the long day and hard work came back to softly drag them into deep sleep.

## Chapter 14

A strong hand grasped Stavín's shoulder in the darkness, and another hand caught Stavín's instinctive swing at the intruder. "Stave, it's me," Kahndar whispered. "We're due on the perimeter in just a few moments. Hit the privy and then I'll help you with your plate. But hurry."

Stavín nodded, then squirmed out of his bedroll and quickly made use of the hole in the ground that served as their privy. When he was ready, Kahndar helped strap on his breast and back plates. Kahndar patted him on the shoulder as he retrieved his weapon and put on his helmet.

"Come on, they'll be back soon." He led Stavín to the edge of the encampment where they waited until the other pair came into view. Lavin Kel'Farin was on his fourth trip to the lowlands and had been paired with Barin Kel'Kandis, who was on his second trip.

"Nothing to report, Kahn," Lavin said softly as they approached.

Kahndar said, "Very well, we relieve you," and turned away as the other pair walked into the camp to rest. Kahn kept them at the slow, regular pace that they had been taught to use to conserve energy.

Stavín peered into the darkness as they walked, seeking anything out of the ordinary, but found nothing. They walked until the sky began to turn green over the distant hills, heralding the dawn.

Somehow, without a sound, the teamsters knew it was dawn and began to appear. They saw to their teams and themselves in silence, nodding courteously to Kahndar and Stavín as they passed.

Kahndar took them on one last circuit of the camp, then led the way back to their tents. Karvik already had both of their bedrolls ready to go and Stavín quickly helped



him collapse and roll their tent. Once everyone's gear was ready to travel, Barvil led them to breakfast.

\* \* \*

The days followed that pattern one after another until their seventeenth day, when they were in the heart of the wilderness. That was when the bandits struck.

Shouts of alarm traveled up the line from the opposite side of the caravan, and Stavín struggled to see what was happening without leaving his post. He carefully scanned the forest on his side of the wagons until Barvil blew his horn to call everyone to the fight.

Kahndar told Stavín later that night that the bandits had aimed for the last wagon, probably in hopes of making a quick grab and getting away. They hadn't counted on Davel Kel'Borvan. Davel met the eight men alone while the others rode to his aid. His initial ride through the group left one wounded and one dead, but cost him his sword as the falling dead man pulled it from his grip.

Cordon Kel'Chamlin was next up the line on that side and he reached the bandits just after Davel. He was not as lucky as Davel, being dragged from his horse by the first man he met. The two fought, Cordon with a wrenched shoulder, but he finally killed his man. Staggering toward his horse, he fell to the ground and vanished in the dust. That was when Barvil's horn sounded.

The bandits fled in the face of the warriors. The fight was all over by the time Stavín got there and rode up beside Karvik. Karvik saw him and held up his Dragon's Tongue, showing Stavín the clean blades.

"Not one! Not even a chance to take one!" he snarled.

Stavín took a deep breath and let it out in an explosive sigh of disgust. "We're never going to get to fight," he muttered under his breath.

"Kar, Stavín, Ivalin, Barin, get back to the front and tell the trader that all's well, then spread out and watch for more of these bastards." Barvil was dismounting next to Cordon as he gave his orders. He wasn't watching, but each of them bowed in the saddle before riding away.

The wagons had kept moving, of course, and the young men spurred their horses to catch up. Stavín and Karvík crossed over to the opposite side of the caravan and slowed to check the forest while Barín and Ivalín rode on to deliver Barvíl's message. There was nothing to see, and they relaxed when they saw Barvíl ride past toward the front of the caravan. Soon, Ivalín rode down the line toward them.

He said, "Resume your positions and keep your eyes open. Barvíl says Cordon is hurt and riding in a wagon, so we're short a man," as soon as he was close enough to be heard, then continued on to his number seven position.

Karvík smacked Stavín on the shoulder and crossed over to his position. Stavín urged a little more speed out of Tru until he reached the number three wagon, then slowed to match the wagon's plodding pace.

That night, after they had eaten, Barvíl called Davel and Cordon to stand in front of their peers. "Davel Kel'Borvan, this day you killed a man with your sword, driving your blade through his chest. This is your fifth kill and your fifth expedition to the lowlands, and you may now paint your fifth white chevron on your armor. Cordon Kel'Chamlin, this day you killed a man with your sword, driving your blade into his throat. This is your fifth kill and your fourth expedition to the lowlands. You may now paint your fifth white chevron on your armor."

Karvík and Stavín watched the ceremony with undisguised envy. "Our turn will come, Stave," Karvík muttered.

"Not soon enough for me, Kar," Stavín answered.

The rest of the journey was routine until they reached Twin Bridges. Stavín kept wondering what Shari was doing.

## Chapter 15

The floor of the Kel'Kavin valley had been cleared of almost all of its trees in the far distant past, and every portion of the land that could be farmed was planted as soon as the weather was warm enough.

Every household contributed labor for the farming, and Sharindis ended up sending Dorvina and Zahrinis to complete their obligation. Sharindis, of course, was exempt due to her work in the archive.

Shari had other worries on her mind. Her entire world had been turned on its head. She was married! And to the only boy in the valley who shared her love of knowledge. It didn't matter that Stavín was two years younger. It didn't matter that he was barely as tall as her chin. What did matter was that they had only been together for three days before he was taken away from her.

Shari found her mind wandering down unaccustomed paths. Where is he now? What is he doing? Will he be able to write to me?

She had time to talk to Sahrena about it. "Sahrena, you know what this feels like. Does Barvil write very often?"

Sahrena said, "No, Mistress Shari. Sending a message is expensive. A little piece of parchment might cost two or three silver crowns just for delivery. And you have to find someone who is willing to make the trip all the way up here." She growled. "And who can be trusted to actually deliver it and not just pocket the coins."

"Did that ever happen?" Sharindis asked.

"Yes. On his first time leading an expedition. He encountered the trader several years later and retrieved his three crowns."

"He didn't kill him, did he?" Shari asked in a breathy whisper.

Sahrena chuckled. "No, but he did say the thief needed some dry pants when he was done." That had them both laughing.

Dorvina really didn't mind working the fields. It got her away from her mother and, though she was ashamed to admit it even to herself, Sharindis as well. It wasn't that Shari was being obnoxious or demanding. She was just helpless and needed to be cared for. And she was a constant reminder of Stavín.

Stavín was a sore subject as far as she was concerned. Oh, she'd known she didn't want him as a husband. She'd always called him "*The Runt*" to all of her friends. And the boy she liked best, Harner, had a special dislike for Stavín. He never called Stavín by name even in passing. It was always "*The Runt*" this and "*The Runt*" that. He and his friends taunted Stavín endlessly about his size. Dorvina had always thought it was funny. Manly.

Now, as the spring progressed and Harner didn't have many men in competition for her hand, she was seeing a different side of him. She hated to admit it, but Harner had a petty side to his personality. Small-spirited. Mean.

Dorvina wondered if it might just be that he didn't have his friends around for the first time in his life. She could make allowances for that. Then she heard something that went totally against everything Harner had told her.

One night, Warmaster Kel'Horval walked Shari home, and accepted an invitation to join them for the evening meal.

Charvil took the master's place as the father of the mistress while her husband was away, and after the blessing he brought up the last thing that Dorvina had expected to hear.

"Shari, you haven't been to practice in a while. Is Arlen keeping you that busy?" Charvil asked with a grin.

"No, Daddy, he isn't overworking me," Sharindis replied with a grin that was remarkably like her father's.

"Then I'll see you at practice soon. I have some youngsters who need to be taken down a peg."

"Your forgiveness, Warmaster, but why not let Harner deal with them for you?" Dorvina asked and ignored the look her mother gave her.

"Because Harner isn't that good at subtle attacks. He's all brawn, no brain. Shari is almost as good as Stavín when skill is more important than power," the Warmaster replied.

"But Harner can beat Stavín, your forgiveness, Mistress, Master Stavín, easily," Dorvina replied.

Charvil laughed.

"Did he tell you that?" Charvil asked with a grin. "Harner has never beaten Stavín in the circle. He wades in swinging away and Stavín just dodges his attacks until Harner leaves himself open and 'tap!' 'tap!' 'tap!' that's the end of the match. Karvik takes a little longer, but he usually does the same. The only person either of them has any problem defeating is the other one."

That little bit of information rolled around in Dorvina's mind, and she started noticing other little things about her beloved soon-to-be husband as well.

Harner spent every moment he could with Dorvina, and they spent hours talking about his favorite subject: himself. He loved to talk about what a name he was going to make for himself when he got out in the lowlands. He adored the battles he imagined himself fighting, and the riches he would acquire. Dorvina listened with all the adoration she could muster, but there was a nagging question at the back of her mind: Harner had never said why he hadn't joined the expedition voluntarily when the Elders hadn't drafted him.

Others noticed Harner's preoccupation with himself as well. Those men were the ones who were assigned to work with him in the fields. Dorvina heard them talking as well, and didn't like what she heard.

"I'll be glad when the planting's done and that babbling bore is assigned elsewhere," one man had said. "I've never had to listen to so much tongue-wagging in my life, and all of it about what a warrior he is. Hah, if he's such a warrior, why is he here instead of with his year-mates in the field?"

"And why is he spending so much time talking about his future with that girl?" a second man had added. "Do you think Barvil will approve of him after he stayed

behind? And Stavin! Oh, after the bullying that boy has received at Harner's hands, there's no way I'd expect him to approve. What's Harner going to do, wait three or four seasons for Barvil to win back his honor?"

"Maybe he thinks he can bully Stavin into saying yes. Personally, any man brave enough to stay in the cave and face the fear isn't someone I'd want to challenge," the first man had said, then they passed out of Dorvina's hearing.

She was upset by the things the men had said and went straight to her mother. "Those men don't have any right to say things like that!" she snapped after repeating as much of the conversation as she could remember.

"They have every right. Harner is an untried boy trying to impress men who've been to the lowlands, Dorvi," Sahrena said calmly as she added some finishing touches to the evening meal.

"But he's a great warrior!" Dorvina said loudly.

"Your father is a great warrior. Harner is a boy with an imagination. Char made that clear enough," Sahrena replied without looking at her daughter. "Go to the practice-grounds the next time Harner is scheduled. Watch what Char has him doing. I think you'll find him to be less than you think he is."

Dorvina did as her mother suggested. What she found dismayed her. Harner was working out against the boys of the next year-group – and losing. Boys as much as two years younger and far smaller were tapping Harner's armor with depressing regularity. It was only when he got mad and started trying to really hurt someone that he finally connected, and that boy was only Stavin's size. The boy had fallen backwards out of the circle; if not for the Warmaster's shout to "leave off," Dorvina thought Harner would have kept going even though his opponent was down. That would have been a deeply dishonorable act.

Dorvina returned to her home in tears and threw herself on the bed and cried her heart break out. *How could Harner do that? He swore he was better than Stavin – That brought her up short. Has it all been a lie?*

She didn't come to the evening meal.

\* \* \*

Sharindis obeyed her father's command three days later. She made her way to the practice ground and listened for his voice. Once she knew which shadow he was, she walked unerringly toward him.

"You wanted to see me, Warmaster?" she asked, coming to attention just as one of the male warriors would have done.

"Yes, Sharindis, I did," Warmaster Kel'Horval said with a small bow. "These are my third-year boys. A few of them believe they are ready to join the expedition already. Would you care to explain to them the error of their ways?"

Sharindis bowed deeply and said, "As you wish, Warmaster."

Charvil smiled at his daughter and then frowned at his students. He snapped, "Eldric, Jallan, Geove, front and center," and scowled as three of the eight-year-old boys ran to face him.

"Sir!" they said in unison as they snapped to attention.

The Warmaster frowned, though it was hard to do considering what he had planned. "You three seem to think you don't need to pay attention to my lessons. You seem to think you're ready to face anyone. Let's see how you do facing a blind girl."

"But Warmaster," Jallan began as he stepped forward, "she's just a —" *Tap*. Sharindis' walking staff struck his breast plate directly over his heart.

"You're dead," Sharindis said softly. "I'm going to hate telling your mother about it."

"That's not fair!" Jallan squalled. "I wasn't ready! I'll show —" *Tap tap*. Sharindis struck him in the chest and stomach. He turned toward her and attacked, girl or not. As he turned her staff smacked into his chest again, then his back as she lightly dodged his strike.

"Do you really think bandits in the lowlands are going to wait for you to be ready?" she asked, following his moving shadow with her whole body.

"You're just a girl!"

"And I just killed you four times," Sharindis replied.

"*Did not!*" Jallan cried. "You cheated!"

"There is no cheating in battle, Jallan," the Warmaster said as he stepped forward.

"There is what works and what doesn't. Geove, would you care to try your luck?"

"No, Warmaster!" Geove said as he stared at Sharindis.

"Eldric?"

Eldric stepped forward and bowed. "Yes, Warmaster." Turning to Sharindis, he bowed, then came to ready. At the Warmaster's clap, he attacked, but Sharindis blocked his strikes. After five exchanges, her staff tapped his breast plate.

"One to Shari," the Warmaster said.

Eldric stepped back, then attacked again. Shari didn't give him a chance. Her staff tapped his armor twice more in rapid succession. After the third tap she brought her staff to salute, and Eldric did as well. "I yield," he said as he bowed deeply to her.

The Warmaster stepped forward and looked at the three boys. "Now, you've just been beaten by a blind girl. Do you have anything to say?"

The three boys came together and snapped to attention. "Our apologies, Warmaster."

"Accepted. Get in the front rank and pay attention." The boys retreated as Charvil turned and smiled at his little girl. "Thank you for joining us, Shari. Would you care to stay?"

"It was my pleasure, Warmaster. Unfortunately, I have a lesson plan to finish for Master Kel'Zorgan." She smiled broadly. "He said he'll let me start teaching soon."

Charvil grinned as groans came from the boys. "Very well, Shari. Run along now." As Sharindis turned away, Charvil turned toward his students. "Now, since I have your attention, let's begin with the ten forms."

Sharindis smiled as she walked away. Her father had taught her how to use a Dragon's Tongue before she lost her sight, and had insisted on drilling her afterward. It kept her senses sharp to have to listen to the movement of her opponents instead of seeing them. Her main advantage with the boys was that their armor didn't fit well and made a lot of noise.



As she walked away, the training ground was once again filled with noise. Ten year-groups, from the five-year-olds who had begun training after the expedition left, learning the basic forms with sticks, to the fourteen-year-olds who were in their last year drilling with Dragon's Tongues and swords, were being drilled by men of varying experience. Some were senior Warleaders with one or two stars, and some were veterans who had just finished their fifth season in the fall.

She sighed as she reflected on how hard it was for the boys compared to the girls. From age five onward they were apprentice warriors. The lessons were hard, and occasionally painful. There were a lot of accidents between the little boys. That's why their Dragon's Tongues were just staffs, like her walking stick. That changed at age ten, when they finished their classroom time and devoted every day to perfecting their weapon's skills. The girls only got basic training with Dragon's Tongues. Few wanted more.

The girls stayed in classes until they were fourteen except for the time they spent in the summertime fields. Even then, they usually spent at least four spans a day in the classroom. It was women's work, and she stifled a snort at that thought, to deal with the logistics of the valley's home life. Mothers taught their daughters to cook and clean, sew and mend, and how to turn a house into a home. Master Kel'Zorgan, and now Sharindis, taught them how to plan meals to remain within their family food allotment. No food was to be wasted, but allotments had to reflect not only the number of people in a family, but their ages and genders as well. Teenagers, especially boys, ate far more than their elders, and the amount of food prepared had to take that into consideration. It was the duty of the woman of the house to know how much to requisition, and how much to prepare for each person.

Sharindis sighed as she thought of that. It would be a long time before she would be able to use the lessons she was teaching. Mistress Shari or not, Sahrena was doing that job as expertly as anyone could, and Shari didn't have the nerve to try and take over. Not from Sahrena.

That worried her. She would one day have to take over. Stavin was the master of the household, but she was its mistress. *I wonder what he's doing now?*

## Chapter 16

Twin Bridges, the capital city of Evandia, was a place of legend. It was an old Imperial Age city that had stood for more than a thousand years, though no one was sure just how much longer that had been. It had been founded either before or after the province called the Land of Evan, but those records were lost. The city was perched on the tip of a spit of land between two rivers. It was named for the two elegant bridges that linked the isthmus that the city occupied to the lands east and west of the mighty Zel'Horgan and Zel'Jevid Rivers. The city looked out over the confluence of those two great rivers, taking advantage of the river gorges as its primary east-west defense. Twin Bridges had also played a major part in the legend of Mary Death, and held her crypt and monument. Stavin knew that the legend of Mary Death had been among Shari's and Sorandis' favorite tales when they were young. *I've got to write to her about this.*

The caravan approached from the north, so they did not get to cross either of the mighty bridges. Instead they were confronted by the great stone wall that crossed the isthmus as the city's northern defense.

The traders stopped and parked their wagons at a caravansary outside the city. Barvil led all of his men to the master trader's wagon to receive their payment. The trader was waiting for them with a smile.

"Come for your pay, I see," the trader said when he saw them. "You've done well by me and I've no complaints. Never do from your people. As agreed, five silver crowns a day by fifty-two days comes to three hundred and twelve silvers. Here are thirty-one gold and two silver crowns, and my thanks. It'll be a moon before I have another shipment, but if you don't find other employment before then, I'd be glad to have you along for that trip as well."

Barvil clasped forearms with the trader and smiled. "We shall see what the Gods decree, and if it is the Gods' will, we will be glad to travel with you again. If not, then may peace and prosperity follow you wherever you go."

With that simple parting, Barvil led his men toward the city gates. Two guardsmen stepped out to bar their way. "State your purpose in the city," the older of the two said.

Barvil had received instructions on what to say, so he replied, "We are free men employed as caravan guards. We wish to enter your city to seek employment with the Traders Guild."

The guards nodded and stepped aside. "The Traders' Guild is located on the fifth street to your right," the younger guard said. "You'll see it as soon as you turn."

"The Temple is straight twenty streets, left eight, right ten, then right again four," the older guard said with a smile.

Barvil fixed his eyes on the man and asked, "How did you know we wanted to go to the Temple of Justice?"

The old man smiled at Barvil and laughed. "Every warrior who comes to this city wants to go to the temple and pay his respects to Mary Death. You'd be an odd lot if you didn't."

Barvil smiled ruefully and nodded. "An odd lot indeed, good Sir. Please forgive my suspicion." The guard simply smiled and stepped aside.

\* \* \*

Stavin's golden armor had been noticed by just about everyone in the caravansary, and the manager quickly approached the trader as soon as the warriors had passed into the city. "Did I just see a warrior in golden armor with your escorts?" he asked, looking off in the direction of the city.

"No, of course not," the trader answered. "Gold is too soft and heavy to make into armor. No, young Stavin's armor is made of dragon scales, and by the dragon that shed them himself." He went on to tell Stavin's story with hardly any embellishments. "Quite a tale, isn't it?" he asked when he was done.

"Indeed," the manager said as he looked toward the city. "It is indeed quite a tale. Excuse me, I have to return to my duties." He hurried away, leaving the trader chuckling by his wagon.

Other traders were lining up to ask the same question, but the trader refused, saying, "Tonight in the Master Trader's Hall I'll tell the tale again. For now, we all have work to do."

\* \* \*

The manager of the caravansary hurried back to his office, then into the city. His destination was the palace office of Lord Zel'Corvis, Lord Minister of Trade in Evandia.

Lord Zel'Corvis was in his office, dealing with the few elements of Evandia's trade network that his subordinates couldn't handle. He was annoyed by the interruption and showed it. "Why are you here, Pattin? Your post is at the caravansary."

Pattin Zel'Orfin went to one knee briefly, then strode right up to Lord Zel'Corvis's desk. "My lord, I have urgent news. There is a warrior in the city who claims to have spoken to a dragon."

Lord Zel'Corvis sat very still for a moment, then said, "You have my undivided attention, Pattin." Pattin told Stavin's story. As soon as he was done Lord Zel'Corvis said, "You did right by bringing this to me, Pattin. I could almost forgive you for what you did to my sister. Now get back out to your post and see what else you can find out."

Pattin bowed and turned to leave saying, "I'll check with the Traders' Guild and find out what I can."

Evindal Zel'Corvis watched his brother-in-law leave, then hurriedly donned his full formal regalia. This tale wasn't one he could keep to himself.

\* \* \*

Barvil led his men to the Traders' Guild first and they all dismounted while he went inside. A man met him just inside the door. "State your business," he said, holding a parchment and quill ready.

"I am the leader of eleven caravan guards. We have completed our contract and seek another."

The man nodded. "I recognize your accent: Valley Warriors. Very well, I will post a notice in the Master Trader's offices. Where can you be reached?"

Barvil thought for a moment, then said, "I was told to ask for Elain's."

The man nodded again. "Across the street, down five doors. Will there be anything else?"

When Barvil shook his head the man simply turned and walked away without another word. Barvil shrugged and went out to his men. "Follow me," was his only order as he took his horse's reins and began walking. His men followed in a double file.

## Chapter 17

Elain's was a large building with a wide porch and overhanging balcony. They had barely tied their horses to the railing when a man came out to greet them.

"Caravan guards?" he asked, barely waiting for Barvil's nod before continuing. "Good. Good. Come along before there's a mess in the street that has to be cleaned up." He hustled off to the side of the building and down an alley with the valley warriors walking their horses behind him. He led them into a yard behind the building and showed them the stable.

"Just put your mounts there. You are the leader, good Sir?" he asked, looking at Barvil. Again he hardly waited for Barvil to answer before saying, "Good. Good. Come with me and I'll introduce you to the mistress." He hurried toward the back of the building, a study in constant motion, and Barvil followed behind him with a bemused expression on his face.

The younger men shared a look all around, then began stripping the tack from their mounts. Inside the inn, Barvil met Elain.

Barvil executed an elaborate bow and said, "Greetings, madam."

The woman, a tall blonde gone to grey with an ageless face, clapped her hands in delight. "Valley men! I *adore* your accent. I am Elain, or, more properly, Madam Elain Fel'Carvin the fifteenth. My family has been keeping inns since Imperial times. Welcome to my house. Are there eleven of you, or twenty-two?"

Barvil wasn't completely taken off guard and replied, "Eleven, Madam Elain."

Elain nodded. "As you were no doubt told, I give your people a special rate because I've never had a problem with you. It is to the benefit of both of us to keep it that way, so I count on you to keep your young men in line."

Barvil nodded deeply before saying, "My men will comport themselves with honor."

"That's good to hear. Now, I am going to charge you the going rate for five rooms for your men and your room will be free. Is this satisfactory?"

Barvil again bowed his head. "It is, Madam Elain."

"Very well. We'll settle your account when it is time for you to leave, but it will be two silver crowns per day for the eleven of you. I wouldn't worry, though. There are at least six caravans making ready now and will be departing within the next four days. You shouldn't be here long." She smiled as Barvil bowed deeply.

"We thank you, Madam Elain."

Elain again clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, I do adore your manners, good Sir. Avid?" she called and the fidgety little man appeared at her elbow. "Rooms thirteen through eighteen, and see to it that the shutters are open." She smiled and looked at the young men who were starting to file in through the back door. "My, such fine-looking young men. My, my, *my Gods Above!* Is that —?" she suddenly shouted as Stavik came through the door.

"No, Madam Elain," Barvil interrupted, "it isn't. It's dragon scale. I'm sure he would be happy to tell you the tale tonight, but right now he's probably more interested in finding the privy. We all are."

"The priv —? Oh, Gods Below, where are my wits. Of course. The privy is there, through those two doors." She waved down a short hall, never taking her eyes off of Stavik and his golden armor.

Barvil led the way to the privy and the men followed, in order of seniority of course, so Stavik and Karvik were at the end of the line. Stavik felt the eyes of Elain and Avid on his back and resisted the urge to shift from foot-to-foot in the ancient dance of a man about to wet himself.

Once everyone had gotten an opportunity to use the privy, Avid led them up to their rooms. Stavik and Karvik had been placed in room thirteen, and they grinned at the sight of real beds after so many nights in their bedrolls.

"It's going to be so nice to sleep the night through and not have to patrol the camp," Stavik said as he claimed the right-hand bunk. "I can never get back to sleep



after mid night, unlike some people." He threw a wad of dirty socks at Karvik as he made that last comment.

Karvik laughed as he threw the socks back. "I have a clear conscience, and sleep the sleep of the innocent."

A knock at the door interrupted them and Barvil's voice came through clearly. "Downstairs, by the count of ten."

Karvik responded immediately to his father's command, and Stavín was only half a breath behind as they clattered down the stairs. They joined the rest of the warriors, wondering what the trouble was.

The valley warriors found Elain in earnest conversation with a bunch of Royal Guardsmen. When Stavín came down the stairs every one of them focused their eyes on him.

The leader of the guardsmen stepped away from Elain and stopped by the stairs, facing Stavín. "You are commanded to present yourself to his royal majesty, King Kalin Zel'Andral, immediately," the guardsman said loudly, looking down at Stavín.

Stavín looked over at Barvil in alarm and he stepped forward. "What is the nature of this summons, Guardsman?"

The guardsman looked at Barvil with a neutral expression. "That is his majesty's business, not yours."

Barvil answered angrily, "This young man is my charge and a member of my command. That makes anything to do with him my business."

The guard looked Barvil in the eye and nodded. "If that is the case, you may accompany him. Come with us."

"Wait!" Karvik cried, then bolted back up the stairs. He returned quickly with Stavín's helmet and Dragon's Tongue. "You might need these," he said as he handed them to Stavín.

Stavín bowed his thanks as the guardsmen scowled. Turning back to the leader, he nodded once. "I am ready, good sirs," he said proudly.

Stavin and Barvil marched through the streets of Twin Bridges, escorted by ten Evandian Royal Guards, and everyone who saw them stopped and stared. Stavin fought the temptation to stare back by pretending that he was back in the academy and just performing another marching drill. It almost worked.

They reached the palace after marching about twenty dragon-lengths by Stavin's estimation. Here his pretense slipped and he had a hard time not turning his head to gawk at the grandeur around him. *I have to describe this place to Shari. She'll be so excited!* The guards marched them through the palace to a pair of gigantic doors that opened as they approached. They passed the doors and marched down a wide set of steps and through the center of a massive room that was filled with splendidly garbed people. At the other end of the room two people sat on ornate thrones on a raised dais.

The leader of the escort took a quick step forward and raised a hand to stop them. "You can go no farther bearing weapons." He held his hand out expectantly.

Stavin looked at Barvil and, at his nod, allowed the guard to take his Dragon's Tongue from him. Barvil unstrapped his sword and handed it to another guard.

When they had been disarmed, the guard motioned them forward. "Stop three paces from the dais and kneel," he commanded. Stavin and Barvil did as instructed, and the king spoke after a moment.

"I have been told that your golden armor is in fact made of dragon scales. Is this true?"

"It is, King Kalin," Stavin answered proudly.

"I have been told that the dragon gave you this armor as a reward for your bravery. Is this true?"

Stavin again answered, "It is, King Kalin."

The king looked at the young woman at his side for a moment, then sat back in his throne. "Tell us this remarkable tale."

Stavin told the same tale that he had told the traders, omitting his reasons for going alone and what had happened when he returned home, but nothing else. The

king listened impassively until he was done, then looked at one of the old men who stood to the side of the room.

The man bowed his head deeply and said, "He speaks the truth, your Majesty."

The king transferred his attention back to Stavin. "It is seldom that a dragon gives such a gift to a human. Does this armor have any special qualities?"

Stavin thought for a moment, then bowed his head. "Yes, your majesty. While wearing it, I have been neither hot nor cold, even in the mountain's snow and your bright lowland sun. Also, though we have only tried it once, the breast plate stopped a hard blow from a Dragon's Tongue without being scratched."

The king again looked to the group of old men at the side of the room. A different man answered his unasked question. "I sense many spells surrounding the youth, my liege. They are of such intensity that I can determine little beyond their existence. They are beyond human magic."

The king nodded and looked at the young woman at his side. She nodded in turn and stood, picking up a tall staff topped with a large ruby that had been carved into the shape of a man's clenched fist. She stopped several steps away and extended the ruby fist toward Stavin. It began to glow as it approached Stavin, and a murmur of wonder flowed through the room. The woman looked over her shoulder at the king and said, "Dragon magic knows dragon magic, Father. This is the final proof."

Turning back to Stavin, she smiled at him. "I am Princess Marina. The dragon saw something special in you, and it is not for mere mortals to question such judgment." Looking past Stavin and Barvil, she addressed the assembled nobles. "I name this man, Stavin Kel'Aniston, a Friend of Evandia. Let his name be so entered in the history of the kingdom."

Stavin stood silent, unsure what to do until Barvil's barely audible whisper reached his ears. "Say you are honored."

Stavin looked at the princess and said, "Your Highness, I am honored to be so — honored."

Princess Marina giggled and covered her mouth with one hand as chuckles and titters of laughter raced through the room, and Stavin blushed darkly in shame at having said something stupid in the presence of strangers. The princess took the last few steps to reach him and patted his shoulder.

"I apologize for laughing at you, Friend Stavin. Please remove your helmet." Stavin did as he was asked and she nodded. "I hadn't realized that you were so young."

Barvil cleared his throat to get the princess' attention, then spoke when she nodded. "With your permission, Princess Marina, Stavin has fifteen years, and was wed shortly before we left the valley for this year's expedition."

The princess looked Barvil in the eye and nodded. "Introduce yourself," she commanded.

"I am Barvil Kel'Carin, Warleader Second of Kel'Kavin. I am the commander of two hands of young warriors acting as caravan guards."

"Then you would be from the great crater valley and a descendant of the Farindian Royal Guards. We know of you and your warriors. Guard this one well, for a dragon's judgment of such men is seldom wrong." With that she turned and climbed back to her throne and sat down.

King Kalin smiled down at Stavin and Barvil and said, "Go in peace, Friend Stavin. I'm sure the stories of your exploits will one day be the source of much pride for you and your people."

Stavin was almost out of breath as he thought about what had just happened. The king and princess of Evandia had just called him friend. *I have to find a way to write to Shari.*

## Chapter 18

Stavin caught a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye and found the leader of the Royal Guardsmen standing beside him. "Bow deeply, then follow me," he commanded, and Stavin and Barvil did as they were told.

Once they were out of the king's presence, their weapons were returned. An old man in elegant robes came bustling down the hall to meet them. "Yes, yes, here you are. The ink is hardly dry," he said in an exasperated tone as he handed Stavin a rolled parchment. "The king's wish is law, of course, but I could wish for more warning."

"What is this, good Sir?" Stavin asked politely.

"Your writ, of course. Safe passage and tolls paid throughout the kingdom as a Friend of Evandia, for you and all who travel with you."

"Your pardon, good Sir," Barvil asked to get the man's attention, "but do you know why their Majesties decided to do this?"

The man looked perplexed for a moment, then said, "Because of the dragon, of course. The traders you came with spread the story and King Kalin has left standing orders that anyone who lays claim to having spoken to a dragon is to be brought before him. The whole Royal Family is dragon-mad. They have been every since Lady Corvana married Prince Chadric."

"Why is that?" Stavin asked and received a look of disbelief.

"The blood, of course," the man answered. "Don't you know? Corvana Zel'Fordan was the first-born daughter of Carlstan and Marydyth Zel'Fordan."

Barvil's hand came up and grasped Stavin's biceps. "Marydyth Zel'Fordan, who was born heir of Zel'Karyn in Coravia?" he asked in a near whisper.

"Yes, yes. Are you telling me that you didn't know that the royal family claims descent from Mary Death?"

Stavin and Barvil looked at each other as the little old man hurried away. The guard got their attention by clearing his throat. "We will escort you back to your lodgings."

The walk back to Elain's was quiet. Both Barvil and Stavin had a lot to think about. It was widely known that Mary Death had died in Evandia, fighting with the Evandian Army to keep the rebellion in Farindia from crossing the border into Evandia. What none of those stories had said was that she had married and produced a child before her death. It made sense, perhaps, seeing that she was supposed to have been in her forties when she died. Her sword, the famous Sang Del Dracl, had been given to her brother when he had become heir of Zel'Karyn, but everyone in the valley had thought it had happened when she had died, not when she had married and left the lineage.

"Guardsmen, I have a question, please," Stavin said tentatively.

"I will answer if I can, Friend Stavin," the guard replied respectfully.

"The ruby fist, the one on the princess' staff? Which dragon made that?"

The guardsman looked at him carefully for a moment before answering.

"Dandarshandrake. It is the hand of a man who grabbed Mary Death's sword and got caught by the spell." He gave an evil grin then continued. "His body was dug up after a hundred years and that was the only part of it that could be broken off."

The guardsmen left them at the door to Elain's with a bow, and Barvil and Stavin both bowed back before heading for the door. The valley warriors were all present in the common room and Kahndar and Davel quickly stood to talk to them.

"Is everything all right, Sir?" Davel asked while Kahndar was looking over Stavin.

"Yes, we'll explain—" Barvil began, only to be interrupted by Elain.

"Oh, you've returned! What was it, if I'm not prying? Having Royal Guardsmen take my customers away is not something that happens very often."

Barvil looked at Stavin, but he gave the impression of a man who wanted to sink into the floor. Taking pity on him, Barvil told the tale. Elain again clapped her hands in delight.

"A Friend of Evandia, and on your first journey! How wonderful! Come, be comfortable, then I must see to supper." She escorted them to a table and then hurried away toward the kitchen.

Karvik was staring at Stavin with wide eyes. "You spoke to the king? And the princess? What was it like?" he asked eagerly and received grunts of encouragement from around the room.

Stavin glanced at Barvil, but it didn't look like he was going to be spared this time, so he began with descriptions. "The king is older, but he still looks fit. He looks a lot like the Warmaster. The princess is tall and blonde and in her early twenties. She looks a lot like Sahrana back home. Same build." He smiled as the others laughed.

Barvil chuckled as well. "I would say generously proportioned, but I'd say it softly. It doesn't do to notice things like that about your betters." He smiled at Stavin and then at the others. "Tomorrow we'll visit Mary Death's Memorial and pay our respects, then tour the rest of the city. Hopefully we won't have too long a wait before we pick up another caravan."

Supper, as the Evandians called the evening meal, was meat sliced thin in thick white gravy poured over thick slices of bread. Barvil allowed his men one beer each, then made them switch to water. The serving girl gave him the strangest look when he made that decree, even though Madam Elain had a magically purified well, but brought the water as requested.

As the youngest, it was Karvik's and Stavin's job to check the mounts before they went to bed, and Barvil sent them out as soon as they finished eating. Elain's ostlers had fed and watered the horses, and all they had to do was make sure the stalls were securely closed.

"Stave, what do you think is going to happen now?" Karvik asked as they walked back to the inn.

"About what?" Stavin asked.

"About you and your armor. Kings don't honor nobodies from nowhere for no reason."

Stavin thought for a moment, then lifted his hands helplessly. "I don't know. The official in the palace said the royal family is related to Mary Death and they take an interest in anything that has to do with dragons."

Karvik looked at him sideways and shook his head slowly. "There's got to be more to it than that." Stavin didn't answer, but just opened the door and stepped inside.

The rest of the warriors had gone up to their rooms and Barvil waved them over. "Sleep. No talking all night like you've done before. Tomorrow will be a busy day." With that he went to his own room, leaving the two youngsters at their door.

Stavin looked at Karvik and sighed, "Your dad's no fun."



## Chapter 19

The night passed quickly, and the smell of frying pork bacon and kava had the men up well before sunrise. Stavín and Karvík, true to their training, immediately went out to check the horses while the older men were getting ready for breakfast. Everything was in order, so they headed back to the inn.

Karvík noticed a strange man standing at the gate of the inn yard and got Stavín's attention. "Stave, at the gate," he whispered.

"I see him," Stavín replied softly. "Predator."

"Make him prey?"

"No, we warn Barvíl unless he makes a move toward us." The man didn't move until Stavín's hand touched the latch on the inn door. Then, as the latch lifted, he darted out of sight. With the door safely closed behind them, they immediately went to Barvíl's side and snapped to attention.

"A man was watching the yard, Sir. He never took his eyes off Stave. When we came inside, he darted out of sight toward the street," Karvík reported.

Barvíl sighed and nodded his understanding. "I was afraid this would happen. The trader and his men have had plenty of time to spread the story of Stavín and his golden armor. Add in what happened yesterday and there are bound to be people looking for him. Some are just going to be curious. Others are going to be trouble. Stavín's status is going to make him, and consequently us, more sought after." He paused and looked around to ensure he had everyone's attention. "Stavín can save a trader a lot of silver that he would otherwise have to spend on tolls and taxes. We just have to ensure that it's in our interest that he does. I want everyone in full armor and weapons until I say differently. Kar, what did you make of the man you saw?"

"He was after Stave, Dad. If Stave had gone out alone I believe the man would have attacked. He was definitely a predator," Karvik answered, having come to attention again before speaking.

Barvil looked around at his men and shot a glance at the stairs. "Eat fast, then armor up. We'll go to the memorial and pay our respects, then hope there's a caravan that's leaving soon that will hire us."

The young men ate with all haste, not that they tended to dawdle anyway, and soon everyone was assembled in the common room in full armor with their weapons strapped on.

Barvil led his men out of Elain's and they immediately formed a column of twos behind him, dividing into the five-man teams referred to as hands that they were famous for. Davel and Kahndar were at Barvil's shoulders and the younger men lined up behind them. Stavín and Karvik were, as always, last in line.

The people of Twin Bridges were accustomed to having warriors walking through their streets, but Stavín's golden armor drew even the most jaded bystander's attention. People came out of the inns and shops as the visual confirmation of yesterday's rumor walked down the street.

Stavín did his best to ignore the gawkers. His years as the butt of everyone's jokes had trained him to look straight ahead and ignore everything that didn't force itself on him. He schooled his features into the carefully neutral mask that he'd worn for years, even though his helmet hid most of his face.

The crowd remained sparse, and few people were rude enough to shout at them. Part of that was undoubtedly due to the weapons that they wore so conspicuously as they walked through the city.

The memorial that honored the legendary warrior-woman who had been called Mary Death was located near the ancient Temple of Justice. Marydyth Zel'Karyn had been one of the Knights of Justice for several years before she renounced the path. She'd died defending her adopted kingdom, and a grateful king had erected a crypt and monument to her memory.

The edifice was constructed of red granite with white marble columns. It was a long, narrow rectangle squeezed between two ancient temples, yet it was the most magnificent of them all. Down the center of the floor was a path of pure white stone that showed no sign of impurities. The warriors walked single-file through the building until they reached the gigantic marble crypt. On its lid, carved by the greatest sculptor of the time, lay a life-sized statue of Marydyth Shelina Forlan Ne'Karyn Zel'Fordan, wearing her armor with its inscribed dragon rampant. The Zel'Karyn Heir's Diadem was on her brow, and her mighty sword, Sang Del Dracl, was in her hands.

Barvil knelt, and his men knelt behind him with their heads bowed. He spoke in a strangely muffled voice as he recited the litany of honor.

*"Mary Death, in life a warrior."*

*"Mary Death, in war a wonder."*

*"Mary Death, in wonder a legend."*

*"Mary Death, in legend remembered."*

Barvil stood and walked to the foot of the crypt, then bowed deeply. "I am Barvil Kel'Carin, and I honor your memory."

Davel stood next and repeated the ceremonial introduction. Then Kahndar introduced himself, and one by one the valley warriors followed in the footsteps of the thousands of warriors who had come before them.

Stavin went last, waving Karvik to go before him. He had a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach, almost like the one that he'd felt the first time he'd asked Barvil for Dorvina. As he finally stood at the foot of the crypt, that feeling intensified.

"I am Stavin Kel'Aniston, and I honor your memory." His words seemed to echo in his own ears and the others were all staring at him strangely.

Karvik finally spoke, his voice soft with wonder. "Stave, you're glowing."

Stavin looked at the Dragon's Tongue in his hands and saw a nimbus of light surrounding it and his gauntlets, then extending up his arms. Looking at Barvil, he saw the light of understanding in the older man's eyes. "Dragon magic knows dragon magic."

"Indeed it does, Friend Stavin," a woman's voice said from the shadows. The woman who followed the voice was a tall blonde dressed in an elegant white gown. The only anomaly was the sword that was belted at her narrow waist. To everyone's surprise, the ruby on the pommel was glowing. "I am Ehrwan Zel'Fordan, keeper of my ancestress' memorial."

Barvil went down on one knee and his men followed his example. "Is that —?"

"—Sang Del Dracl?" she finished for him, then smiled. "No. The sword is in Coravia with the current heir." She tapped the glowing ruby. "This is a piece of the Wizard Armen Fel'Ervin." She walked over to Stavin and smiled. "Stand, Friend Stavin."

Stavin rose smoothly to his feet and looked up into her eyes. "Lady Zel'Fordan, I am honored," he said deferentially as he bowed his head.

"It is I who am honored to meet a man who attracted the attention of a dragon," she replied. "There have been few such men in living memory." She placed one hand on his shoulder and tilted her head prettily to the side as she smiled. At her side, the ruby sent shafts of scarlet light through the memorial as it glittered in the presence of another dragon's magic.

## Chapter 20

Trouble found the valley warriors on the long walk back to Elain's. A dozen men came rushing out of an alley and attacked without warning. They carried axes and swords and proved that they were well versed in their use. Three of the valley warriors fell in the first rush and Stavín found himself isolated from the rest as three of the attackers singled him out. The rest of the attackers fought to keep Barvil and the others from assisting him.

Stavín took a hard blow to the back that knocked him into the arms of another of the attackers. Luckily for Stavín, he'd instinctively brought his Dragon's Tongue up for balance and the blade of the upper point caught the man in the face. The man recoiled in pain as the blade sliced across his right eye, nose and mouth.

Stavín pushed away from the man and whirled his Dragon's Tongue around in a desperate attempt to clear some space. He'd faced multiple opponents in training, but the reality was far different. He felt a tug of resistance and heard a gasp of anguish from behind him and turned to find the third attacker backing away, holding one bloody hand in the other. He had tried to grab the Dragon's Tongue with an armored gauntlet, but the dragon-wrought edge had sliced his fingers away.

Stavín was turning back to his last opponent when a massive blow to the side of his helmet dropped him in his tracks. He was too stunned to move, but he could still see as his opponent swung an ax back for the killing blow.

The man never finished his back-swing. Seemingly from nowhere, a thrown Dragon's Tongue sliced into the man's chest. He had time to look down at it before Karvik's burly form leapt across Stavín and used the haft of the Dragon's Tongue as a lever to spin the man away from Stavín, incidentally severing the man's spine in the process.

The attackers withdrew as fast as they had arrived, leaving five of their friends dead in the street. Four of the valley warriors were down, but none were dead. Stavin's ears were still ringing and his eyes didn't want to stay focused. Horvan Kel'Erins had been knocked flat in the initial rush, but had only had the wind knocked out of him. Lavin Kel'Farin was unconscious, but his helmet had limited his injury to a concussion that matched Stavin's. The worst was Kahndar.

Kahndar had been engaged sword-to-sword with one opponent when another had struck his sword arm with an ax, numbing it from elbow to fingers and cutting through the light armor and mail to leave a deep gash. Kahndar had turned toward his first opponent and surged forward, driving him back. When he had room to move he had brought his left elbow up into the man's throat, crushing his windpipe. He had grabbed his sword left-handed, but the fight was over and he staggered over to kneel beside Stavin.

"Are you all right, Stave?" he asked through gritted teeth.

Stavin looked up at him and flinched, closing his eyes. "Oh, Gods Below! There can't be four of you."

Kahndar sighed in relief. "You'll live, and Shari won't torture me before she kills me. Gods Above and Below, my arm hurts."

Barvil was checking his wounded when the sound of running feet alerted him that more people were coming. "On guard!" he shouted, drawing his sword. "Flying Geese!" he snapped, commanding his men to form a 'V' behind him.

The sound of running feet came clearly from around a corner and was soon followed by a quartet of City Guardsmen who were responding to the disturbance. The leader saw them and slowed, drawing his sword. "Stand where you are and lower your weapons!" he commanded. "What happened here?" Barvil began to respond, but the leader of the guards pointed his sword at him and shouted, "Silence, you! You'll get a chance to defend yourself before the Magistrate. You," he snapped, pointing at one of the bystanders, "did you see these barbarians attack our citizens?"

The man shook his head. "T'wer the other way 'round, Guard. These were passin' quietly when that lot come out of the alley."

"Fagh! What would make five men jump a double handful of mercs?"

"Probably 'cause there was more of 'em to start. As to why, that young 'un in the gold armor would be my guess."

The guardsmen all moved to where they could see Stavin lying in the street. "Golden armor— Friend Stavin, my apologies. I had no idea that this was your party." He walked quickly over to Stavin's side and knelt. "Are you badly injured, Friend Stavin?"

Stavin opened one eye and looked at the guardsman. "No, nothing serious. Just a broken head," he answered. "I need help to stand." Barvil and Karvik immediately helped him stand up, then caught him as he pitched forward and vomited.

"You need to stay still, Stave," Kahndar said as he was helped to his feet.

Stavin moaned as he answered, "I am still. It's the ground that's moving."

The guardsmen stepped back and the leader looked around. Spotting a cooper's shop, he walked over to the man at the door. "Do you have a wagon that will hold these men?" he asked and the man nodded. "The City Guard asks your assistance in aiding Friend of Evandia Stavin. Please take Friend Stavin and his— party— to their lodgings." He pulled a bronze medallion from his pouch and handed it over. "You may redeem this with your taxes."

The cooper took the medallion and disappeared into his shop. He came around the corner a few long moments later in a large wagon. The guardsmen helped get everyone loaded and settled, then bowed deeply to Stavin, even though he was lying back with his eyes closed. The cooper clicked his tongue at his horses and got them moving as the guardsmen dispersed the crowd and started checking the dead men.

The cooper drove in silence for a bit, then turned his head to look at Barvil. "Where are you lodged, friends?"

"We are staying at Elain's, good Sir," Barvil answered. He was busy checking his wounded.

"Best stay there, then," the cooper said, turning forward again. "The city guardsmen don't take kindly to foreign warriors fighting in the streets. If not for Friend Stavin, you lot would be in lock-up until a magistrate passed sentence on you. More than one band has been stripped of their belongings and cast out."

Barvil had spun around to stare at the man's back. "We were the ones who were attacked, not the attackers!" he nearly shouted, but the man simply shook his head.

"Don't matter none," he replied without turning. "You were fighting in the streets. That's all they know or care about."

"How does Stave being a Friend of Evandia make a difference?" Ivalin asked.

The man chuckled, his whole body shaking for a moment. "A Friend of Evandia is a personal friend of the king, and only a member of the royal family can judge him. No guardsman or magistrate can touch him."

"And none of them want to face the king and explain what happened to Stavin in their sector of the city," Barvil said, finally understanding.

"Just so," the cooper agreed. "So long as Friend Stavin wears that golden armor there'll be those that think it *is* real gold, stories about dragons be damned."

Barvil grimaced. "If that's the situation, let's hope someone hires us soon so we can leave."



## Chapter 21

Barvil gave his orders as soon as Elain's came into view. "Prepare to leave. I want to be ready if someone comes looking for us."

Elain saw them enter and hurried over to Barvil. "Goodman Barvil, what happened? Has there been trouble?" she asked after seeing the blood and dirt on the warriors.

"We were attacked by a bunch of men who were after Stavin and his armor. Your pardon, Madam Elain, but I'd feel better if I had two armed men down in the common room at all times," Barvil explained, glancing around.

"Indeed, and so would I, Goodman Barvil. So would I. I'll also be having a word with some friends of mine about this. This won't be allowed to happen again." She had spoken quietly, but Barvil still took an involuntary step backwards, away from the menace in her eyes and tone. She spared him one last glance, then swiftly disappeared into the back of the inn.

"Your pardon, Goodman Barvil," one of the serving girls said, drawing his attention. "Here is water and some bandages for your men."

Barvil bowed slightly. "Thank you, miss. I don't think we'll need much more, but I would like to get some food into them. It'll help distract them."

The girl smiled and bobbed a quick curtsy. "The luncheon will be ready soon."

While Barvil had been talking, Davel and Chandar had been removing Kahndar's armor to get a better look at his arm. Davel was examining the cut when Avid appeared at his side.

"Your pardon, but please allow me to see to that," he said, placing a large satchel on the table. "We see an unfortunate amount of this sort of thing." He didn't exactly push Davel out of the way, but somehow ended up between him and Kahndar. Examining the cut, he probed Kahndar's arm with gentle fingers.

"It doesn't appear that any bones are broken, but we'll give you a bit of Bone Heal anyway, just in case there are any cracks. Overall, young man, I'd say you were exceptionally lucky."

Kahndar was gritting his teeth in an effort to fight the pain, but still managed to answer. "Cut through my armor with an ax. Almost took my arm. Oh, Gods Below, that hurts."

Avid nodded and smiled. "That's good. It means there's no nerve damage and you'll keep your hand. Now let's take care of it. Some Heal-All first." He pulled a large earthenware jar from the satchel and smeared a generous finger-full of the salve over and into the cut on Kahndar's arm. A satisfied smile crossed his lips as the magical salve numbed the area and Kahndar let loose a long sigh of relief. "One of our regulars is an Adept Healer-Mage. He makes this extra strong for us. Now I can sew you up without listening to you grunt and groan." He pulled a small round case from the satchel and opened it to reveal a spool of silk thread and a small, curved needle. He ran out a length of silk and snipped it off, then expertly threaded the needle. In a matter of moments he had the cut on Kahndar's arm sewn shut with fifteen neat, even stitches.

"That'll do for now. The Heal-All will take care of the rest in two or three days." With that he packed up his satchel and left without another word.

Barvil inspected the cut without touching Kahndar's arm. "He's better at sewing skin than I am. Eat, then go to bed. That Heal-All is going to pull a lot of energy out of you to fix your arm. Davel," he said, turning to the other senior member of his team, "get some help and see to it that Kahndar gets to his room before the salve puts him to sleep and we have to carry him up the stairs. You heard my instructions."

Barvil left Kahndar and checked Stavil and Lavin. Both young men were sitting up with wet rags around their necks and on their brows. "How are you two feeling?" he asked, looking back and forth between them.

Lavin answered first. "I feel like I've had too much beer. Everything is fuzzy and I'm dizzy. My head is pounding as well."

Barvil transferred his attention to Stavín and got an answer before he asked. "I feel like Lavin does. At least I'm only seeing one of everything now."

"Good," Barvil answered as he looked at both of them. "We'll be keeping you awake for a while. Men have died in their sleep after blows like you two took. You just sit still and keep your heads as steady as you can. You won't be standing guard with the others for a while."

"That's good, Sir," Lavin answered. "I don't feel much like moving right now. Every time I turn my head I feel it slosh like an overfull bucket of water."

Stavín nodded his agreement, then winced in pain. When he could open his eyes again, he carefully looked around for Karvik. When he saw him, he called him over.

"Kar, will you come over here, please?"

Karvik came over to face Stavín and grinned. "How's your head?"

"Dented but not broken. Kar, thank you for my life."

Karvik was surprised and showed it. "You don't have to thank me, Stave. Whatever else has happened, we've been friends forever. Besides," he said, pausing to lean closer, "I made *my* first kill before *you* did. *You owe me* a silver crown."

Stavín looked up and winced again. "You're not really going to hold me to that bet, are you?"

"Absolutely."

"*Ouish!*" Stavín sighed. "The very first silver crown I get my hands on is yours."

"And speaking of first kills," Barvil said, having listened to Stavín and his son, "Karvik, Horvan, and Ivalin, come over here." The three young men hurried to face him.

"Horvan Kel'Erins, on this, your third expedition to the lowlands, you have made your first kill, using your sword to cut your opponent's throat. Ivalin Kel'Standis, on this, your second expedition to the lowlands, you have made your first kill, driving the point of your Dragon's Tongue through your opponent's eye and into his brain." He paused for a moment to smile proudly at his son. "Karvik Kel'Carin, on this, your first expedition to the lowlands, you have made your first kill, throwing your Dragon's Tongue like a spear and then following through and severing your opponent's spine."

Stepping back, he bowed to them formally before he continued. "According to the customs handed down from our ancestors, you may each paint a white chevron on your left shoulder." Turning, he faced Kahndar.

"Kahn, I believe that was your sixth kill. You may now paint your top chevron red and claim the title of Sergeant. Congratulations."

Kahndar smiled and bowed his head. "Thank you, Sir."

Further conversation was prevented by the appearance of the mid day meal. Well-seasoned chunks of meat in thick gravy were poured over a bed of boiled grain, and a kind of green legume was served on the side. Elain was there with the servers and approached Barvil as soon as everyone was served.

"Goodman Barvil, I've spoken to some – associates of mine about today's incident. The men who attacked you will be found and dealt with." She didn't smile, which made Barvil feel nervous for some reason. "I do have a question for you, if you wouldn't mind satisfying my curiosity?" At Barvil's nod, she continued. "You have three red stars on your shoulder. What does that signify?"

Barvil considered his answer carefully. "Each of the first five kills is a white chevron. The sixth kill is a red chevron. The eleventh kill is a second red chevron. It continues that way until the twenty-sixth kill. That is signified by a red star. I have eighty-three kills, counting the one today."

Elain was quiet for a moment, then bowed her head deeply. "I am ever so glad that I chose to cultivate a good relationship with your people, Goodman Barvil." She turned and walked to the back of the inn, pausing to grab a beer from the bar as she passed.

## Chapter 22

Karvik couldn't contain himself anymore and chortled as soon as the door closed behind Elain. "I think you shocked her, Dad. I don't think she's ever known what the stars meant, and I'll bet she's never seen anyone with three before."

"Since there are only fifteen men alive who have earned more than two, that's almost a certainty," Barvil answered absently, still watching the door that Elain had passed through.

Stavin grinned, but kept quiet as he listened to Karvik and Barvil. It took two stars to be eligible for election to the Elders Council. Only twenty-nine living men could claim that honor, and of that august company, only Charvil Kel'Horval could claim a fourth star. That was what made him a Warmaster, and consequently *the* Warmaster of the academy. Karlit, Stavin's father, could only claim the single hollowed star of a Warleader Fifth, and would have to make seven more kills to earn his second. Given Karlit's age, that was not likely to happen.

All of the men ate quickly, then Barvil gave out the guard assignments and Kahndar was taken upstairs to bed. Everyone, even Stavin and Lavin, kept their weapons close at hand.

The day passed quietly with people coming into the inn for a drink or a bite to eat. Several groups came in for a beer, but seemed much more interested in Stavin than their drinks. Finally, a man wearing the device of a Master Trader on his vest walked over and stopped by Barvil.

"Your pardon, good sirs, but I am looking for the Kel'Kavin Valley men. Are you they?"

Barvil turned to face him and bowed slightly. "We are. I am Barvil Kel'Carin, leader of this team."

"Yes, that was the name I was given. I am seeking guards for a trip to the Kingdom of Lux, to the capital city itself."

Barvil stroked his chin in thought. "That is a long journey, Master Trader. It takes us far from our home and there is no guarantee that we'll be able to find another caravan coming back this way. We could lose a good portion of our season if we don't."

"But I must have the best guards I can get!" the trader cried. "It is vital that my cargo reach Lux intact and on time. Please! I'll make it worth your risk. I'll pay seven silver crowns a day instead of the normal five. How's that?"

Barvil laughed. "Seven? For the risk of losing half a season? No, I couldn't do that. For the risk of not being paid on our return trip, twenty silvers a day."

"*Twenty!*" the trader shrieked. "You'd bankrupt me! I wouldn't have to worry about bandits on the road – you'd already be with me! I might consider eight."

"I might consider swimming the Zel'Horgan in my armor, but that doesn't mean I'd actually do it." Barvil laughed. "I would consider seventeen. Plus meals, of course."

"Oh, of course," the trader said, throwing up his hands. "Of course meals are included. Would you like mountain venison? Plains bison? Deep sea fish flown fresh on dragon-back to your plate? You'd rob me before the journey even began and save the bandits the trouble. You expect such a princely fee for one old man and a bunch of untried boys?"

Barvil leaned forward so his face was just a hand-span from the trader's. "Only one of my men has yet to make his first kill, and that young man has proven his courage before a far harsher judge than any man. He is also the real reason you are here. For the insult you have given my men, fifteen silver crowns a day, plus meals, or turn and walk away. I am through bargaining with you."

"This is outrageous!" the little man cried, and a new voice agreed.

"It certainly is, Harvar," a large man said from near the door. "I was first to voice an interest in hiring these men, and here you are, poaching my contract."

"You have no contract with these warriors, Eldan!" Harvar shouted.

"Nor have you, but I was given first contact rights by the Guild. You've tried to cheat me and I'll be having a word with the Guild Masters before the sun sets. You see if I don't."

"You're both fools," a woman's voice said from the back of the inn, and they all turned to face her. "Greedy fools, squabbling like children. Warrior Barvil, I am Master Trader Sahren Kel'Vandar, of the free Kavadian House of Zel'Vandar. What these fools won't tell you –"

"Shut up, you slut!" both traders shouted in unison.

"– is that Friend Stavín will save them at least ten gold crowns in tax and tolls just by being with them."

Harvar shouted, "You're not a Master Trader in this kingdom!"

"You are not a member of the Guild!" Eldan agreed.

"And for that I pay extra tax and toll," Sahren said with a frown.

"Now listen here, you miserable little –" Eldan said as he advanced on her.

Elain stopped him dead in his tracks with a look. "You'd best not complete that thought, Eldan Fel'Dardan," she said softly but in an iron-hard tone. "Not in my inn." Her giddy persona had been replaced by something as cold and dangerous as a cobra.

Eldan looked at her and stepped back, swallowing convulsively. "As you say, Madam Elain," he said, keeping his eyes focused on the floor.

"I have taken an interest in these men and especially young Friend Stavín." Turning back to Barvil, Elain continued. "Sahren has spoken the bare truth, Goodman Barvil. Friend Stavín is worth as much to a trader as the rest of you combined. His status will save a trader tax and tolls crossing Evandia's many bridges." She snorted delicately. "Harvar Fel'Loyal will probably end up paying thirty gold crowns just to get out of the kingdom. Eldan will probably spend more since he's going to the Kingdom of High Zamaria. He'll have more rivers and mountain gorges to cross."

"I am aware of Stavín's value, Madam Elain," Barvil said. "How is it that you know so much about these traders' business?"

Elain considered him for a moment before replying. "I have many sources of information, Goodman Barvil. There is little trade that takes place in this city that I don't know about."

Barvil looked into her eyes and decided that he didn't want to know any more. He bowed deeply before asking, "Could you make a recommendation for us?"

Elain smiled and looked toward Trader Sahren. "Sahren is here at my invitation. I have known her for more years than either of us will admit to owning, and I trust her with a knife at my back."

Barvil tilted his head at that last phrase. It meant that Elain trusted Sahren completely, even in matters of life and death, but it was also an ancient oath of support in times of trouble. Barvil had once said those same words about Charvil.

Turning to Trader Sahren, he bowed. "Trader Sahren, what is your need?"

"Just a moment, I was here first and we are still negotiating –" Trader Harvar began, but shut his mouth abruptly when Barvil rounded on him and put a hand on his sword.

"You ended those negotiations by insulting us. There is nothing more to be said." Barvil turned his back on the shocked trader and bowed to Trader Sahren.

Trader Sahren's eyes glittered with amusement as she answered, "I am making a long circuit through Evandia, then Coravia, and ending in Kavadia. Our home is in Markavia Cross, which is only about eight days' easy ride from your valley. I offer the standard five silver crowns per day, plus half of any tax and tolls that Friend Stavín saves us. You will eat with my family."

"I agree to this," Barvil said and smiled at the sound of cursing from behind him. "What cargo do you carry, if you don't mind my asking?"

"A bit of everything, Goodman Barvil. We are a true trade caravan, not just a single-consignment cargo carrier. That's why we travel a circuit instead of to a single destination."

Barvil smiled and dipped his head. "When do we leave? This city has become uncomfortable."



"With the dawn," Trader Sahren answered. "Finish the night here and come to the Common's Gate. That should be where you entered the city."

Barvil bowed formally this time. "We will be there with the sun." Turning, he began to say, "Gentlemen, we are—" but his voice faded. "They left?"

Davel snorted. "They left mad. Between you saying yes to Trader Sahren and Madam Elain's glare, they didn't have anything else to say."

## Chapter 23

Elain stepped up to Sahren's side now that an agreement had been reached. "I know Harvar Fel'Loval, Goodman Barvil. Warn your people away from him. He's a cheat. He never would have offered anything for the aid Friend Stavín's status would have provided him and probably would have tried to short you in Lux. Sahren," she said, turning to face the other woman, "we still have some things to discuss."

Sahren smiled and gave Barvil a half bow. "I will see you in the morning, Goodman Barvil." She and Elain walked away to the back of the inn and Barvil turned to his men.

"You heard her. Eat heartily and go to bed early. Two beers tonight if you want them—except Stavín and Lavin. Sorry, men, but beer doesn't mix well with a concussion. I'll be setting guards tonight, but I want you all to sleep in your mail and keep your weapons close at hand. I'll take the last tour alone and make sure everyone is up with plenty of time to get ready. Davel, take Kar and Ivalín and check the horses. Keep your eye on the gate and be ready for trouble. Consult with Avid about closing the gate for the night."

"Sir!" Davel answered, coming to attention. "Ivalín, Kar, you heard him. Let's go." He walked to the back door of the inn and went out without another word.

The evening meal was hearty mutton stew with crusty bread. They had plenty of company. It seemed that more people than the inn was meant to hold crowded into the common room. There was an island of space around Stavín and Lavin, and its shores were the armored shoulders of their fellow warriors.

Only a few patrons dared to try and say anything to Stavín. None of them was foolish enough to try and reach him. If the armored figures that surrounded him weren't enough to discourage them, the occasional glance from Elain was.

As ordered, the warriors ate and then went to their rooms with the exception of the guards Barvil had posted. Stavín was already in bed when Karvik came up. "How are you feeling, Stave?"

"My head is pounding. I'm not dizzy anymore, though, and your dad says that's a good sign."

"We both know he's right. Besides, that isn't the first time you've had your head bashed like that. Remember how you landed on it when you —"

"Don't! Don't make me laugh, Kar. It hurts more. I remember. Better go to sleep. *You* have guard duty in a few spans."

Karvik sighed and climbed into bed, watching the lamplight glitter on Stavín's hair like sunlight on a trickling brook.

\* \* \*

Barvil took the last watch, and wasn't surprised to find that he wasn't alone. Madam Elain came out of the back of the inn not long after Davel and Ivalin went up stairs. He bowed deeply when she walked over to his side.

"Goodman Barvil, I'm sorry your stay here has been so eventful. Rest assured that your next visit will be quieter."

Barvil bowed again. "Thank you, Madam Elain."

Madam Elain smiled and bowed her head deeply. "I've been receiving an earful from my sources within the city. The men who attacked you were not associated with any of my — associates. There is a general sense of trepidation right now because something like this could cause the king to take a more active stance as far as the shadier dealings in Twin Bridges are concerned. If young Friend Stavín complained to the king it could cause a major shakeup among the thieves. Such shakeups are bad for business. All business. I must ask you to leave the matter in our hands. We can deal with it much more thoroughly, and quietly."

Barvil eyed her carefully for a moment, then bowed. He took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. "We want to cause as little trouble as we can, Madam Elain. Trouble is bad for us as well. If you say you can deal with it, then I will let it rest in your hands."

Elain smiled and bowed. "I assure you, Goodman Barvil, the trouble *has* been dealt with." With that she turned away and disappeared into the back of the inn.

Not much later, Barvil led his men to the Common's Gate in the early morning darkness and found Trader Sahren waiting for them. "As punctual as I could ask. We're over there." She pointed to the east of the gate and started walking with him. "Elain's sources have given her an earful of information about yesterday's incident and our mutual encounter with Harvar and Eldan. We're already harnessed and ready to roll."

Barvil kept his head up and his eyes moving as he answered. "Yes, she told me about the thieves in the street."

Sahren chuckled. "I suspect she told me more about the thieves in the Guild Hall. Those two pompous fools have lodged a formal complaint concerning my poaching of their contract rights."

Now Barvil shook his head slowly, but never stopped watching for trouble. "After that fool insulted me, I would never have signed with him. The second man seemed to be cut from the same cloth. I can't say for certain that I would have killed him for trying to cheat me, but it's likely that I would have."

Sahren threw her head back and laughed loudly, sounding remarkably like a braying mule. "Oh, if only the Guild Masters could have heard that!" she managed to say between brays. "Here we are." A group of elaborately decorated wagons had begun to move as soon as Sahren had come into sight. "Position your men, Goodman Barvil. The road beckons," she shouted as she ran to catch the lead wagon.

Barvil mounted his horse and the rest of the warriors followed his example. "Spread out along both sides of the wagons, same formation as we had coming down here, except I want Kahndar behind me until his arm is completely healed."

Ten voices shouted, "Yes, Sir!" and the men split up, taking their places. This caravan had only twelve wagons and Staviv found himself next to the number two wagon. He was surprised to see a woman driving, and more surprised to see that she was heavily pregnant. She noticed his reaction and said something over her shoulder. A man's head appeared almost immediately.

"Good morning, young warrior. You must be the one we were told about."

Stavin bowed in the saddle, then found his voice. "We weren't told that there were women with this caravan other than Trader Sahren."

The woman smiled broadly. "The Zel'Vandar Trading House is a family-owned house. We're all related to some extent. Of the twenty-three of us with this caravan, eleven are women."

The man smiled and patted her belly. "It's certainly better than being left behind and doing without for eight moons."

She slapped his hand, but was smiling when she scolded him. "Mind your manners, or you'll be doing without sooner than you think." She smiled at Stavin. "Ignore him, young warrior. He's just upset that I left him home last season."

"I understand his reasons," Stavin said with a grin. "My wife and I had just—"

The sound of a loud horn from the direction of the city interrupted him and he turned to look back while the man stood on the wagon seat to get a better view. They could see a group of guardsmen riding after them and Stavin heard Davel whistle for Barvil.

Barvil rode by just half a breath later and shouted, "Stavin, with me," as he passed. Stavin reined his horse around and crossed the caravan, then spurred to catch Barvil. They reached Davel at about the same time the guardsmen did.

"This caravan is to turn around and return to the city by order of Magistrate Valdar Zel'Korval," the leader said as he reached them.

"Trader Sahren is up there, but there is probably no reason to bother her with this. Is this summons because of her recent dealings with the Traders' Guild regarding our employment?" he asked.

"It is," the guard confirmed.

"Then you are looking for me, not her," Barvil said lightly. "Friend Stavin and I will accompany you back to the city and explain it to the magistrate. I'm sure he'll be most interested in hearing how the traders tried to cheat Friend Stavin." He wheeled his horse about and the guardsmen followed them at a gallop back to the city.

The guardsmen caught up at the city gates and escorted them to the magistrate's office. City Magistrate Zel'Korval looked up in shock as his guards led Barvil and Stavín into his chambers.

"What's the meaning of this? Who are these men? Where is that so-called trader Sahren Kel'Vandar?" he demanded rapidly, but it was Barvil who answered.

"Magistrate Zel'Korval," he began with a deep bow, "I am here as Friend Stavín's advisor. Last night, two traders tried to cheat Friend Stavín by seeking to employ our company for a pittance and take advantage of his status to avoid tolls and taxes on their wares in Evandia. Though we were aware of Friend Stavín's value to a trader, Trader Sahren pointed this out to us and offered a fair wage and compensation for Friend Stavín's help. Because of the insults Traders Harvar and Eldan had given Friend Stavín and the rest of my men, we would never have considered their offers. I agreed to accompany Trader Sahren, hers being the first honest and honorable offer we received. We had thought to let the matter rest and not complain until your guards intercepted us as we were leaving."

The magistrate was staring at Stavín's golden armor and bowed his head formally to him before speaking. "Is this accurate, Friend Stavín?"

Stavín bowed in return and answered calmly, "Yes, Sir, it is, Magistrate Zel'Korval."

The magistrate looked at the leader of his guards and said, "Bring those two in here."

The guard bowed and left through a side door. He returned a moment later leading two pleased-looking traders. Their pleasure seemed to evaporate when they saw Barvil and Stavín.

"Harvar Fel'Loval, Eldan Fel'Dardan," Magistrate Zel'Korval said in a very controlled tone, "you stand accused of insulting and trying to cheat Friend of Evandia Stavín Kel'Aniston. How do you plead?"

Both men had frozen as soon as the magistrate spoke their names. Now they began speaking rapidly, each blaming the other, until the magistrate struck his bell three times, signifying that he'd reached a decision.

"You two came to me claiming that Trader Sahren Kel'Vandar had cheated you by hiring the Kel'Kavin Valley warriors when you were engaged in good-faith negotiations with them. Friend Stavin was not mentioned. Now I hear that it was you who tried to cheat Friend Stavin, and that it was his status that you were after all along. I find Friend Stavin's complaint superior to yours and declare you guilty. For bearing false witness against a Friend of Evandia, I fine you twenty-five silver crowns each, to be paid to Friend Stavin. For wasting my time with your greedy machinations, another twenty-five silver crowns each to be paid to this court. That's five gold crowns each, payable before you leave this chamber."

The two traders looked sick, and Eldan seemed to be on the verge of tears. Harvar stepped forward as if to protest, but instead pulled out his pouch and placed four gold and ten silver crowns on the magistrate's desk. Eldan stepped up and placed three gold and twenty silver crowns next to Harvar's.

"Very well," the magistrate said severely. "I am endlessly comforted by the knowledge that you two scoundrels will soon be gone from my fair city. Rest assured that I will be having words with your Guild Masters about this incident. Now be gone." He tapped his bell once and the two traders fled.

When the door closed behind the traders, the magistrate chuckled. He leaned forward and separated five of the gold coins, then leaned back. "The rest of that is yours, Friend Stavin, along with our apologies."

Stavin stepped forward after Barvil gently elbowed him in the armor and collected the coins. "Thank you, Sir."

"Thank you, Friend Stavin," the magistrate said. "Had you taken this complaint to His Majesty, as is your right, I would be beheading those men this morning. Beheading men is not something that I enjoy doing, though it is part of the

responsibility of this position. Long life to you, Friend Stavin." With that he stood and went through the door behind his chair.

One of the guards cleared his throat to get their attention. "Your pardon, Friend Stavin, but you should go. That caravan didn't stop and you've got quite a way to go by now."

Stavin and Barvil quickly retrieved their horses and headed back to the gate. Stavin was quiet until he heard Barvil chuckling. Then he looked over and asked, "Did you know that was going to happen, Sir?"

Barvil laughed out loud now that he'd been caught. "About the traders' complaint? Yes, of course. Elain warned me about it at breakfast. Sahren knew as well. That's why the early start. As far as the magistrate fining them for making the complaint, no, I was as surprised as you."

Stavin unclenched his fist and looked at the coins. "Where is the pouch, Sir? I'd better put these away."

"You will put those in your own pouch, Stavin. That is not part of the company's wages. Every bit of that is yours."

"Mine?" Stavin asked in a stunned whisper. "It's fifty silver crowns! That's ten times my rightful —"

"It is exactly your rightful share, Stavin," Barvil interrupted. "*That* is something you earned on your own. It's like a bonus from an employer or war-booty. You, and you alone, earned those coins."

"But, Sir, it's —"

"Stavin!" Barvil snapped and Stavin's mouth snapped shut. "This season is just beginning. You may be glad to have that silver and gold long before you get home and give it to your *wife*."

Stavin didn't say anything else. Barvil was, as usual, right. He got out the pouch that held a few of his childhood treasures and carefully poured the coins in it. He paused, then pulled a silver crown back out and held it up. "For Kar."



Barvil laughed and led off again. They reached the Common's gate and kicked their horses into a gallop to catch up with the caravan.

## Chapter 24

Harvar Fel'Loval sat in the bar of the Master's Hall of the Traders Guild and fumed in impotent rage. That slut from Kavadia had cheated him. She'd hired Friend Stavin right out from under him, and with Elain backing her there was nothing he could do about it. Then, to make matters worse, she had sent the boy and his commander back when Magistrate Zel'Korval had fallen for the plan that he and Eldan had come up with. They'd turned it around on them, costing him an additional five gold crowns.

Harvar was an angry drunk when he made his way unsteadily out to the caravansary. He was going to have to hire regular mercenaries to guard his caravan, and they were going to be just as unreasonable about it as that valley bastard had been. "The bastard," he swore softly.

"You weren't to speaking to me, I hope," a man to his left said and Harvar turned to find himself facing four men in the uniform of the Kel'Portan Guards.

"No," Harvar snapped. "Valley bastard cheated me. Kavadian slut cheated me. I wish I could kill them all."

"What would the job pay?" one of the other mercenaries asked.

Harvar was sobering up a little as the adrenaline from his anger rushed through his veins. "I'd pay ten gold for the boy dead — but I'd pay twenty for him alive. As for the Kavadian slut, I'd pay five gold for her head."

"Perhaps we can do business," the leader of the mercenaries said with a grin.

\* \* \*

That night, after they had eaten, Stavin approached Karvik. "Kar, our bet was for a silver crown to the one of us who made his first kill first." He held up his hand and displayed a silver crown. "You won that bet, and I am paying it now, as agreed, with the first silver crown I could get."

Karvik stared at Stavín for a moment, then took the coin. "Where did you get a crown, Stave?"

"From those traders. The magistrate fined them for insulting and trying to cheat me, and then fined them again for wasting his time."

Barvil interrupted before Stavín could tell the whole story. "Guards, begin your rounds. I'll be taking Kahndar's place tonight, and Stavín and I will go last. Stavín, come over here for a moment."

Stavín walked over to Barvil as Davel and Karvik headed out to the edge of the camp. "Stavín," Barvil whispered, "don't tell everybody how much you have in your pouch. Kar and I are honor-bound to keep your secrets and I trust our men, but I don't fully trust all of the traders. If they find out how much is in that pouch, that pouch won't be yours very long."

Stavín remained very still for a moment or two, then nodded. "I hadn't thought of that, Sir."

Barvil patted him on the shoulder. "These are the lowlands, Stavín. The rules are different here. Don't write about it either. Yes, I've seen you writing letters. There is no guarantee of privacy with letters. Go ahead and tell Kar, you will eventually anyway, but tell him what I told you. Now get some sleep. We'll be up well before dawn and I want you alert."

Stavín said, "Yes, Sir," more from reflex than because he was agreeing with Barvil. He walked to his tent in silence and lay down. He was still staring at the fabric above him when Karvik came in from patrol.

"Kar, I have something to tell you, but I want you to keep it secret."

"You know you can trust me, Stave."

"Yes, I know I can trust you." He went on to tell Karvik the whole story and what Barvil had warned him about.

"*Fifty?*" Karvik asked in a stunned whisper.

"Fifty," Stavín agreed. "Two gold and thirty silver crowns. Twenty-nine now."

"Stave, with that you could – you could buy – I don't know, but it'd be big."

Stavin chuckled. "I was thinking of the future. The gold is Shari's, for the house account. That leaves me with twenty-nine silver crowns. I'll have to see what's available, but I don't want anything frivolous. I want to make every spark of it count." He was interrupted by a huge yawn. "Good night, Kar. I'll try not to wake you when your dad comes for me."

"No chance of that, but thanks for the thought."

Stavin's sleep was troubled by dreams of someone trying to rob him, and he woke up with a start when he heard a noise. He strained his ears and heard Ivalin's voice say, "Sir, it's time," and Barvil's grunt of assent. He quickly wriggled out of his bedroll so Ivalin wouldn't wake up Karvik. Ivalin passed by with a nod and went back out to the perimeter.

Stavin had everything but his breast and back plates on when Barvil arrived just moments later. Barvil carried his plate armor as well and waved Stavin over to the fire. "Over here," he whispered. Stavin joined him and dropped his armor to help Barvil buckle in. Then Barvil helped him and they were quickly ready. They used the privy on the way out to the edge of camp and met Cordon and Ivalin as they came around.

"Nothing much to report, Sir. Two riders passed by in the night, but didn't stop," Cordon said as he faced Barvil.

Barvil said, "We relieve you. Get some sleep if you can." He watched as the two young men walked away, then directed Stavin to the left. They made half a circuit of the camp in silence, then Barvil spoke quietly.

"Madam Elain warned me that we're likely to have trouble because of those traders. What happened when we were leaving might have been all of it, but it might not. Stay on your toes and keep your eyes open. If something is going to happen, I'd expect it after the moons set."

Stavin said, "Yes, Sir," and started carefully examining every shadow as they passed.

The night wore on and Stavín began to relax as nothing happened. It was boring to walk around the camp over and over again, and he couldn't help yawning. After his second yawn he looked at Barvil and said, "My apologies, Sir. I—"

Barvil's sword hissed as he drew it and he turned to face an enemy. It was only his years under the Warmaster's tutelage that had Stavín ready for the attack.

Four shadows separated from the darkness beyond the camp and ran toward them in silence. Stavín brought his Dragon's Tongue up across his chest and stepped to the side as three of the attackers headed for him while the fourth moved to keep Barvil busy.

Stavín was ready this time and attacked when his opponents were still several steps away. He moved forward and went low, using his short stature to his advantage, and took the leg off his right-hand opponent as he slid between them, just as he'd slipped between Harner and his friends dozens of times in the past. The man to Stavín's left brought his sword down quickly in a following blow that slid harmlessly off Stavín's back plate while the one-legged man shrieked in agony, shattering the silence that they had so far maintained.

Stavín didn't stop moving and attacked his two able opponents before they could turn to face him. The incredibly sharp point of his Dragon's Tongue swung across the back of the man who'd struck him, severing his spine near the bottom. The third man spun around and brought his sword up, but Stavín attacked once again. His Dragon's Tongue snaked out like its namesake and slid through iron mail into the man's throat, then took his head half off when he spun away from the strike.

Barvil killed his opponent quickly and came to Stavín's side. "Watch for more. Don't let these distract you."

The man with the missing leg finally went silent as blood-loss took his life. The sudden silence was punctuated by the panting of the man with the severed spine.

There was a roar building from within the camp as people responded to the screaming. Men with torches and weapons in their hands came running to see what the trouble was, forming a circle around Barvil and Stavín and their attackers.

Barvil looked down at the paralyzed man and asked, "What were you after?"

The man looked at Stavin and gasped, "Him," through gritted teeth.

Barvil looked at Stavin for a moment, then back at the dying man. "Who sent you?"

"Master Trader Fel'Loyal. He wanted the boy alive if he could have him, dead if he couldn't. Mercy, warrior to warrior. Kill me. Please."

Barvil raised his sword, then stopped and stepped back. "Stavin, you started this; it's your duty to finish it."

Stavin stepped forward and looked down at the man he had crippled. "Mercy is yours," he whispered, then flicked the point of his Dragon's Tongue across the man's throat, beheading him. As the man's blood pumped out of his neck, Stavin's stomach rebelled and he turned away to vomit.

Barvil nodded in satisfaction and looked around at his men. "Dav, Kahn, search the bodies and collect their gear. Cordan, Lavin, they came out of those bushes. Take some torches and look for anything they might have left behind."

## Chapter 25

Trader Sahren walked up and looked at the bodies as the warriors moved to follow Barvil's instructions. "Elain's warnings seem to have been accurate, as always." She put a hand on Stavin's shoulder and turned him to face the interior of the camp. She glanced back at the dead men and then at her people. "Bury those in the privy pits. I want every wagon ready to roll before we eat." She continued on with Stavin under her grip, and Barvil looked at his men.

"Strike the tents and stow our gear." He paused as Davel and Kahndar stood ready. "Stavin got those three. See that their gear is separated for him." He shook his head in amazement. "I've fought him, but I didn't realize how fast he is or how sharp those points are."

Karvik cleared his throat to get his father's attention. "The Warmaster wouldn't start him on sword because of his size. Stave has two more years exclusively with the Dragon's Tongue than the rest of us."

Barvil shook his head and led the way back into the camp while eight of the traders saw to the bodies. He found Stavin sitting next to Sahren, clutching a cup of kava.

"He's all right," Sahren said as they took seats around the fire.

"We're a resilient breed. Eat lightly, Stavin. You'll be feeling the after-effects of that fight for a while. We'll see to your stripes tonight when we stop."

Stavin's head snapped up at the mention of his stripes. "Three to start!" he said with a shaky grin. "How often does that happen?"

"Not often. Hopefully it'll be the last time for a while." Barvil sat and accepted a cup of kava. "Your fortune is growing. You can claim the gear of the three you killed, including whatever Cordon and Lavin come back with. The Council will buy it from you, of course, or you can let the traders deal with it for you."

Trader Sahren patted his knee. "We'll be making several stops where their gear can be sold. Personally, I'll be happier when it's gone."

Breakfast was being served when Cordon and Lavin returned leading five horses. "They really did mean to take you alive, Stave," Lavin said as he accepted a plate.

Cordon continued their report to let Lavin swallow a few bites. "One of the horses only had a saddle. The others had full kits."

"This was in one of the saddle bags, Sir," Lavin said, tossing a pouch to Barvil.

Barvil opened the bag and poured a handful of coins out on the bench next to him. He sorted the coins into gold, silver and copper with one finger, then counted. "Eight gold, twenty-five silver and twenty-seven sparks. Call it one hundred and seven silver crowns, three-quarters to Stavin. That'll be a bit over eighty silver." He counted out seven gold coins, nine silver, and ten copper sparks. "The rest is my share." He pulled a bag from around his neck and put the coins in it, leaving Stavin's coins on the bench. He then put Stavin's coins back in the original bag and tossed it to him. "We'll divide up the rest when we sell their horses and gear. Now let's get in the saddle. We'll do a quick sweep of the area and join the traders on the road."

All of the warriors moved to obey Barvil, but he held his hand out to Cordon and Lavin. "Finish eating, then take positions by the first and last wagons. We'll spread out once the rest of us rejoin the caravan." He walked away as the two young men sat down to continue their meal.

Barvil joined the rest of his men and mounted his horse. "I want a skirmish line, no more than a horse-length between you. Watch the ground closely on both sides of your horses. We're looking for anything that is out of the ordinary. Any sign that those four were not alone."

He led his men back toward Twin Bridges on the west side of the road until they reached a stream, then they crossed the road and came back up the east side until they caught up with the caravan. They found nothing but trash.

\* \* \*



The caravan had stopped for the night and the evening meal had already been served when Barvil stood and smiled at his men. "Stand up, Stavin," he commanded, and Stavin scrambled to his feet.

"Stavin Kel'Aniston, on this, your first expedition to the lowlands, you have made your first three kills. You killed your first man by cutting off his leg with your Dragon's Tongue and leaving him to bleed to death. You killed your second man by driving the point of your Dragon's Tongue into his neck and nearly beheading him when he turned away. You killed your third man by administering a mercy stroke after you severed his lower spine with your Dragon's Tongue. According to the customs handed down from our ancestors, you may now paint three white chevrons on the left shoulder of your armor." Barvil paused to smile. "I think Kar has the paint ready for you."

Karvik came forward. "Stand still, Stave. This'll only take a moment." He pulled out a small pot of white paint and a narrow brush and quickly painted the first chevron on Stavin's shoulder. Before he could paint the second chevron, the paint from the first ran down and dripped to the ground.

"What is going on?" Barvil asked, angry that Karvik might be pulling a prank at a time like this. "Did you mix it right?"

"Yes, Sir," Karvik answered, looking at the paint. "I made it the same as I made mine in Twin Bridges. Look," he said, offering the pot to his father.

Barvil took the paint and stirred it, but it appeared to be the correct consistency. "Dav, come over here," he commanded, and Davel quickly went to his side. "Stand still. You're looking a little chipped and faded." Barvil renewed Davel's five stripes and the paint held exactly as it should.

"Stavin, let me try this," Barvil commanded, giving Karvik a stern glare. Barvil painted one stripe and waited. In just a few breaths the paint beaded up and ran off the golden armor, leaving Stavin's shoulder bare. "Gods Below, I should have guessed. It's the dragon scales. The paint won't stick to them."

"There's got to be a way, Sir," Kahndar said, stepping up and looking Stavin over carefully. "What about a piece of the armor from those men? I think – yes, that'll do. Dav, come with me." Kahndar led Davel off to Trader Sahren's wagon and returned in just a few moments.

Kahndar held a brightly shining piece of armor in his hand and he and Davel were both grinning. "This is about the right size to fit his biceps, Sir. It's an armguard. One of them was apparently an archer. Hold still, Stave," he commanded and Stavin let him wrap the long silver band around his upper arm.

"Move your arm, Stavin," Barvil commanded and Stavin ran through a series of exercises. The armguard stayed in place. "Very well. Kar, do the honors, please."

Karvik quickly painted Stavin's three stripes on the silver surface of the armguard and then stepped back. "Three stripes, Stave. I've got some catching up to do."

## Chapter 26

The caravan traveled for three more days before they reached the first toll bridge over the Zel'Horgan River. Barvil rode back to Stavin's side as soon as the bridge came into view.

"Join up with the first wagon and have your writ ready when we reach the bridge. Trader Sahren will tell you what to do."

"Yes, Sir," Stavin said with a deep bow and rode ahead to the side of Sahren's wagon. She waved him close and leaned toward him.

"Stavin, when we are about two dragon-lengths from the bridge I want you to ride ahead. Introduce yourself to the bridge guardians as Friend Stavin. Since you aren't well known yet, they should ask for your writ as proof of your status. Tell them anything they want to know about the caravan as far as the number of wagons, people, horses, and guards, but plead ignorance of our wares. That should be true enough. They'll tell you what our toll would have been, so pay attention. Half of it will go to your people."

Stavin nodded and said, "Yes, ma'am," then faced forward again. At the proper distance he rode forward and pulled up in front of the little house next to the bridge.

A wizened old man came out and stared up at him. "Well, aren't you a pretty sight?" he said in an age-roughened voice.

"I am Friend of Evandia Stavin Kel'Aniston," he said, pulling his writ from his pouch.

"Are you indeed? May I examine that document, young Friend Stavin?" Stavin handed over the writ and the old man quickly examined it, then returned it. "How many wagons do you have, Friend Stavin?" he asked.

"Twelve wagons," Stavin answered.

"And how many horsemen?" the man asked as he wrote in a large ledger.

"Eleven."

"Very well, Friend Stavín, your toll would have been seven silver crowns and one spark. I'll need your mark here for the record." He turned the ledger toward Stavín and looked surprised when Stavín wrote his name in Imperial Glyphs and added 'Friend of Evandia' in common script.

"Will there be anything else, Sir?" Stavín asked politely.

The old man shook his head. "No, Friend Stavín. Everything is in order. Good journey to you." With a wave of farewell he turned away and took his book while Stavín rode the short distance back to the approaching caravan. He rode close to Sahren's wagon and matched her pace.

Sahren smiled as he joined her. "Was there any problem, Friend Stavín?"

"No, ma'am," Stavín answered. "The toll would have been seven silver crowns and one copper spark," he added and she noted it down on a book that was lying open beside her on the bench.

"That's standard. Five sparks per wagon and one per rider. The led horses would have counted as well if we hadn't removed their saddles."

Stavín was silent as they crossed the bridge. Once everyone was across he rode back to Barvil. "Seven silver and one spark for the toll, Sir."

Barvil smiled as he nodded. "Good. That's an extra three silver and five sparks for our pay. Sahren said we are stopping to trade at Parvin's Hold. We should arrive before nightfall." He paused for a moment, then continued softly, "Stavín, remember not to let it be known how much coin you are carrying. Towns are much more dangerous than the road."

Stavín said, "Yes, Sir," and Barvil nodded once sharply before riding back up to the front of the caravan.

\* \* \*

The town of Parvin's Hold was small by lowland standards, but was still over three times the size of Kavinston. The caravan arrived just at sundown and Trader

Sahren had the wagons form a long arc instead of a closed protective circle as they had on other nights.

Stavin looked at the driver of the number two wagon, which changed daily, and asked, "Why aren't you circling the wagons as usual?"

The driver, a man named Kethlan, laughed and answered, "We're here to trade. This puts all of the wagons in a row so we can see and be seen. The sides open up and become our booths. Our mules and your horses will be tied in the back to keep them away from the townsfolk."

Stavin joined Karvik and began their daily chore of fetching water and seeing to the horses. Water came from a well in the middle of the field this time, and they took turns at the crank to pull the bucket up. By the time all the horses and men were seen to, the traders had their camp set and the evening meal was being served.

Barvil called his men together as soon as they had their food. "Most of you already know this, but it bears repeating, and this is the first time Stavin and Kar have been near a town with a caravan. We'll be pulling double guard duty while we're here. We're much more likely to have people sneaking around the wagons, and we don't want to kill anyone, even if we're provoked. We can't fight a whole town." He paused to look each man in the eye, especially his son and Stavin.

"Carry your weapons, but do your best not to use them. Let your hands and feet take care of any intruders unless they pull a weapon. Even then I'd prefer that you didn't kill if you have the option. Cordan, take Stavin. Lavin, Karvik. Horvan, you get Barin. That leaves Chandar and Ivalin. Davel, Kahndar and I will be guarding during the day. After we eat, I want Horvan and Chandar walking the line. Spread out but keep in sight of one another. Switch at mid night. All of you be careful. You men not on rounds get to sleep as soon as you can. These are going to be some long nights for you."

Stavin went to bed as soon as he finished eating and Karvik was right behind him. He lay down, but sleep refused to take him. He stared at the roof of their tent as his mind raced. He had real money in his pouch, and the prospect of going to town and

visiting the shops to spend some of it was exciting. He didn't realize that he'd fallen asleep until Karvik shook his shoulder.

"Come on, Stave. That's the second time Chandar has called us. Get moving!"

Karvik was already out of his bedroll and holding Stavin's armor for him.

"What?" Stavin asked groggily. "Oh, Gods Below, I slept through a call?"

"Two calls. Get up and out. Cordon and Lavin will be here soon."

Cordon and Lavin arrived just as Karvik was checking the last straps on Stavin's armor. Lavin slapped Karvik on the shoulder and asked, "Ready?"

"Ready," Karvik and Stavin both answered.

"Good," Cordon said softly. "Stave and I will cross over between six and seven. I'll turn left and leave Stave in place. Once I reach the end, he'll follow."

"Right," Lavin agreed. "We'll do the same on this side. That will space the four of us evenly around the caravan."

"Remember to try and keep one of us in sight at all times. If you lose sight of the man ahead at the turn, make sure you see the man behind you before you continue. And if you see something, for the love of the Gods Above, don't try to face it alone."

Stavin and Karvik nodded their understanding, and they split into two teams. Cordon led Stavin across the line of wagons and left him in place with Karvik opposite him. Once the two senior warriors began to turn around the end of the wagons, Stavin raised a hand to Karvik and they both started walking.

The night was quiet until the sky began to brighten. Birds of all kinds announced the dawn and noises started coming from the wagons. Lavin whistled at Stavin to get his attention, and when Stavin turned to face him, he held his hand out to keep him where he was. Cordon and Karvik were repeating the scene on the other side of the caravan.

The four young men stayed where they were as the caravan awoke to the new day. Barvil's horn called them back to their tents as the sun broke over the horizon.

Lavin and Cordon came to attention as they reported to Barvil, and Stavin and Karvik were at attention right behind them. "Nothing suspicious to report, Sir. It was a quiet night," Lavin said, and Cordon nodded his agreement.

"Very well. Eat, and then sleep if you can. It's going to be noisy today." Barvil clapped Cordon on the shoulder and walked away.

Stavin shook his head, then yawned. "I'm too tired to eat. I'm going straight to bed."

"First night is always the hardest," Lavin agreed. "I'm doing the same."

## Chapter 27

Stavin woke up when a shaft of bright light stabbed into his eyelid. He moved and the light left him alone, but it hit his eye once more as soon as he got comfortable again. Anger at being awakened sent a surge of adrenaline into his bloodstream, and he rolled up and onto his elbows to find the source of the irritating light. He was surprised to see a hole in the cloth that made up the door of the tent. It was small, no bigger than a dried pea, but it was letting in the light. Grumbling, he started to lie down again and looked over at Karvik. He was gone.

Stavin was confused, but not concerned. Nothing could have happen to Karvik that wouldn't have awakened him. He wanted to lie back down, but now nature was nagging his bladder and he decided to get up.

The sun was bright and well beyond the middle of the sky when his eyes finally adjusted enough to let him see. He found the privy, then the cook's fire. There was bread and over-strength kava available, and he had both in quantity before he walked to the wagons.

A sound that he had been hearing but hadn't identified resolved into the babble of hundreds of voices. The people of the town had turned the area in front of the wagons into an outdoor market, and a carnival atmosphere had everyone smiling. People milled about in the area in front of the wagons, talking, shouting, and comparing the goods they had purchased from the traders. Some noticed Stavin's golden mail and under-padding and grew silent in wonder, which drew the attention of others to him. The sound faded as people all around him turned to see what was coming and went silent in turn. Suddenly the sound redoubled as the best story of the day was made flesh.



Kahndar came over to Stavin with a big smile in his face. "One of the traders is an amateur bard and has been telling your story all day." He laughed as Stavin blushed. "The story gets better every time he tells it."

Stavin ducked his head in embarrassment. "Gods Below, could this get any worse?"

Kahndar laughed again. "At least he's just telling the story and not singing."

Stavin winced at that thought, then he smelled something heavenly. "What *is* that?" he asked as his nose turned into the breeze.

Kahndar sniffed and grinned. "It's some kind of local sausage with onions and green peppers. They serve it on a long loaf cut lengthwise."

Stavin's stomach growled and he took a step toward the smell. Kahndar joined him and they reach the food quickly. Stavin was confused because he didn't recognize the woman at the grill while it was obvious that she recognized Kahndar.

"Back for another, warrior?" she asked with a toothy grin.

"No," Kahndar said with a laugh. "My brother-in-law's nose led us here."

The woman smiled broadly at Stavin. "So you're the dragon warrior, are you? That storyteller has spun a good yarn about you. Even so, I've my own living to make. A pair of sparks will get you sausage and bread, same as your tall relation there."

Stavin looked up at Kahndar and grinned. "I'll stand you another if you want it."

Kahndar laughed and patted the plate armor over his stomach. "No, but thank you for the offer. Two was more than enough."

Stavin laughed and pulled two sparks out of this pouch. "One then, good madam," he said and handed over the coins.

The woman handed back a roll that was the size and shape of his forearm, with a thumb-thick sausage peeking out of both ends. Green peppers and onions that had been cooked until they were clear topped it, and Stavin immediately took a large bite. His eyes closed in ecstasy for a moment, then opened as the sausage bit back.

Kahndar laughed and put a hand on Stavin's shoulder to guide him to the next booth, which was serving beer. "Barman, a tall beer for my short friend. He's discovered the secret of your wife's sausages."

"Two sparks, warrior," the man said with a grin. He put a beer mug on the table, but didn't let go of it.

Stavin was struggling, trying to balance his pouch and his sausage, so Kahndar lent a hand. "Here, Stave, give me your pouch." Stavin handed the pouch over and Kahndar opened it. He froze when he looked inside, looked at Stavin, then back in the pouch.

"Use a silver," Stavin gasped.

Kahndar carefully pulled a silver crown from the bag and handed it over to the barman. He let go of the beer to take the coin and Stavin grabbed the mug.

After a long drink, Stavin glared at his brother-in-law. "You are an evil person, Kahndar Kel'Horval."

Kahndar laughed as he accepted the change and put it in Stavin's pouch. "And you have been keeping secrets. Besides, if you think I'm bad, wait until you spend the winter with Shari." He hung the pouch around Stavin's neck and tucked it inside his mail.

Stavin looked at the woman with the sausages and asked, "What is in here that's so hot?"

"It's a local spice," she laughed. "In the old tongue it's called Sah Da Ho'ha. That means —"

"— Damn, that's hot," Stavin finished for her. He took a more judicious bite and nodded. "It's good, though."

The woman and her husband were looking at Stavin strangely. "Do you know the Old Tongue, young warrior?" the man asked and Stavin shrugged.

"Of course," he replied, as if he was agreeing that the sky was blue. "The old tongue is the basis for all of the new languages. If you want to read the really old imperial manuscripts you have to be able to read the glyphs as well as speak the

language, because some of the words change meaning depending upon how they're used. For example, 'Ho'ha' can mean hot, fire, sun, or molten, depending on what is before and after it."

"Stavin," Kahndar interrupted, "sometimes you sound so much like Shari you scare me."

Stavin looked at Kahndar, then at the man and woman. They were all wearing the expression that Stavin had come to know all too well. It was the surprised look that he had privately dubbed, 'skunk in the pantry.' He grinned at Kahndar and said, "Now you know why I married her. We're the only people who think we're normal. Except Master Kel'Zorgan, of course."

"Of course," Kahndar agreed. "Finish up, then we'll walk around a bit. We're supposed to watch for trouble and stop it before it starts."

Stavin nodded and applied himself to his sausage and beer. Soon, all that was left was a warm lump in his belly and a pleasantly hot sensation in his mouth.

Kahndar led him back to their tents to get the rest of his armor. As he was fastening Stavin's straps he stepped back to look Stavin in the eye. "That pouch has more in it than those mercenaries were carrying."

Stavin nodded. "I said the magistrate fined those merchants for trying to cheat me. I just didn't say it was fifty silver crowns." He paused as Kahndar took a step backwards. "The gold is all going back to Shari, and probably most of the silver as well."

"And there's still all that armor and the horses to be sold," Kahndar said softly.

Stavin sighed. "Barvil asked Trader Sahren to see what she can do about it. She'll get a percentage, but each of those horses is worth about seventy-five silvers. And the armor is worth about a hundred altogether."

Kahndar was shaking his head slowly. "In five seasons I've only collected about fifty silver crowns. You've already collected twice that and more is on the way. Shari did far better than even Mother ever dreamed."

Stavin ducked his head in embarrassment, but had to grin. "Wait till Dorvi finds out. Shari is going to have her biting the walls."

Kahndar shook his head and slapped Stavin's armored shoulder. "She probably already does. Let's get back out there."

Stavin and Kahndar walked around the perimeter of the crowd, watching and listening to the people of Parvin's Hold as they turned the trader's presence into an excuse for a festival. At one point they saw Barvil watching them, but he just smiled and waved them on their way.

## Chapter 28

As the day wore on toward evening, the crowd became thicker and more boisterous, and all of the warriors were signaled to stay by the wagons. At Barvil's order they took up sentry positions in front of and behind the wagons. Trader Sahren specifically asked for Stavin to be posted in front of her wagon.

The sun had set and gaily colored lanterns had been lit to illuminate the area when four men came to Sahren's wagon. "Are you Sahren Kel'Vandar, of the Kavadian House of Zel'Vandar?" the apparent leader asked.

"I am," Sahren answered, looking the man in the eye as she spoke.

"I am Ardath Fel'Ganin. Were you given a consignment for me?"

"I was. I must ask for proof of your identity, Sir. This consignment is quite valuable."

The man scowled at her. "You don't want to cross me, woman."

Now it was Sahren's turn to scowl. "You don't want to cross Elain," she said in a near whisper. "The tattoo."

The man had taken an involuntary step back at the mention of Elain, but now he stepped forward and pulled his jerkin open at the neck. "Satisfied?" he asked, and Sahren nodded.

Sahren turned and motioned for them to accompany her. She caught Stavin's eye and nodded for him to accompany them as well, and he fell into step behind the last man. The man kept looking back, but the only thing he could see was the reflection of the lanterns glittering on Stavin's armor.

Sahren stopped at the corner of her wagon and opened the back. "This is your consignment. Let me count your payment first."

The leader pulled a large bag from his jerkin and handed it to Sahren. "It's all there."

"Since Elain will take it from my purse if it isn't, we'll count it together. That, or you can go your way empty-handed."

The man finally agreed and they began counting. Stavín was watching the other men because something didn't feel right about what he was seeing. There was something wrong in the men's posture. All of them were very tense and one of them kept rubbing his arm.

One of the other men struck while Stavín was concentrating on the man who was rubbing his arm, stabbing backward with a large knife at a level that would have caught an average-sized man in the crotch, a notoriously weak place in most men's armor. On Stavín, however, the knife hit the bottom of his breastplate.

Stavín jumped back in alarm anyway and struck out with his Dragon's Tongue, knocking the knife out of the man's hand with the flat of one point. The man continued to turn towards Stavín with a knife in his other hand, and Stavín reacted to the dishonorable attack as he had been trained. The point of his Dragon's Tongue sliced up, opening the man's gut, then across to open his throat.

The other three had gone for Sahren, assuming that Stavín was taken care of, and it immediately cost two of them their lives. Stavín took one swipe at the back of their necks, and they fell like puppets with cut strings. That left the leader, but Sahren had him.

"You think to steal from me?" she snarled. "You think to steal from Elain? You don't think enough." Sahren's hand was a blur as she struck the man's throat, and he fell at her feet, choking on his crushed windpipe.

Stavín turned toward a sound behind him, but it was just one of the traders with another man. "What happened?" the man asked.

"These men thought to steal a valuable consignment from me. That one was named Ardath Fel'Ganin, or so he claimed to be."

"His name was Orval Del'Flour. He was one of my lieutenants. I am Ardath," the man said. "How did he convince you that he was me?"

Sahren looked at him through narrowed eyelids. "A tattoo."

"Like this?" the man asked, pulling aside his shirt to show the tattoo: A red rose with the name Elain under it.

Stavin was tired of being ignored and used his Dragon's Tongue to slit the dead man's jerkin and push the cloth aside. The tattoo was the same, and in the same place.

The man claiming to be the real Ardath knelt and rubbed at the dead man's tattoo. His fingers came away red and green, leaving the tattoo smudged. "Players paint! That miserable cheat." He stood and looked at Sahren. "Did he have a payment?"

Sahren looked at the top of the box where five stacks of ten gold crowns each sat next to a small pile of loose coins. "They attacked when it became obvious that it was short."

Ardath walked over and finished counting the coins while Sahren watched, then pulled out a purse and added to the pile when it came out thirty gold crowns short. "Payment in full, as specified in Elain's letter."

"And them?" Sahren asked.

Ardath looked down and spat. "I'll deal with them. A moment, if you will?" At Sahren's nod, he walked to the front of the wagons and made a gesture. He came back and nodded to Sahren. "My wagon is coming around to get the cargo. We'll take this offal along with us."

He finally turned to Stavin and looked him up and down. "You're the one in the story. Keep your mouth shut about this if you know what's good for you." He looked at Stavin's shoulder and snorted. "Only three? Well, now you have three more. No loot, though. Too bad for you."

Stavin didn't say anything. He was afraid his voice would quaver and betray how shocked he was. He just stared at Ardath, then watched as the box and bodies were loaded into a wagon and spirited away into the darkness.

"Stavin, are you all right?" Sahren finally asked.

Stavin let loose a long, shuddering breath and sagged a little. "Three more kills. Three more men dead by my hand." He took a step back, and bent down to pick up the

knife that might have ended his life. It was a long, thick dagger with a silver ball on the pommel. "Thank the Gods Above I'm short. He almost got me."

His hand began to shake and he dropped the knife as he staggered back to lean against the wagon. "So close. That's the fourth time I've had to fight for my life. It was so sudden. I had no warning. If he had struck for my eyes, I'd be dead."

One of Sahren's people had gone for Barvil and they arrived while Stavín was speaking. "Are you all right, Stavín?" he asked, examining Stavín carefully. "What happened?"

Sahren spoke first. "He saved my life. I'll admit now that I wanted the drawing power of that golden armor to lure the curious to my wares, but his good sense proved to be more valuable. He stayed behind my visitors and took three of four when they tried to steal Elain's consignment from me." She bent and picked up the dagger. "This almost took off his manhood."

"It was the most *foul* attack I've ever heard of, Sir!" Stavín finally said in a voice hot with indignation. "He tried to stab me in the crotch!"

Barvil laughed. He tried not to, but the laughter wouldn't be contained. "Stavín, honor is rare among thieves. Let me guess: he stabbed backwards to cripple you and had another knife for the kill." He paused as Stavín nodded. "Stavín, there is a reason such things are commonly called 'a dirty, underhanded trick.' Where did he actually hit you?"

Stavín touched the bottom of this breastplate. "Somewhere in here."

Barvil grinned. "Not a scratch, not that I expected one. He probably wouldn't have had much luck if he'd been lower, though. That knife wouldn't damage your mail any more than it damaged your plate. You'd be sore, but you wouldn't have been disabled. He, on the other hand, would still be dead."

Now it was Stavín's turn to grunt in agreement. "I hadn't really thought of that, Sir, but you're right."

"Bitter experience is a harsh teacher. I know that trick from my fourth expedition. My partner died to teach it to me. I got his killer, but I still had to tell his family what



happened." Barvil examined the knife. "Water-steel, and I'd guess real silver in the hilt. If you don't want to keep it, Sahren can probably get you two or three gold crowns for it. Where's the second knife?"

"I saw the second knife, but it's gone. They must have taken it with the bodies," Stavín said softly as he scuffed the ground with his toe. "As for this one," Stavín said in a stronger voice as he held up the big knife, "I'll keep it for a while, Sir, as reminder of how close death can be."

Barvil smiled and patted his shoulder. "Good man. Now shake it off and get back on guard. The crowd is thinning, but there are still a lot of people out there. I'll award your stripes in the morning, Sergeant Kel'Aniston." He grinned and gave Stavín a shove toward the front of the wagons.

## Chapter 29

"Goodman Barvil," Sahren said as Stavín rounded the wagon and disappeared, "I had thought that young Stavín had been blessed by that dragon, but I think I may have been mistaken. He said that's the fourth time someone has tried to kill him, and he's not even halfway through his first season."

"*Nothing comes without a price,*" Barvil quoted. "Dandarshandrake taught the Chosen of Luxand that lesson centuries ago. That dragon saw something in Stavín that none of us dreamed existed. Well, his parents believed in him, but most of the town discounted him because of his size. He has a long way to go, but I wouldn't be surprised if he earns his two stars and joins the Elders Council." Sahren looked at Barvil's shoulder and raised a curious eyebrow. "Oh, that's not a happy story, Trader Sahren. It's full of bull-headed pride, youthful lust, and an Elder's refusal to admit that he could be wrong. He is learning, though, and expects a full recovery in a few years."

Sahren bowed slightly. "I won't press the issue, then. I will ask that you say nothing about Elain's shipment. Her business is her own affair, and I am simply her cargo carrier. I neither know nor wish to know what that cargo is."

Barvil simply nodded and walked away. He had his own suspicions about Elain, and was certain he didn't want them confirmed.

He walked among the people of Parvin's Hold and watched his men. He wasn't surprised to see Stavín hovering in Kahndar's shadow, and was glad he'd been able to get the older man in his group. Kahndar's conspicuous championing of Stavín kept the other youths from saying anything cruel, as many of them had in previous years. The fact that Stavín was proving himself to be far more dangerous than anyone would have believed was troubling, though.

There was something that he had deliberately not told Stavín or Sahren. The four men who had attacked them on the road weren't ordinary mercenaries: They were

Kel'Portan Guards, one of the most respected and feared mercenary companies in the lower kingdoms. They commanded even higher prices than the warriors of Kel'Kavin—and Stavín had defeated three of them. He shook his head as he considered the implications of that. Now Stavín had killed three men who were probably underworld enforcers as well.

The crowd finally dispersed as the night got late and Barvil gave his final instructions to Stavín and the other night guards. "If there's going to be trouble, I would expect it tonight." He looked Stavín in the eye. "There has already been one incident." He looked at the others and let a sardonic smile twist his lips. "Stavín just earned his first red stripe. Remember that you are only responsible for the traders and their wagons. What goes on out there," he waved his hand to where many of the town's merchants had left booths set up, "is none of our concern."

"Yes, Sir," four voices snapped and Barvil waved them on their way while he headed for his tent.

Karvik turned to Stavín as his father walked away. "What in the name of all the Gods is going on? More kills? It's only been four days since the *first* one!"

Stavín looked at the ground and kicked at the dirt before looking up into Karvik's eyes. "Four men tried to rob Trader Sahren. One tried to stab me in the crotch with this," he pulled the big knife from behind his back, "but just got my breastplate instead. I gutted him and slashed his throat. I sliced the spines of the other two from behind. Trader Sahren killed the last one."

Cordon and Lavin looked at one another, then at Stavín. "Stave," Cordon began, "you've earned your red stripe and sergeant's rank in what has to be record time."

Lavin picked up on that theme. "Even the Warmaster started slower than that. My dad was his year-mate third time out, when he earned his. What are you trying to do?"

Stavín shook his head, then tried to shrug. "I'm not *trying* to do anything except go home with my hide and honor intact. Those men tonight were honorless slugs who

tried to rob and kill our employer. All I did was what honor demanded. I couldn't have done anything else."

"No, you couldn't have," Karvik agreed. "Not honorably."

Cordon slapped Karvik's shoulder. "Right you are. Now we've got rounds to walk. Same as last night, but we'll vary things a bit. Once in awhile Lavin or I will whistle. When we do, cross over and keep going the same direction. That will reverse our rotation and vary our timing."

Cordon took Stavín behind the wagons and had him lead off. "Slow walk. Keep your eyes moving and your head up."

Stavín said, "Yes, Sir," and began walking, watching the darkness beyond the wagons. He reached the end and circled around, spotting Lavin's broad back halfway down the line.

The night remained quiet until dawn awakened the birds. That awakened the caravan, and Barvil signaled the guards to come in. Once everyone was gathered around the fire with their breakfasts, he stood in front of them.

"Stavín Kel'Aniston, on this, your first expedition to lowlands, you have made your sixth kill. You killed one man by gutting him, then cutting his throat with your Dragon's Tongue. The other two died when you cut their spines. You may add two more white chevrons to your armor and paint your top chevron red. You may also claim the title of sergeant, though you may not exercise the authority of that title until your fourth expedition." He paused and made sure Stavín was focusing on him before he continued. "It's unusual for a man to be put in this position, but you don't have the experience to take your place as a leader. You do understand that, don't you?"

Stavín stood and came to attention before he answered. "Yes, Sir, I do."

"Good. Experience is far more important than stripes in determining a leader. It's just so unusual for a man to be put in this position that we seldom have a reason to not acknowledge his rank. Now get to bed before you nod off and get egg on your nose."

\* \* \*

Stavin awoke before Karvik this time and squirmed quietly out of the tent. It was earlier than he had expected, barely mid day, and he put on his armor as well as he could by himself, then picked up the armband that held his stripes. Someone had already painted his new honors on it, and he carried it toward the front of the wagons.

Ivalin stepped out from behind a wagon and confronted him. "You won't get away with this, Runt. I don't know how you got Elder Kel'Carin to award you those stripes, but none of us believe you earned them."

"I did earn them, Ivalin. I earned them the same way you earned yours."

"Liar," Ivalin snarled, and spit at Stavin's feet. "How come none of us saw the bodies? How come none of us heard any commotion? You can't kill three men and not have anyone notice it."

"We were behind Trader Sahren's wagon. The crowd hid the noise. Their friends took the bodies because they didn't want the authorities to know about it. Ask Trader Sahren if you don't believe me." Stavin glowered at Ivalin. "And if you ever call me a liar again I'll have you in the circle, with Dragon Tongues."

Davel walked up and stopped Ivalin's reply. "Stave, you're up early. Kahndar and I took care of your stripes. Let's get you buckled up." He stepped forward and started tightening Stavin's armor while Ivalin stomped off. "Watch him, Stave. He's a year older –"

"– He's half a year younger," Stavin said, interrupting Davel. "The Warmaster held me back last year. Ivalin and I were in classes together for ten years."

"Maybe I should say he's more experienced. He's also jealous of anyone who earns more honors than he does."

Stavin nodded his agreement as Davel strapped on his armband. "He's just going to have to choke it down then. If he impugns my honor again, he'll face me, and I've always been able to take him one-on-one."

Davel raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything else. There was really nothing he could say. They walked together out into the crowd, then went their separate ways.

Stavin began to notice something odd as he walked. A group of children was following him, staying about a horse-length behind him. It wasn't long before older children, mostly teenage girls, began to trail him as well. After a while, he turned suddenly and asked, "What do you want?"

One buxom lass of about sixteen winked and said, "Your baby."

Stavin was glad he was wearing his helmet so she couldn't see him blush. "I-I'm married, young miss."

The older girls all giggled, and then the same girl spoke again. "What she doesn't know won't hurt her."

Stavin shook his head. "I still couldn't, not and retain my honor."

The girl shared a smile with her friends, then said, "Your loss, golden warrior," and walked away with her friends in tow. The little children remained and Stavin did his best to ignore them.

## Chapter 30

The crowd was thicker on the second night and Stavín was relieved to be placed behind the wagons, away from the curious stares of the children and more than a few rude adults. He kept his mind alert by thinking of what Shari would say when he presented her with ten gold crowns.

A shout and several moving shadows drew his attention down the line to where another of the young warriors was posted. Something was happening and he desperately wanted to run down there to see what it was, but he couldn't desert his post. Not without orders. He couldn't see more than shadows until two figures stumbled into view. One had a sword and the other had a Dragon's Tongue.

Stavín's fingers went to his mouth and he whistled as loudly as he could, trying to summon aid.

Six more figures burst out from between the wagons and looked around. The fighting figures were in the open now, and Stavín recognized Barin's stocky form. All six of the others descended on the fight and ended it immediately. All of the people came together and then went between the wagons.

Stavín looked around and found Ivalín staring at him from three wagons away. He raised his hand, but Ivalín just turned away. The night wore on, and finally Cordon came for him.

"What was that fight earlier?" Stavín immediately asked.

"Barin caught a man under one of the wagons. When he confronted him, the intruder drew a sword and attacked. Barin said he wasn't very good. He claims that he wasn't doing anything, but the villagers know him as a petty thief and don't believe him."

"Is Barin all right? I signaled as soon as I saw the weapons."

Cordon laughed. "There isn't so much as a scratch on his armor. That fool of a thief couldn't use a sword. Barin was just playing with him."

Stavin laughed and began walking his round. The night passed quickly, but it was still a long time before dawn when Davel and Kahndar came to meet them.

"We're pulling out in the morning. Get some sleep and be ready to break camp at dawn," Davel said, pointing back towards their tents.

Sunrise had everyone moving and Stavin was relieved to be traveling again. He'd had a vivid dream where Shari and the buxom girl had changed places, and he felt guilty for having betrayed his wife, even if only in a dream.

\* \* \*

The caravan rolled on, and Stavin's status saved the traders tolls at two more bridges before they stopped again, this time in a city called Barrens Bridge. This was a large city that over fifty thousand souls called home. It was located on the banks of the Zel'Kaman River, and was the major inland shipping port for this portion of Evandia. Where the mighty Zel'Horgan was a fast, wild river in a deep gorge, the Zel'Kaman was wide and placid, providing a barge route deep into the continent.

At the bridge over the Zel'Kaman, Stavin saved both tax and toll for the traders totaling twelve silver crowns. What he didn't find out until much later was that he also saved them from having their wagons searched and inventoried to determine the tax. He agreed with what Trader Sahren said they were carrying, and none of the officials at the bridge dared question his honesty.

Near the bridge was an area outside of the town proper that served as the caravansary and livestock market, and Trader Sahren had her wagons form a circle this time. They parked and unhitched their mules, then all of the animals, including the warriors' horses, were put in a fenced enclosure.

Trader Sahren came over to the area where the warriors were setting up their tents and indicated that she wanted to talk to both Barvil and Stavin. "When I was renting the paddock for our animals, I mentioned the extra horses to the manager. He's passing the word around among the livestock traders, and I'd expect to have a buyer or



two stop by soon. You may, if you wish, deal with them yourselves, or you can let me handle it. I'll charge you five percent, but I think I can get a better deal for you."

Stavin looked at Barvil, then took half a step back, leaving the decision in Barvil's more experienced hands. "We thank you, Sahren," Barvil replied with a bow, "and accept your offer. I don't think I can talk fast enough to keep up with these lowland merchants."

Trader Sahren smiled. "I thought you would." She glanced at the tents and nodded. "It's best to stay out here. If you take your men into town, be careful. You're likely to run into the same sort of trouble here as in Twin Bridges as far as Stavin's armor is concerned."

Barvil looked at Stavin, and Stavin's mood turned sour. "I understand, Sir," he mumbled.

"Everything comes at a price, Stavin, even a dragon's gift. I'll see to it that you don't miss out completely." Barvil smiled at the sudden gleam in Stavin's eyes. "I'm sure there will be an opportunity for you to go into town for a least a little while."

Stavin nodded and smiled as he said, "Thank you, Sir."

Barvil split his men into hands and posted five at a time in a walking circle around the caravan, and divided the day into four watches. The hands alternated so they didn't get worn out.

Stavin was in Kahndar's hand with Lavin, Horvan, and Barin. That suited him just fine. Ivalin hadn't said a single friendly word to him since the incident during their first night on the road. Karvik said it was because 'Stavin the Runt,' as Ivalin usually called him, had surpassed him and he was jealous. Stavin was secretly pleased by that idea. He and Ivalin had been friends until Stavin had stopped growing. Then, as the other boys had grown taller, Ivalin had turned against him and started taunting him with the others.

Kahndar led and the others filed behind him in order of experience. That was per the proper etiquette of their people, but it also put Kahndar in a position to watch Stavin's back.

Before the warriors had made two full circles, the center of the caravan was filled with people. Most of them were local merchants come to see what wares, and possible competition, the traders had brought. Trader Sahren had positioned the wagons with a large gap between her wagon and the last wagon, and it was to that gap that most of the people made their way.

Stavin walked at the measured pace that every warrior was taught, and, as always, observed every person he saw, and everyone who saw him paused to look at his golden armor. It was an uncomfortable situation, because such stares had always meant trouble for him in the past.

The watch had changed hands and Stavin was keeping an eye on the crowd as he ate, when Trader Sahren brought an elegantly dressed man to see him. "Friend Stavin," Sahren began, warning Stavin and the others that something unusual was happening, "this is Lord Jallin Zel'Elindar. He is Lord Mayor of Barrens Bridge."

The lord looked Stavin up and down curiously. "So you're the one that all the fuss is about. I would like to see your writ. There has been no formal proclamation from the king concerning you."

Stavin had stood as soon as Sahren introduced the lord, and now handed over his writ with a deep bow, and the lord examined it closely. "It seems to be genuine. All of the seals and signatures are in the right places. Trader Sahren claims that your armor is made of dragon scales. How did you convince his majesty that this was true?"

Barvil had come to Stavin's side and answered first. "King Kalin had a Truth Seer present when Friend Stavin told of his encounter with the dragon, Lord Zel'Elindar. Princess Marina also used a piece of dragon-spelled ruby to verify that Friend Stavin's armor had been made by a dragon."

Lord Zel'Elindar looked at Barvil and tilted his head to the side. He looked Barvil over closely and his eyes stopped when they reached Barvil's shoulder. "Three stars? I understood that Elders never left the valley."

Barvil bowed deeply. "You understood correctly, Lord Zel'Elindar. It was necessary for me to put aside my position for a time and join this expedition."

Lord Zel'Elindar gave Barvil an intensely curious look, but turned away when he didn't elaborate. Looking at Stavín again, he bowed slightly. "We are pleased to have such a distinguished visitor as you in our city. How long will you be with us?"

Stavín had no idea, so he looked at Trader Sahren. "We will be leaving in the morning, Lord Zel'Elindar," she said.

The lord said, "How unfortunate," but his body language said he was relieved. "Good journey to you, Friend Stavín." With that he turned and walked away.

"That was odd," Barin said as he watched the lord walk away.

"No, not really," Sahren said. "He was hoping that Stavín's writ was a fake so he could search the wagons and possibly seize Stavín's armor for himself. Even if he couldn't do anything but display it, it would still be very valuable. As for our goods, he could seize everything and turn a fine profit while we rotted in his jail." Sahren watched as Stavín's expression went from stunned to angry. "It happens at least once every trip, Stavín. Some greedy lord tries to find a way to rob us. Your weapons can't protect us from every bandit."

Stavín finally found his voice and protested, "That would be the most dishonorable—"

"Stavín," Barvil said sharply, "I told you that not everyone is honorable down here in the lowlands."

Barin stepped up to Stavín's side. "I didn't see anything like that last year, Sir, and I was with four different caravans."

Barvil smiled and slapped Barin on the shoulder. "If it hadn't been right in front of you this time, you might not have noticed. The more highly placed the thief, the more circumspect he has to be."

## Chapter 31

The day continued without any more excitement. Stavín was once again on watch when Barvil came and matched pace with him. He was smirking and seemed to be on the verge of laughing out loud.

"Sahren just sold those horses," Barvil finally said, "along with their tack. I knew she was good, but I've rarely seen anyone outmaneuver a horse trader like that." Now he laughed outright. "For the five horses and tack, she got us five hundred and ten silver crowns."

Stavín stumbled in shock but recovered quickly. "Five hundred and ten silver?"

Barvil continued to smirk. "Exactly. I gave her twenty-six silver crowns for her commission. It's a little more than five percent, but not much. That left four hundred eighty-four. You get three-fourths. That, my young Master Stavín, is three hundred sixty-three silver crowns to you. Or, more accurately, thirty-six gold, and three silver crowns." He handed a heavy bag to Stavín with a grin.

"Gods Above. Gods Above and Below! That's more than our pay coming down to Twin Bridges. I didn't think — Those horses weren't worth more than seventy-five silver crowns each, even with their gear. How did she do it?"

Barvil laughed again. "She found two horse traders who didn't like one another and played them off against each other. They ran the price up until one suddenly withdrew, leaving the other with the highest offer."

Stavín grinned and put the bag of coins inside his armor. He had already done more and earned more than most warriors did in five seasons. He surreptitiously reached up and touched the arm guard on his left shoulder.

Barvil saw this and said, "Always remember that, Stavín." He smiled when Stavín looked at him. "I saw you touch your stripes. Always remember that your

success came at a terrible price to someone else. And always remember that it could be you who pays that price one day."

Stavin said, "Yes, Sir," and Barvil went back between the wagons while he continued his round. It was near mid night when the watch changed hands again, and he was able to lie down and really think about what the gold in his pouch meant.

Every spark he carried was a reminder of a fight, a battle of strength, will, or cunning. They were also a reminder of death. The trader in Twin Bridges had started a series of events that could just as easily have resulted in Stavin's death. A stray thought made him whisper in the darkness. "Gods Above grant me honor, strength, and courage. Let this gold go to my wife."

The sound of loud voices awakened Stavin and he slithered out of his tent with his Dragon's Tongue in his hands. There was activity all around him and he relaxed as he recognized the sounds of the traders getting ready to move.

Kahndar saw him and walked over with a grim expression on his face. "Loud today, aren't they?" he asked, waving at the traders. "Armor up and strike your tent." He waited for Stavin to swing his back and breast plates into position, and tightened the buckles for him. "Davel took Kar and the rest to get our horses. Get everything stowed, then come eat. I don't know why, but the traders seem to be in a hurry."

By the time Stavin had finished with the tent and bedrolls he had to agree with Kahndar's assessment of the situation. For some reason the traders, who were normally happy and joking in the morning, were grim and focused on completing their tasks as quickly as possible.

Stavin joined the others at breakfast. Barvil looked serious, and said nothing until Davel arrived with the remaining men.

"Trader Sahren warned me that we will probably be attacked soon after we leave. She had a consignment from Madam Elain for a merchant here. He tried to cheat her, like the men Stavin killed, but there was no violence. Yet. She expects trouble later, once we are away from the city. I want both hands tight on opposite sides of the caravan."

Stavin and Karvik exchanged glances, then joined the others at their horses. Barvil addressed them again as soon as everyone was mounted.

"The goods that the merchant is after are in Trader Sahren's wagon, so that's where I expect the most trouble. Davel, Kahndar, move forward. Everyone else shift back one position. You have your assignments. Prepare to move out."

The wagons were rolling just moments later, and the warriors took their positions. Trader Sahren set a faster-than-normal pace to begin with, but slowed as the morning wore on. Mid day had come and gone and the mood of the traders seemed to be improving when a woman's scream echoed up the road.

Stavin turned in his saddle in time to see Lavin ride between the wagons, his sword already in his hand. Only years of discipline kept Stavin from joining him, but he knew his duty. There was no guarantee that the bandits would only attack one side of the caravan.

More screams, mingled with the shouts of many men, had Stavin shaking with the desire to join in, but Kahndar still rode ahead of him, scanning the area continuously.

When Barvil's horn finally sounded, Stavin cut between the wagons and looked around. Barvil, Davel, and Karvik were fighting a group of men near the front of the caravan, with Kahndar attacking the bandits from the rear, so he turned toward the back of the line. He rode hard toward the center of the fight, through bodies that were lying all around, though dead or dying he couldn't tell.

Four of the valley warriors were bunched together, fighting twice their number of bandits, and Stavin turned Tru toward them. He tumbled from the saddle and let the reins dangle as soon as he was close. His attack from the rear took the bandits by surprise, and one fell immediately when Stavin slashed the back of his neck. A second man turned toward Stavin and caught the return blow on his sword.

Stavin twisted his Dragon's Tongue in a corkscrew move that brought his opponent's sword dangerously close to his armor, but also made it possible to thrust forward into the man's shoulder. When the man pulled back, Stavin spun his Dragon's

Tongue under the bandit's guard and cut him from crotch to shoulder. A final thrust split the man's heart, and Stavin turned back toward his comrades.

Stavin's distraction had let the four others deal with the six remaining bandits while he dealt with his man. Now they all turned toward the front of the caravan, but there was no sign of a fight up there. As the adrenaline rush faded, the moans and cries of the wounded penetrated Stavin's awareness. Then another voice reached his numbed mind.

## Chapter 32

"Cordon went down. So did Ivalin. Find them," Lavin commanded and all of the warriors began searching the tumble of bodies for their friends.

Barin shouted, "Here's Ivalin!" and Stavin rushed over to his side. Ivalin was lying on his back with a sword through his breastplate. He was still alive, and spoke in a whisper when Barin knelt at his side.

"Tell Ardana I fell in battle. Tell her I died with honor. Oh, Gods, Barin! I wanted to go home." He cried silently for a moment, then pink foam began to speckle his lips. "I got two, Barin. Tell Elder Kel'Carin I got two." Then he seemed to relax and let go of one final breath.

Barin stood and staggered back a pace. "Goodbye, good friend," he whispered, then looked at Stavin, and then past him. "The others found Cordon."

Stavin turned to look, then led the way to where the other three warriors stood looking down. Cordon had fallen with three crossbow bolts through his chest. There were no other marks on his body and his sword was still in his scabbard.

"Check for wounded bandits," Lavin ordered. Everyone turned away and began searching once again. Three bandits were found alive among the fifteen bodies. Lavin had them dragged to the side of the road and watched as one died just as Barvil rode up.

"Status?" he demanded, and all five of the warriors snapped to attention.

"Two dead, Sir," Lavin announced in a muffled voice. "Fifteen bandits, two survivors."

Barvil was silent for a moment. "We had the leaders up front. I don't see a reason to prolong this. Dispatch them. Catch your horses first, then begin a search for their camp. Sahren is willing to stop here for the night. She wants some time alone with the



leaders." He paused and closed his eyes briefly. "I'll send Davel and Kahndar back for Cordon and Ivalin."

All of the warriors snapped, "Yes, Sir," and Lavin led them into the trees at the edge of the road. They didn't have to walk far. A wagon with a pair of draft horses was just beyond the trees, and two riding horses were tethered close by.

"It looks like they brought the help out in the wagon and the leaders rode. Lowlanders!" Lavin said scornfully and spit. "Stavin, Barin, check the wagon. Chandar, Horvan, see to the riding horses. Throw anything you see on the ground into the wagon." Lavin was looking around carefully. "I want to get back to the caravan as soon as we can."

There was little for the men to find and they quickly returned to the road. There they took on the repugnant task of stripping the dead, and figuring out which kills each of them could claim. In the end the count was Ivalin two, Stavin two, Barin two, Chandar three, Lavin three, and Horvan three. They laid the bodies out near the bushes and headed toward the traders' camp. Lavin reported to Barvil as soon as they arrived.

"Sir, we have four horses and a wagon. Arms for fifteen, but little armor. Coins totaling fifty silver crowns already divided to the victors." He detailed the kill count and Barvil nodded.

"Twelve up front, with considerably more coin. Davel got four, Kar four, and Kahndar two. My two are just wounded. Sahren has them." He looked over to where a pile of weapons was carelessly thrown on the ground. "Knives and swords and no armor. I don't know what they expected to face, but it wasn't warriors."

A wail of anguish from one of the wagons drew everyone's attention. "Two of the traders were also killed," Barvil continued. "Davel and Kahndar are digging graves for Ivalin and Cordon. Barin, Lavin, go take over. The rest of you set up our camp." Barvil walked away and Karvik hurried over to Stavin's side.

"Four, Stave! I got four!" he said excitedly. "They fought stupid, like they didn't expect us to fight back."

Stavin nodded and grabbed their tent. "They weren't armored, and they weren't armed very well either. One of the men I fought was fair with his sword, but not beyond a second-year swordsman."

"How many?" Karvik asked without turning around.

"What?" Stavin asked.

"How many did you get this time?"

"Two. It was eight to four when I got there, and I cut the spine of one to get their attention. The second, I gutted and split his heart."

"My first two went down with a quick left-right stab. They hardly even defended themselves. The third was an ax-man. He shaved my Tongue's shaft, but lost his throat." Karvik paused and grinned sheepishly. "The fourth was almost an accident. He was backing away from Kahndar, and I drove a point through his back and heart as I was disengaging from another one that Davel killed."

"It all happens so fast," Stavin said with an amazed shake of his head. He looked over to where Lavin and Barin were digging. "Cordon never had a chance. Ivalin fought well, but died anyway." They had been working as they spoke and finished their tent just moments later.

"Let's set up Barin's tent," Karvik suggested.

Stavin looked at him for a few heartbeats, then walked over to Barin's horse. "He and Ivalin weren't very close, but it's still going to be hard for him to adjust. I wonder if your dad is going to put him with Lavin?"

"Maybe, but even if he does it won't be tonight."

Barvil called all of his men to the graves soon after the tents were set up. Horvan and Chandar had followed Stavin and Karvik's lead and set up Lavin's tent when they were done with their own. When everyone was assembled, Barvil spoke.

"It is our duty to fight and, if needs be, die in the service of our people. Cordon and Ivalin died as warriors. That is how they shall be remembered among the honored dead of our people. Cordon could lay claim to five kills in his four expeditions. Ivalin could lay claim to three kills in his two expeditions. Place them in their graves." All

eight of the remaining warriors worked together to lay their comrades gently in their graves, still wearing their armor, and with their weapons in their hands. When they were done, Barvil spoke again.

"Karvik, Stavín, fill in the graves halfway. The rest of us will gather stones." He turned away with the others as Stavín and Karvik grabbed the shovels. As the two junior warriors worked, the rest brought rocks and stones from around the area and built two equal piles. When the graves were half-full, Kahndar and Davel climbed down and began placing stones carefully to form a rough pavement to protect the fallen. When they were done, everyone finished filling the graves and tamped the ground hard, trying to erase any sign of the graves to keep them safe.

Barvil saw Sahren and the rest of the traders watching them as they finished. At his half-bow, she came forward. "It is as I suspected. Trader Ahran was after his shipment of – goods – from Elain, but he didn't want to pay. Unfortunately, he wasn't here. He just sent his lackeys and a bunch of dumb muscle after us."

Barvil nodded. "We have honored our dead and collected what few weapons and armor they brought against us. The two wounded – "

" – Are dead. They carried this." She handed over a small purse. "They expected to take us after they overwhelmed you. After all, they had more than twice your number, and it was men against boys."

Barvil let his contempt for that sentiment show by a barely disguised sneer. "I would match boys of my people against his men one on one and not fear for any of them. His men against my men is a laughable notion."

"Agreed," Sahren said with a nod. "We will have food ready soon. I'll send someone for you." She turned away without further comment and went back to her wagon.

"What could be so valuable that a merchant would sacrifice twenty-seven men to steal it?" Barin asked, and others indicated that they also would like to know.

"There are many small, high-value items traded in these lands. I won't ask because it's none of my business, but I'm beginning to suspect that it is not a legal item.

Things Madam Elain said and did would make more sense if she is something other than a humble innkeeper."

"If it's dishonorable—" Davel began, but Kahndar silenced him.

"— It is their dishonor, not ours. We took honorable contract with Trader Sahren. If she has taken a dishonorable contract with Madam Elain, then it is to her shame, not ours."

"Absolutely correct, Kahndar," Barvil agreed. "However, we know nothing and I will not seek to find out. I will suggest to Sahren that I be present when she delivers her other consignments. Hopefully it will convince whoever it is that paying beats the alternative."

Everyone quieted and then set about doing the little tasks that ate up hours of their days. Finally, a trader came and told them that the evening meal was ready.

After they had eaten, Barvil stood and surveyed his men. "It is never easy losing comrades like this. The celebration and ceremony that we would normally have after so many kills is blunted by the loss of our friends. Stavin has two more kills, and so does Barin. Chandar has three more kills, as do Horvan and Lavin. Kahndar has two new kills. Davel and Karvik have four each. I claim two. Davel, you've earned your first red stripe. Morning is soon enough to paint your honors."

## Chapter 33

The caravan continued along the road west, heading toward the mountains that defined the border with Andaria. Trader Sahren had only one more consignment from Madam Elain, and it was at the next stop that she delivered it. Barvil's glowering presence kept the merchant and his men nervously glancing his way, but they gave Sahren no other trouble.

The towns and villages along the road were spaced a day's wagon ride apart close to the center of the kingdom, but grew farther and farther apart as they approached the border. Soon they were spending three and even four nights camped, and Barvil started joining the guard patrols to make up for Cordon and Ivalin's absence.

While the villages were farther apart, the welcome the traders received was all the warmer to make up for it. The warriors drew more attention as well. Other warriors met the caravan in some towns, usually just watching to make sure they were no threat, then returning to other tasks. Sometimes one of the town warriors would approach Barvil, then quickly leave.

In the town of Kel'Graflin's Hold, Barvil tried to sell the wagon and ran into trouble. Several people appeared interested until they got a good look at the wagon. Then they suddenly lost interest and hurried away. Barvil watched the third man hurry away and frowned.

"You'll have a hard time selling that wagon, Barvil," Sahren said as she walked up to his side.

"Why? It's a good wagon. It's nice and sturdy. It's heavy enough to be a beer wagon and big enough to haul hay. Why won't anyone really look at it?" he asked angrily.

"Oh, they looked," she said. "What they saw is something that you don't recognize and I didn't think to point out. You see this mark? The lily? That's the mark of

Ahran Fel'Hadar, the merchant who tried to steal Elain's consignment from me. He is a well-known figure in the darker side of trade in Evandia. Unless you can defend it, as you and your men can, he will take it from whoever has it when he sees it next. Given how many men he lost with it, as well as the consignment from Elain, whoever it is will die rather messily."

"Couldn't we remove it?" Kahndar asked, but Sahren shook her head.

"It's magical. It'll just reappear. Things that travel a lot are marked that way." Sahren looked up at the Zel'Vandar crest on her wagon. "We use it as well."

Barvil stared at it for a moment, then shook his head. He muttered, "I wonder how the Council will react to us bringing home a wagon?"

\* \* \*

High Summer was a time of gathering for the people of Kel'Kavin. What was gathered the most was wood. The trees inside the crater had been cut down generations before to make room for farming, and those places that were unsuitable for grain crops were planted with assorted fruit-bearing vines and trees.

Work-parties of fifteen men were sent out of the valley as much as three days' travel away to cut wood and burn it into charcoal before loading it in their wagons to bring back for the winter.

Harner was drafted almost constantly, but he didn't mind. He'd always been told that cutting and hauling wood was a good way to build muscle, and he wanted to present the best possible figure to Barvil when he returned. He was also going to show the Runt what a man was supposed to look like.

On his third trip out of the valley, Harner was watching the passing trees in a light doze when a fist landed on his head. "Wake up, boy. Time to put those muscles of yours to good use," one of the older men said, and Harner quickly scrambled out of the wagon.

"Stop calling me 'boy,' old man. I'm fourteen and old enough to be considered a man," Harner said indignantly.

"You're a man when you've made your first expedition. Until then, you're a boy. It doesn't matter how old you are," the man replied with a sneer.

"I wasn't called. That's no reason to treat me like a child," Harner hissed with his hands balled into fists.

The older man leaned forward so that his face was just a hand from Harner's. "You're a fool, boy, and we all know it. You could have gone. Twenty from a year-group isn't a maximum number. It's just what we normally send. If you were a man you'd have gone anyway."

Harner's fist arched up, striking the man on the chin with enough force to knock any of his friends off their feet, but the man just took a step back and laughed. "Do you think you can prove yourself that way, boy? Do you think I'll shut up because I'm afraid of you?"

Harner advanced again, but stopped dead in his tracks due to the man's fist impacting his nose. That *hurt!* No one had managed to hit him in years, not since he was nine and had started outgrowing all of his year-mates. "You hit me! I'm going to kill you!"

All of the men laughed as Harner charged his attacker only to be hit again. And again. And again. He never landed another blow, but every time he came within arm's reach of the older man he got hit. Hard. And it hurt! And still the men laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" Harner shouted.

"We're laughing at a fool of a boy who needs to learn to shut his flapping mouth and hold his wagging tongue," another of the men said.

"Now start digging the pit to burn the charcoal. We'll be bringing you wood soon enough," the youngest of the men said, smirking at Harner.

\* \* \*

At the town of Zel'Marran, an ancient Imperial-era fortress stood guard over the crossroads that tied the road they were on to the road from the south that led through the mountains and out of the kingdom. The town was relatively large and the caravan was directed off the road to a meadow that served as the town's festival ground.

Sahren had her wagons form their line of booths. This was their northwesternmost stop before turning south, and she expected a good profit from her wares.

Before Barvil could have his men set up their tents, a distinguished-looking older man in the uniform of an Evandian Army General came to see him.

"Good day. I am Lord General Dahral Zel'Fordal. I received a message that Friend of Evandia Stavín Kel'Aniston was with this caravan. Who is he?"

Barvil bowed deeply before he answered. "Friend Stavín is that youth over there in the golden armor, General Zel'Fordal. A moment, please." At the general's nod he whistled and all of his men hurried to his side. "Friend Stavín, this is Lord General Zel'Fordal."

Stavín took a step forward and snapped to attention. "I am honored to meet you, Sir," he said, never taking his eyes off the general's face.

"The king's proclamation of your status only arrived two days ago. I would be pleased to host you and your command in the fort," General Zel'Fordal said with a slight bow. "I'll assign twenty of my men to guard your caravan."

Stavín turned to Barvil and asked, "Sir?" At Barvil's nod, Stavín turned back to the general. "We would be pleased accept your hospitality, General Zel'Fordal."

The general nodded and smiled. "Princess Marina's letter said you were quite young, and under command of an elder of your people."

"Yes, Sir," Stavín answered. "Barvil Kel'Carin, Warleader Second of Kel'Kavin."

The general raised an eyebrow at that and looked Barvil. "As I understand the old code, Warleader Second is only two steps from the very highest rank. Warmaster and Warleader First are the only ranks higher. What are you doing out of your valley riding herd on two hands of youngsters, Elder Kel'Carin?"

Barvil almost grinned. "It was necessary for me to step down as an Elder for a time, General Zel'Fordal. This group contains not only Friend Stavín, but my only son as well. It had also been five years since I last left the valley, and the chance to take Karvik on his first expedition was too tempting to pass up."



"I understand completely," the general said with a smile. "I try to lead at least one patrol a moon myself. Even the mostly luxurious office can be stifling. I'll let you make your arrangements, but I would like to take Friend Stavin with me now, if that's all right?"

Barvil bowed. "Of course, Sir."

"Very good. Come to the fort when you're ready. Friend Stavin, this way, please." The general turned and began walking, and Stavin hurried to match his pace.

The ancient edifice of Zel'Marran loomed above the town from the top of a small hill. Five thousand troops had once called it home. In its heyday it had served as the primary defensive position between the Empire of Luxand and the wild lands, but that time was a thousand years in the past. Now it served the Kings of Evandia against the Kings of Andaria, but it had been three hundred years since an enemy had last stood beneath its walls. Those walls still stood tall and proud, looking as new as they had when Chosen Adepts had spelled the stones in place, yet giving off an air of age that was impossible to ignore.

Sentries at the gate snapped to attention as their general approached. Stavin surveyed them critically and found himself satisfied with their appearance. A little snort of amusement at that thought escaped before he could contain it, and the general turned an inquiring gaze his direction.

"Was there something you wished to say, Friend Stavin?" he asked.

"No, Sir. No. I was just thinking that I approved of your sentries, and it struck me as ridiculous that I might find them lacking in any way."

"And why is that?" the general asked, his voice is taking on an ominous tone.

Stavin stopped and removed his helmet, then pushed his mail hood to the back of his head. "It's funny because I'm only fifteen, Sir, and this is my first trip out of the valley. What business would I have inspecting your troops?"

The general considered Stavin carefully for a moment, then smiled and patted Stavin's shoulder. "You have a point, Friend Stavin. I didn't know you were so young. I had been thinking that you and your Warleader might do exactly that, though."

"I'm sure Barvil, I mean Warleader Kel'Carin, would be pleased to join you, Sir, but I'm not sure it would be appropriate for me to. I'm not experienced enough to be able to properly evaluate them."

"Mary said you showed wisdom beyond your years," the general said half to himself. Seeing Stavin's curious look, he continued, "Princess Marina is my niece. My little sister was Queen Carissa."

Stavin bowed, but didn't say anything as the general began walking again. They went into the inner keep of the fort and Stavin found himself the subject of intense stares and buzzing conversation as they passed through the halls.

General Zel'Fordal led Stavin to a long hall with many doors opening left and right. "Officers' quarters," the general explained and led Stavin to a door. "I've given orders for you and your comrades to be billeted here. If you would care to leave your helm and weapon here, I'll show you around until your people join us."

Stavin quickly did as he was told and left his Dragon's Tongue and gauntlets on the bed, and his helmet on the rack. He braced to attention as soon as he returned to the general's side. "At your service, Sir."

The general led Stavin out to the battlements and gestured out over the valley. "We're primarily an administrative center now, but there was a time when Zel'Marran commanded this entire region. We hunt bandits in the hills and enforce the decrees that come from Twin Bridges, but this has become a quiet post. It's a terrible thing, but I could wish for a little less civilization now and again."

Stavin gave a faint smile. "I understand, Sir. Kel'Kavin and Kavinston are like that. That's one reason anyone can join the expeditions. It lets men like Warleader Kel'Carin get out for some excitement, though this has been a more exciting trip than any of us had planned." Stavin's hand came up to touch his stripes. "Eight kills already and not halfway through."

The general was nodding. "I noticed. That's part of why I thought you were older."

Stavin was about to continue when the staccato sounds of a fight reached them. Two figures, each armed with a wooden practice sword, came around the corner, striking at one another in running combat. The strangest thing to Stavin's eyes was that both of them were little girls.

"*Vile barbarian!*" shouted one.

"*Evil mage!*" screamed the other.

"*Girls!*" bellowed the general and they both froze. "What have I said about this?" he asked as the girls faced him.

"But Gran'da, the troops have the practice field all tied up," the elder of the two whined.

"Ooo, pretty," the younger said, focusing on Stavin. "Who is he, Gran'da?"

"This is Friend of Evandia Stavin. He is passing through and I have invited him to stay in the fort tonight."

The two girls stood still for an instant, then raced toward Stavin. They stopped before they collided with him, though not by much, and bowed prettily. "We are pleased to meet you, Friend Stavin," the older of the two said as she straightened.

The younger was focused on his armor. "Is that really dragon scales?" she asked. "Can I touch it?"

"Yes to both, Zel Hava Conta," Stavin replied with a deep bow.

"What did you call me?" the girl asked, and her older sister joined in.

"That was Old Tongue! Chosen something woman," she translated.

"Young warrior or apprentice warrior," General Zel'Fordal supplied. "Friend Stavin, these are my granddaughters, Kahrah and Lohandra Zel'Bandar. You'll meet my daughter Kennis later." He shifted his full attention to the girls. "You two are supposed to be in lessons, not terrorizing my troops."

Lohandra, the little one, was caressing Stavin's breast plate with one hand as she looked up at her grandfather. "Lord Scholar Zel'Haman had to go somewhere, and he turned us loose early." She shifted her attention to Stavin. "This is as smooth as silk," she said to Stavin. "That dragon must have really liked you."

Kahrah had put a hand out to copy her sister. "Cousin Mary's letter said he gave you the armor as a reward for bravery. Will you tell us the story?"

"Please," the two said together, and Stavín laughed.

"I would be pleased to tell you the tale, and the true tale at that. The story that the minstrel tells is better, but he's changed things to make it that way."

## Chapter 34

General Zel'Fordal stopped Stavín from continuing. "We would all be pleased to hear it tonight, Friend Stavín. You two return to your rooms while Friend Stavín and I collect his comrades. Now scoot!" The general waved a dismissive hand at his granddaughters, and they fled, giggling. The general watched them go, then led the way down to where Barvil and the others waited in the courtyard.

Stavín walked up to Barvil and braced to attention. "Sir, the general has provided us with rooms for the night," he reported.

Barvil turned to the general and bowed. "We are grateful, Lord General Zel'Fordal."

The general nodded in answer and led the way to their rooms. "Please leave your weapons here. Armed strangers in the fort disturb my men," he said with a light smile, and Barvil nodded. Moments later, everyone was lined up in the hall once again. "Your men are well-trained, Warleader Kel'Carin. I wish more of mine were like them. This way, please."

The general led them on a long tour of the fortress, and provided a running commentary on the history of Zel'Marran, from its founding in the sixth century of the Imperial Age through thirteen centuries of imperial service and five more in the service of Evandia.

All of the valley warriors were thoroughly impressed by the time the general led them into a large dining hall. Barvil spoke for all of them when he said, "I have never seen a more impressive fortress, General Zel'Fordal. Kel'Kavin is older, but it was never meant to be more than a guard post with just a hundred or so warriors. This," he paused to gesture expansively at the fortress around him, "is a true marvel of military engineering."

"Thank you," General Zel'Fordal said, clearly pleased. "I'm actually quite proud of it. Come, my cooks have been busy preparing a feast in honor of Friend Stavin's visit."

The general led them to a table that was set higher than the others and hundreds of soldiers began filling the lower tables. There was a low murmur of men's voices, but no one spoke loud enough to be heard above the rest. Soon an old man in a white uniform approached the general and snapped to attention.

"Sir, the men are assembled and await your pleasure," he said loudly, his voice reaching the far corners of the room.

The general nodded once and said, "Thank you." He turned to the rest of the room and spoke so that all could hear him. "Men, today we are honored by the presence of Friend of Evandia Stavin Kel'Aniston. Friend Stavin is from the Kel'Kavin Valley, and is accompanied by Warleader Second Barvil Kel'Carin. For those of you who don't know the old code, Warleader Second is a rank approximately equal to that of a Provincial General." General Zel'Fordal paused as a murmur of surprise ran through the room. "You may be seated. Servers, you may begin."

Everyone took their seats as white-coated men began pushing carts of food into the room. Stavin was at the general's right hand, next to a man wearing colonel's insignia. Barvil was next, and the rest of the warriors were disbursed among a dozen Evandian officers.

A young woman sat across from Stavin, and Kahrah and Lohandra were beside her.

General Zel'Fordal waited until things had quieted down before introducing them. "Friend Stavin, this is my daughter, Kennis. Kahrah and Lohandra you've already met."

Stavin bowed his head. "I am pleased to meet you, Lady Kennis."

"I am honored, Friend Stavin. Marina was quite impressed with your story."

Stavin was prepared by the general's comments and dipped his head at the mention of the princess. "Princess Marina was quite kind to me to during our audience. I was very grateful."

Lady Kennis grinned across the table. "You're quick."

"That's enough, Kenny. I had occasion to mention our relationship to their majesties during our tour." General Zel'Fordal smiled serenely as his daughter glared at him.

"Friend Stavin," the colonel next to him said, "I am Colonel Zel'Tahran, General Zel'Fordal's Chief of Staff." He glanced at the general and received a nod of permission. "It is our understanding that your armor is made of dragon scale, shaped by the dragon itself. However did you manage to convince the dragon to give it to you?"

Stavin had been waiting for that question since they arrived, so he smiled and began his tale. "High on the rim of the Kel'Kavin Valley is a cave—" He told the story as dry fact, giving a soldier's report of the incident and leaving out the embellishments that the minstrel had added. He concluded the story with a self-deprecating smile. "So you see, I went up there a boy with something to prove. The dragon didn't kill me and chose the give me this armor for reasons of its own."

The colonel commented, "There is a minstrel getting rich on your story, Friend Stavin, but the one you tell is much more believable. Dragons do what they want, and the will of humans seldom matters. Thank you for the truth."

"My honor, Sir."

"That wasn't a good story," Lohandra said in a petulant tone.

"It wasn't like a tale at all," her sister agreed.

Stavin gave the girls a half-bow from his seat. "Life is seldom like a tale. I went into the cave a thief, determined to snatch a bit of gold from the dragon's hoard. I came out a—I don't know. A man? A boy? A warrior? What tales they tell of me in the future, only the future will know."

"Well said, Friend Stavin," Lady Kennis said. "Now we've kept you busy long enough. Your food is cold." She signaled one of the servers, and the man removed

Stavin's untouched plate and replaced it with one that was steaming hot. "Eat now, young man. You've given us all a great deal to discuss while you do."

Stavin did as he was told while his story was discussed around him. Each of the warriors was questioned by their table-mates, and they gave their companions answers to just about every question. Only matters that dealt with the internal politics of the valley were refused, and those few refusals were taken with good grace.

After the meal, all of the valley warriors were invited to join the officers for drinks at a local tavern. They were soon enjoying beer and wine, and listening to outrageous stories. Stavin's story came up, and many of the locals were amazed by his accomplishments.

One man wasn't. He wasn't a soldier, but had been in years past, and was openly scornful of Stavin's story. "Don't make no difference," he snarled. "Boy against a man is gonna lose, lest there's magic involved."

"Would you care to test that?" Stavin asked in a low voice as his fists clenched in anger at his sides.

The man stood and spread his arms wide. "Sure, little boy. Strip off that magic plate, and we'll give it a go."

"I forbid this," Colonel Zel'Tahran said, stepping between them. "Carad, Friend Stavin is an honored guest of the general."

"Don't matter to me no more, lapdog. The boy issued the challenge, not me." The man sneered at Stavin. "Swords good enough for you, boy?"

"I'll face you staff to sword, if that's what you want?" Stavin said, enraged. "Can't be taking advantage of you, now can I?"

"Hah! Staff to steel it is, boy. Outside." Carad moved toward the door with a crowd behind him, and Stavin followed.

Barvil caught Stavin's shoulder. "This is foolish, Stavin."

"No, Sir. I've taken all of that kind of talk I'm willing to take." He pulled away from Barvil and took a step back. "This is about honor, Sir."



## Chapter 35

In the street outside the tavern, a circle of people surrounded Carad. Stavín let Karvík and Kahndar remove his plate armor, then accepted a quarterstaff from one of the officers.

Stavín circled to the left, slowly spinning the staff in his hands. Carad matched him, sword in hand and a sneer on his face. Neither spoke as they sized one another up.

Carad's strike would have made a snake blink, but not Stavín. He faded to the side and brought the staff around to block, following through by delivering a hard blow to Carad's side. The man backed away, stunned and favoring his right side.

"You can't beat a sword with a stick, boy," Carad snarled and attacked again.

Stavín ignored the weapon and struck at Carad's arm, using the greater reach that the staff gave him to stay away from the blade.

Carad bellowed in pain and rage and attacked again. Stavín's staff blurred as he knocked the sword out of Carad's hand, high into the air. As he had expected, Carad looked up to follow his weapon's path and Stavín brought his staff around to crack Carad's forehead. Carad fell unconscious in the street, and his sword clattered down beside him.

Stavín picked up the sword and handed it hilt-first to Colonel Zel'Tahrán. "I don't want this, Sir. It seems to have fool all over it." Everyone started laughing when they heard Stavín's comment, including the colonel.

"Indeed, Friend Stavín. And what of the fool?" Colonel Zel'Tahrán asked.

Stavín looked down at the unconscious man and shook his head. "If he ever insults me again, I'll kill him. For now, let his friends take care of him. He means nothing to me."

Three disreputable-looking men came forward and bowed, then grabbed Carad and dragged him away.

"Your mercy may come at a price, Friend Stavín," a grizzled old man said, bowing to Stavín. "I'm Master Sergeant Kel'Kanlan. Carad Kel'Vanat was one of my men until he got caught pilfering supplies. He's never been one to take defeat well, and he was one of our better swordsmen. He'll try you again."

"Then I'll kill him," Stavín said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Next time he'll face me with a Dragon's Tongue in my hands."

The sergeant nodded. "I'd heard your folk still use the Dragon's Tongue. We've done away with them in favor of swords and lances. Carad won't underestimate you again."

"Then he will die a fool," Barvil said with a frown. "Colonel, I think my men have had enough excitement for one night. We have to make an early start in the morning."

Colonel Zel'Tahran seemed puzzled, but accepted Barvil's decision. "Very well, Warleader, I'll escort you back your quarters. This way." He gestured up the road and Barvil fell in beside him with the rest of the valley warriors falling into formation behind him.

"Warleader Kel'Carin," the colonel said as they walked, "you seem very sure of young Friend Stavín's ability to defeat Carad. Why is that, if you don't mind my asking?"

"He beat me," Barvil said with a grin. "Granted, it had been years since I had fought with the Dragon's Tongue, but I used to teach the weapon so it shouldn't have mattered. It was a near thing and I almost had him, but he won in the end. That was before we left on this expedition. Since then he's made eight kills and is, if possible, even faster than he was. He was toying with Carad. If he'd been in a hurry, Carad never would have had the chance to strike and Stavín would have killed him, even with a plain quarterstaff in his hands."

"If he's really that good, perhaps a demonstration would be in order. Most of us tend to dismiss staff-type weapons. To be honest, I had expected Carad to defeat him in short order. He was command sword instructor at one time."

Barvil gave the colonel a sharp look upon hearing that. "If that is the case, I'm sure Stavín would be pleased to demonstrate his skill."

The warriors went to their assigned rooms immediately upon returning to the fortress. They found pitchers of warm water by the basins in their rooms, and each of them luxuriated in the opportunity to get clean.

Stavín had bathed and was lying back in his bed when there was a knock at his door. He wrapped the bath sheet around himself before saying, "Come in."

Kahndar opened the door a crack and slipped through, closing it softly behind him. "Stave, did you hear Barvil and that colonel talking on the way back here?"

"I heard, but not clearly. Why?"

"You are going to face the fortress champion in the morning to demonstrate your skill with the Dragon's Tongue. They didn't say it would be the champion, but I can't see them matching you against anyone else."

Stavín shrugged and sat on the bed. "It doesn't matter. Even if I lose, it's only practice."

Kahndar grinned at Stavín. "Stave, I intend to bet every crown I have on you to win. I just want you to make it interesting. If that fool you beat today is any indication of sword skills down here, you shouldn't have any trouble at all. Just try to drag it out to run up the bets."

Stavín laughed loudly and rocked back and forth on the bed. "Very well, Kahn, I'll put on a show."

Kahndar grinned and turned toward the door. "Good. Sleep well."

"And you," Stavín answered as the door closed.

Morning proved Kahndar correct in his warning. General Zel'Fordal and Colonel Zel'Tahran met them after breakfast. "Friend Stavín," the general said cheerfully, "I heard about your encounter last night. I wonder if I might prevail upon you to demonstrate your skill for our men. I'm afraid staff-weapons like yours aren't held in very high regard in our army."

"It would be my honor and pleasure, Sir," Stavín answered.

"Very good." The general turned and waved at a young man in a uniform of an Evandian Army captain. "This is Captain Kel'Ashton."

"I am honored to meet you, Captain Kel'Ashton," Stavín said with a bow.

"The honor is mine, Friend Stavín. This way, please." The captain turned and led the way to a practice ring, one of the many things Zel'Marran and Kel'Kavín had in common. A quarterstaff and a wooden sword lay at the center of the circle, and the captain picked up the sword. "I hope you don't mind training weapons, Friend Stavín. An accident would be most unfortunate."

Stavín handed his Dragon's Tongue to Karvík and picked up the staff. "I agree completely, Sir."

General Zel'Fordal stepped into the circle and spoke loudly. "Gentlemen, this is a test of skill. Scoring will be assigned by Colonel Zel'Tahrán and myself. When I clap my hands, you may begin."

At the clap of the General's hands, Stavín and the captain crouched and began circling. Stavín let the captain strike first, but blocked the blow with an intentionally clumsy move. Twice more he let the captain strike before striking back. The staff in his hands flicked out, but the captain deflected the strike easily. He almost missed the counterstrike, but again deflected the blow.

The captain again attacked, and this time he landed a blow on Stavín's shoulder.

"One point to Captain Kel'Ashton," the general said loudly.

Stavín backed away, watching for an opening, and soon the captain attacked again. As his sword arched upward, Stavín's staff swung up to knock it away, then reversed to land a blow on the captain's arm.

"One point to Friend Stavín," Colonel Zel'Tahrán said, and a low murmur came from the crowd.

The captain circled Stavín cautiously. "You're remarkably good with a staff, Friend Stavín," he said, watching Stavín's eyes for some clue as to what Stavín was going to do.

"The Dragon's Tongue is my weapon of choice, Sir," Stavín replied, waiting for the captain's next attack.

Karvík waited until the captain's back was to him before saying, "Quit fooling around, Stave. The caravan is waiting."

Stavín's expression turned rueful as he looked the captain in the eye. "I'd love to stay and play, Captain, but Kar is right." His staff blurred as he attacked, concentrating on hitting the captain's weapon for ten blows, then shifting his target and striking the captain four times in rapid succession. He leaped back after landing his fifth blow and brought his staff upright in salute.

"You're very good, Captain Kel'Ashton. I believe you would be a serious opponent for Warmaster Kel'Horval if ever the two of you should meet."

The captain finally brought his sword up and returned Stavín's salute. "You are a remarkable young man, Friend Stavín. I wouldn't have believed it was possible to beat a sword with a staff, yet you did so easily. I may have to revise our training program to include more staff work."

"I agree with that sentiment, Captain," General Zel'Fordal said as he stepped into the circle. He bowed slightly to Stavín. "With a real weapon in your hands, you'd be a match for anyone I've ever served with. Long life and good fortune to you, Friend Stavín."

Stavín snapped back to attention. "Thank you, Sir, and thank you again for your hospitality." He bowed and joined his comrades as they marched out of the fortress.

## Chapter 36

The caravan was waiting at the base of the hill and Barvil had his men take their positions quickly. Trader Sahren smiled as Barvil fell in beside her wagon.

"We have to arrange for this to happen more often, Goodman Barvil. Those soldiers who took your place spent half their time buying our goods. The locals seemed more relaxed with their own troops around as well," she said with a grin.

Barvil smiled in return as he answered. "We had quite an experience ourselves. If the opportunity presents itself, I wouldn't object to visiting another fort like Zel'Marran."

The road they were following led south toward the coastal region. The land grew progressively lusher as the days passed, and soon the air became unpleasantly humid and hot.

All the mountain-bred folk, warrior and trader alike, found the dampness unpleasant. Stavín was bothered by the feeling that everything he touched was wet, like poorly dried laundry. He also found the air unpleasant to breathe. He mentioned his discomfort to Kahndar as they walked circuit one evening.

"It's the altitude, Stave," Kahndar said with a laugh. "We've been going downhill for the past ten days. Soon we'll reach the sea."

"I don't understand, Kahn," Stavín said as he dried his hands on a towel that he had tied to his belt. "It can't be that different."

"Ah, but it can," Kahndar replied. "The floor of the Kel'Kavin Valley is actually about twenty-eight dragons above sea level. We came down to Twin Bridges, but we were still more than twenty dragons up. That's why the rivers are so wild there. We went down as we crossed the plains to Barren's Bridge, but had to climb back up to Zel'Marran. Now we're really going down, all the way to the coast road."

"The sea," Stavín mused. "Somehow, I'd forgotten which way we were going."

Kahndar laughed again. "You'll make a fine scribe if you keep forgetting things like that. I've traveled to the sea before, you know. Surprisingly, you'll feel better there. The breeze off the water isn't like this. Here we have to contend with all the rain pools and daily drizzle, but on the coast it'll be dryer."

Stavin grimaced and dried his hands once again. "We can't get there soon enough for me."

As the caravan made its way toward the coast, the traders began buying more than they were selling. The wagons had been all but emptied by the time they left Zel'Marran, but now they were filling up once again. Stavin noticed and approached one of the traders. "Your pardon, Kethlan, but why are you loading up? I thought you were trying to sell all of your goods."

Kethlan was a small man like Stavin, and the two had struck up a friendship in spite of the thirty-five year difference in their ages. "Well, Stavin, it is called trade because that's what we do. We traded the goods we had for coin, and now we're trading the coin for goods we don't have. You've groused enough about the heat. Do you think anyone but a madman would buy woolen clothes down here? We are buying goods to sell elsewhere in this hot land. That's how goods move across the kingdoms. Caravans like ours buy in one place and sell somewhere else. The people who make the items earn some coin, and we earn some coin as well for carting it around. Take this shirt, for example." He put his hand on a shirt he'd just purchased. "This cloth is made from plant fiber, and it's loosely woven to let air pass through," he said, handing Stavin the light-blue shirt. "The color is important as well. Dark colors attract heat, while light colors repel it."

Stavin examined the cloth closely, then shook his head. "I never would've thought of any of that."

Kethlan smiled and patted Stavin's shoulder. "Half the trick of trading is knowing what to offer."

The road followed the course of the Zel'Caris River, and Stavin was being called upon more often as they crossed the dozens of tributaries that fed the mighty river. He

was seldom asked for his writ, but was often asked to stop and tell his tale. He only agreed if Trader Sahren wanted to stop and trade. Otherwise, he politely but firmly declined.

Eighteen days after leaving Zel'Marran, they reached of the port city of Zel'Fray. When the city first came into view, Stavín sat in his saddle in stunned silence. Zel'Fray was the biggest city he had ever dreamed of. Fully one million souls lived and worked in the city, and almost every one of them was involved in trade of some sort.

Stavín was riding next to Kethlan's wagon by chance, and his expression made the older man laugh. "Quite a sight, isn't it, Stavín?"

"It's beautiful," Stavín replied, never looking away from the city.

"So is a greenback rattlesnake," Kethlan said, "but it's deadly nonetheless. You keep your armor on and your weapon in your hand in this city, Stavín. The city guard doesn't do much to keep the peace outside of the noble enclaves. More often than not, merchants employ mercenaries like you and our friends to guard their warehouses, and they don't care what happens outside of them."

Barvil echoed that warning when they stopped at the caravansary and the traders set up shop. "Split into hands and begin turn and turnabout watches. If anyone goes into the city, the whole hand goes. No exceptions. Stavín," Barvil paused and looked Stavín in the eye, "refuse any invitations into the city unless Kahn and the rest are also invited. Even the nobles in this city have a bad reputation."

All eight of the young warriors snapped to attention and said, "Yes, Sir," then split up with Lavin switching to Davel's hand to make up for the loss of Cordon and Ivalin. Kahndar took the first watch and led his hand to the perimeter of the wagons.

"You all know the routine," Kahndar said, looking at each of them in the eye. "We're short a man, and I want each of you to be more careful. Don't try to face anyone alone. If there is trouble, yell first, then confront them. We all know each other's voices, so I want the man following to come to the aid of anyone who has trouble. The other two keep going in case it's a diversion. If we get hit from two sides at once, yell and



attack, and keep yelling until help arrives. Understood?" Kahndar gave them a hard look, then turned and led off.

Stavin had completed three circuits around the wagons before he saw the first visitors. Men and women arrived in fine carriages, often with servants in plain wagons behind them. Not much later the first gawkers started arriving.

There were only a few to start with, just some curious youngsters who stared when Stavin came into view, and continued to stare until he had passed. Then more people arrived, silently staring at him, and soon there was a ring of people around the entire caravan. When it came time to switch hands, Stavin quickly vanished between the wagons. A sound followed him, but Kahndar had to explain it.

"That, little brother-in-law, is the sound of a bunch of disappointed people."

"Disappointed in what?" Stavin asked.

"In you, Stavin. Every one of those people was hoping you'd do something exciting, extraordinary, or, at the very least, out of the ordinary. They watched your every move in hopes of seeing a free show." Kahndar grinned and slapped Stavin's shoulder. "You seem to have been elevated to the status of a traveling sideshow."

"Oh, Gods Below, no," Stavin said with a sigh. "Could this get any worse?"

His answer soon arrived in the form of a well-dressed servant. "Friend Stavin, I am Lord Karnar Zel'Vahn's butler. Lord Zel'Vahn invites you to join him for supper this evening."

Stavin asked, "May I bring three of my comrades with me?" as Barvil had instructed.

The butler was visibly taken aback by Stavin's question. "That would be highly improper, Sir."

Stavin nodded. "Perhaps so. Please tell your master than I must respectfully decline his invitation. I am too new to these lands to walk the streets of your city alone."

"Sir, Lord Zel'Vahn would be pleased to send his carriage for you," the butler immediately replied.

Stavin shook his head slowly. "I still must decline. I will not go alone into this city."

The butler seemed about to continue, but shut his mouth with an audible click after he glanced over Stavin's head. He cleared his throat instead and bowed. "Very well, Friend Stavin. I will convey your message to Lord Zel'Vahn." With that he turned and hurried away.

Stavin turned to find Kahndar and Horvan standing shoulder to shoulder behind him. "Thank you," he said and bowed his head. "He didn't seem to want to take no for an answer."

Following Lord Zel'Vahn's butler was a succession of other servants, each with a similar invitation, and each with an almost identical reaction when Stavin mentioned bringing along the others. Apparently none of the lords wanted a group of mercenaries as supper guests.

\* \* \*

Barvil took Karvik, Davel, Lavin, and Chandar with him when he went into the city, obeying his own orders. He wasn't really concerned about being attacked. It would take a mighty foolish thief to attack even one fully armed and armored warrior. He just wasn't going to be a hypocrite about his orders. He also wanted to give his son a chance to look around at one of the greatest cities of the kingdom, and possibly visit an old friend.

Karvik and the others gawked at the magnificent city that surrounded them and Barvil fought to hold back his laughter as even Davel, who had been to the coastal regions before, kept his head in almost constant motion as he took in the sights as well.

Barvil knew where he wanted to go, assuming it still existed. It was an inn called The Black Ahldar Bull, and he remembered it as serving the best beef steak he'd ever tasted. It took him a while to find it, but at last he saw the statue of the bull and hurried his steps.

A serving girl met them as soon as they passed the doors. "Yer pleasure, good sirs?" she asked, winking saucily at the warriors.

"Beef and beer, young miss," Barvil replied. "Is Master Steward Fel'Anders still running this establishment?" he asked as she turned away.

"He is, good Sir," the girl replied with a wide smile.

"Then you'll still have Fel'Anders Prime. Five, and the rarer the better. White tubers and greens for all of us," Barvil ordered.

"Yes, good sirs. This way," the girl said and led them across the room. "Bein' warriors, I'd guess you'd want a wall t' yer back. This is as close as we presently have available."

The table only had two chairs with the wall at their backs, but Barvil nodded and said, "It'll do. Davel, join me. I don't expect trouble, not in here at any rate."

The five sorted themselves out with Karvik getting the seat that put his back directly toward the room. The others looked amused as he glanced around and sighed. "I can't wait 'til it's my turn to be senior."

Everyone laughed at that. "Your turn will come, Kar," Davel said. "Just keep following Stavin around and you'll be leading your fifth expedition. Of course, so will he, so you won't be together."

"I could live with that, Dav, but with only five stripes so far I'm not going to bet on it," Karvik replied with a laugh.

The food arrived and suddenly thoughts of future expeditions faded as the most tender beef they had ever eaten grabbed their attention. Barvil grinned as the conversation stopped and the only sound was that of knives and forks. Then another sound intruded as a man cleared his throat.

"I heard there was a hand of warriors in my establishment and came to investigate. I am Master Steward Angus Fel'Anders, and I think one of you is an old acquaintance. Is that you, Barvil?"

Barvil stood. "It is, Angus. It's good to see you, and better to taste your cooking again. Will you join us?"

Angus shook his head slowly. "Ah, I wish I could, Barvil. I wish I could. Unfortunately, I have to leave now or I'll be late for an appointment with the Lord

Mayor. Enjoy your meals, my friends. Perhaps I'll return before you have to leave." He gave Barvil a bow, and Barvil returned it deeply.

Angus headed for the door and was almost there when ten men burst through, clubbing the peace-keeper to the floor. "You were warned, innkeeper. This is the Varacats' territory now. You pay or you burn. Which will it be?"

Angus was still looking at the peace-keeper bleeding on his floor when five armored forms brushed past him. Faster than he could follow, the toughs who called themselves the Varacats were the ones bleeding, and the four leaders were dead.

Barvil looked at Angus and asked, "Shall we kill them all, Master Fel'Anders?"

Angus was looking at the dead men on his floor and shook his head. "No, they're just small-time strong-arm thieves. Give them a few bruises and throw them out. I'm sure the Freelancers will be interested in knowing who's moved in on *their* turf." He smiled evilly. "I'll pass the word to my contact on the way. Enjoy your meals, men. You've earned them."

"Yes, Sir," Barvil answered. "You heard him, men. Throw them out." Each man was grabbed by all four of the young warriors and thrown out, all the way across the walkway and into the street. The bodies were thrown as well.

Angus stepped over to Barvil and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I owe you again, Barvil. Don't worry about the bodies. The people I actually do pay for protection will deal with them." Turning to the serving girl, he nodded and said, "My treat, Mellis." Her nod was sufficient and Angus clasped forearms with Barvil for a moment, then he was gone.

"Angus was the caravan cook the first year I led an expedition. I saved his life more than once that year, and he remembers it. I got two. Who got the others?"

All eyes turned to Karvik. "I didn't mean to, Dad," he said, "they were just the right distance apart and—" He held up his Dragon's Tongue to show both blades stained with blood.

All of the warriors laughed as they returned to their meals. Davel slapped Karvik's shoulder. "What's the count, Kar?"

"Seven. My first red stripe," he replied, grinning so broadly that everyone who saw him had to grin as well.

## Chapter 37

Sahren spent just one more day in Zel'Fray before deciding to move on. "I'm buying twice what I'm selling," she muttered in complaint as they ate that night. "We've got to get out of here while the wagons can still roll."

The caravan left Zel'Fray early the next day and headed east into the lower coastal regions of Evandia. Sahren used Stavin's status much more in this area. Hardly a day passed that they didn't cross a bridge or a raised causeway through a swampy area, and every one of them charged the same five sparks per wagon and one for each rider.

On the fifth day after leaving Zel'Fray they reached the city of Zel'Doran. Sahren stopped, circling her wagons at the caravansary. Barvil looked back and waved Kahndar and Davel to his side. "Kahn, take your hand and begin rounds. Dav, set up camp."

Barvil looked at their wagon once again and grimaced. "Sahren thinks we're going to be stuck with that wagon until we reach Coravia. No one in Evandia will touch it with the mark of Fel'Hadard on it."

"We could just abandon it, Sir," Davel said. "It's costing us money to keep the draft horses."

Barvil shook his head. "That wagon is worth eight or nine gold crowns, Dav. I won't abandon it unless I absolutely have to."

"Yes, Sir," Davel said and began setting up their camp, wagon and all. The wagon did give them a place to store their gear other than behind their saddles, and it also gave one of them a chance to stay out of the saddle every day. That did the horses and riders some good.

Trader Sahren and her people were doing a brisk business until a well-dressed man arrived with twenty toughs at his back. Then the customers all just seemed to fade away. Sahren and Barvil walked out of the circle of wagons to see what the trouble was

and stopped dead in their tracks when they saw the man. Sahren's lips drew into a straight, angry line and she addressed the leader.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"Our due, good trader. Only our due. You should have contacted us before you set up in our territory," the man said, maintaining a pleasant demeanor the whole time.

"I don't think you want to press this issue," Sahren said as she walked toward the man. "I am under contract to Elain Fel'Carvin. You have heard of her, haven't you?"

The man laughed. "Elain doesn't hold sway here. Ahmel Fel'Barkan controls the coast. For five gold crowns, you can do business in his territory."

"And if I refuse?" Sahren asked.

"It's a terrible thing when a wagon burns with people still in it. There's all that screaming, and then the smell—"

"I understand you," Sahren said in a subdued tone. "You come with me. Everyone else stays here."

"Sahren," Barvil began, but her raised hand and silenced him.

"Some bandits are too powerful to fight. Fel'Barkan is such a man. Fire-arrows can't be stopped by swords, Barvil. Five gold is cheap compared to the lives of my family."

Sahren and the leader of the criminals returned a short time later and she stopped by Barvil while the man continued on. The horde of enforcers parted to let him pass, then turned to follow him. "We are clear until we hit the highlands again. Gods Below, this makes me so angry. Elain's contractors are supposed to be safe throughout the kingdom," Sahren said in a voice harsh with rage.

Barvil turned to give her a curious look. "Is she really that powerful?" he asked.

"Yes, she is. I've carried her consignments through here before without any trouble. Now Fel'Hadar and Fel'Barkan are not honoring their agreements with her. Someone thinks Elain is getting old— which she is, mind you, but her daughters and granddaughters are not."

Barvil had to smile at the tone of Sahren's voice. "Are they all named Elain as well?" he asked.

"Yes," Sahren said with a hint of a smile. "Every firstborn girl child is given the name Elain, but they use their paternal grandmother's name unless they inherit and become the newest Elain. When I first met Elain, she went by the name Marah."

Barvil nodded and walked back into the warriors' camp. The watch changed hands moments later and all three of Kahndar's men joined him as he walked to Barvil's side.

"Sir, what was that confrontation with those muscle-heads about?" Kahndar asked for all of them.

"The price of doing business in Evandia," Barvil said, then explained what had transpired.

"We could have taken them, Sir," Kahndar almost snarled.

Barvil shook his head "If that were all of them, I might have tried, but Sahren is better-informed than I am. She knows what we are facing and chose to pay. However, she is going to have a very good story for Elain the next time they meet."

The warriors continued to patrol the caravan, but few customers returned. The enforcers of Fel'Barkan had frightened everyone away. It was late in the night when trouble returned.

Davel's hand was on guard when a dozen men raced out of the shadows towards Sahren's wagon. Lavin saw them and began shouting as he ran to intercept them. Chandar was behind Lavin in the circle and came to his aid immediately, shouting "*We are under attack!*" as loudly as he could.

Stavin reacted to the shout, scrambling out of his bedroll and grabbing his helmet and Dragon's Tongue. The rest of his armor was forgotten as he answered the call for help.

Lavin and Chandar were back to back and on the defensive when Stavin arrived. He didn't make a sound as he attacked, and two surprised men died without ever



seeing him. Barvil, Kahndar, and the rest of the warriors were not as quiet, bellowing war cries as they ran to aid the guards.

Stavin saw Karvik join the battle and ran toward him as four men broke toward that part of the caravan. Karvik met them but was bypassed by all but one of the bandits. That man died with Karvik's Dragon's Tongue in his eye, then Karvik joined Stavin and chased the other three.

The three thieves had gone directly to Sahren's wagon and were climbing aboard when Karvik and Stavin caught up with them. Almost in unison, Stavin and Karvik stopped and threw their Dragon's Tongues like spears, killing two of the men and leaving the last man to Karvik's sword.

The surviving thief jumped down to face them with a large knife in his hands, but Karvik didn't even slow down. He hit the man at a full run and drove his sword through the man's body until they both hit the wagon and stopped.

Stavin had to climb a wagon wheel to reach his Dragon's Tongue, and freed Karvik's as well while he was there, tossing it to his friend's outstretched hand.

"Three and three, Kar. Let's go get more," Stavin said as he jumped down.

"Do you think they left us any?" Karvik asked as he wiped the blood from his sword so he could sheath it.

"No, but I've been wrong before," Stavin answered with a laugh and Karvik joined him as he returned to the battle.

There were no surviving thieves by the time Stavin and Karvik got back to the scene of the attack. They both walked to Barvil's side and came to attention. "Sir, there are three more of them by Trader Sahren's wagon," Stavin reported.

"What is your count?" Barvil asked, his eyes on Karvik.

"Three and three, Sir."

"It just isn't fair," Lavin said as he shook his head. "Stavin was asleep. I was right in their path. Stavin got three, and I only got two. It just isn't fair."

Davel nodded in agreement. "He's too fast, and his armor weighs half what ours does. On top that, he's got the reflexes of a cat."

"It's all those years of extra training he got," Horvan said with a grin.

"Yeah," Chandar agreed, "all those years dodging the bigger boys and evading them has given him an unfair advantage."

Barvil was actually laughing when he said, "That's enough, boys. Time to grow up and be warriors again." He looked over toward the wagons as Sahren led a group of her people toward them with the bodies.

"Barvil, look at this one," she said as the bodies were unceremoniously dropped among their comrades. "Do you recognize him?"

"The leader of the men earlier. I'd guess that the safe passage you bought is worthless," Barvil said as he looked at the man. Kneeling, he searched the body and came up with a purse. Looking at Stavín and Karvik, he asked, "Whose kill?"

Stavín looked at Karvik at the same time that Karvik looked at him. "I don't know," Stavín said. "We each got one with our Dragon's Tongues, then Karvik got the third with his sword." Stavín knelt and rolled over the body of the other man who had been pinned to the wagon and looked at his back. "This is a smaller wound. I think that one is Karvik's."

Barvil tossed the pouch to Karvik. "Tuck that away before someone sees it." Standing, he addressed the rest of his men. "Search your kills, then drag the bodies off to the side. Anyone not in full armor," he paused to look at Stavín, "armor up."

\* \* \*

Stavín went and put his armor on as he thought about Horvan's comment. In a certain light, the years he'd spent being pummeled, chased, and teased *were* training of sorts. Because of Harner and his friends he knew how to fall without getting hurt. He knew how to evade the bigger boys, and now that he thought of it, those same tactics were working against the bandits they were facing.

He shook his head sadly. *Five years of being bullied at the hands of boys I once*—he shook his head again. At least he was making a better showing against the bandits than he had ever expected. Eleven men were dead because he was faster than they were. *And*, a stubbornly honest portion of his mind added, *because of the dragon's gift*. His old

armor probably wouldn't have withstood the impact of that first swordsman's strike, or the knife to the groin. His old Dragon's Tongue wouldn't have sliced so easily through the bodies of his opponents.

Strapping on all of his armor that he could, he joined his watch mates and Kahndar finished buckling his back and breast plates for him. Then they all joined the rest patrolling the area.

## Chapter 38

The manager of the caravansary and two well-dressed men arrived with the sun. "I heard that you had some trouble last night," the manager said as he walked up to Sahren. "Did you lose many of your people?"

"No, my people are all fine," Sahren answered. "Goodman Barvil and his men took care of the thieves."

"Then some of the thieves escaped?" one of the other men asked.

"No. There are twelve dead bodies on the other side of the wagons," Sahren said, pointing to the west.

"All twelve – that is, your warriors defeated twelve bandits? They must be extraordinary," the other man said and Sahren focused her gaze on him.

"Yes, they are," she almost hissed. "One of my consignees recommended them to me. I'm sure that Elain will be most gratified to know how good they are. I'll be sending her a message detailing everything that has happened in this city before we leave."

The manager of the caravansary cleared his throat and bowed slightly. "I should make arrangements to bury the bodies. Excuse me, please." He hurried away without waiting to see if anyone objected.

"We should probably be going as well," one of the other men said. They both turned and walked rapidly away.

Barvil had been standing slightly behind Sahren the whole time and stepped up to her side as the men leisurely fled. "That fool knew too much."

"Indeed," she said. "I don't know for certain, but I think that was the fearsome Ahmel Fel'Barkan." She smiled as she turned toward Barvil. "Stavin and Karvik killed the men he sent to rob me. The leader saw which wagon I got the gold from. That's why those three went for me."

"I'm sure Karvik will return your gold," Barvil said, but Sahren held up a hand to stop him.

"That is his, Barvil," she said, stopping to face him. "Those men would have killed me. I value my life above the few crowns."

Barvil bowed his head in acceptance. "As you wish."

Sahren looked around and grimaced. "I've had enough of this place." Raising her hands to her mouth she bellowed, "Load up and harness. We move as soon as we can."

Barvil found his warriors already packing and grabbed his own bedroll before Stavín or Karvik got to it. "Sahren is in a hurry to show her back to this town. Load the wagon quickly and get ready to move. Chandar, you drive today. If something happens, I want my best teamster handling those reins."

Chandar snapped to attention and said, "Yes, Sir," then went and tied his horse to the back of the wagon and climbed aboard. Stavín and the others loaded their gear in the wagon and were waiting in their saddles when the wagons started rolling.

That night Barvil awarded the kills to his men. "Last night was an unusual night for many reasons, not the least of which was an attack when we should have been protected. Sahren paid enough to ensure that. Davel, you claimed two. That brings you to eleven and your second red stripe. Congratulations Command Sergeant Kel'Borvan. Lavin, you claimed two, bringing you to seven and your first red stripe. Congratulations, Sergeant Kel'Farin. Chandar, you claimed one for a total of six and earned your first red stripe as well. Congratulations, Sergeant Kel'Varin. Karvik, you claimed three kills, bringing you to a total of ten." There was a note of pride in Barvil's voice that none of the men could dispute when he awarded Karvik's kills. "Horvan, you woke up and responded to the attack in time to make one kill. That gives you're your fifth white chevron. And Stavín," Barvil said as he paused for a moment, "who was in such a hurry to join the battle that he forgot his armor, claims three kills, bringing his total to eleven and earning his second red stripe. Congratulations, Command Sergeant Kel'Aniston."

Barvil stepped over so that he was looking down into Stavin's eyes. "We all know how good your armor is, Stavin, but even if they can't cut through to your skin, a blow to the back or chest from an ax against mail can still kill you. Worse, it could cripple you. Think about how you'd react to not having your legs under you ever again. Think about not being able to love your wife again. *Think*, always, before you join a fight."

Stavin stood and bowed deeply. "Yes, Sir. It won't happen again, Sir."

\* \* \*

The caravan left the area controlled by Zel'Doran and headed down the road to the coast. Sahren kept their pace brisk until mid day, then slowed to their normal pace as they crossed the Zel'Evid River. The Zel'Evid drained into a gigantic swamp and the road circled north around the periphery.

The caravan remained unmolested as they traveled to the city of Adak's Cove. It had started as a simple fishing village long before Luxand had expanded this far west. Now, it was home to one of the largest fishing fleets in Evandia, but it was still controlled by the powerful Pah'Trini clan of fishermen.

When Stavin found out to that they were going to see the Pah'Trini, he excitedly explained what made them special. "The Pah'Trini are originals. Dandarshandrake never changed them. They are what our ancestors were like before Dandarshandrake remade the Chosen. When they were found, he said, '*These are sufficient as they are.*' I've always wanted to meet one of them."

Everyone had to grin at Stavin's enthusiasm. On the fourth day after leaving Zel'Doran, they arrived at Adak's Cove. The city was built around a wide harbor, and the first thing Stavin noticed was the pungent smell of the shore.

Stavin wasn't the only one who noticed. The driver of the number two wagon began cursing and tied a bandanna over his nose and mouth. Stavin tried that as well, but the smell still got through.

The caravan pulled into an open field near the old city gates and Sahren had them form a line for trade. The warriors were setting up their camp, and Stavin looked at Kahndar and asked, "What is that *stench*?"

Kahndar looked at him with a pained expression. "Low tide and no wind. It'll be better once the breeze picks up," Kahndar answered.

Local people started coming out of the city as word of the traders' arrival spread. Soon there were over a hundred of them and more were coming. Barvil had assigned Davel's hand first watch, so Stavin was free to wander among the crowd.

Stavin found himself being examined as closely as he was examining the Pah'Trini. The proclamation from Twin Bridges concerning him had arrived twenty days before he had, and just about everyone knew him by sight. Curious children and youths trailed silently behind him. Curious, but more courteous, adults watched him closely as he passed. No one approached him, though several of the young women started to until they were called back by their elders.

Something was nagging at the back of Stavin's mind, but it didn't become clear until he heard two of the Pah'Trini arguing. For trade they spoke the common language, but among themselves they spoke Old Tongue.

Stavin didn't hurry his steps, but he did set his course toward Barvil and stopped by his side. "Sir, have you noticed that they speak Old Tongue among themselves?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

Barvil nodded. "Many old societies do. It gives them an advantage in trade because most traders don't. They can speak among themselves and discuss a trade without the trader listening in. Usually. Sahren and several of her people speak Old Tongue as well as I do, but don't let on that they understand what's being discussed. That gives the advantage to the traders."

Stavin was staring at Barvil. "How did you know that?" he asked.

Barvil laughed at the expression on Stavin's face. "I've been doing this since before you were born, Stavin. There was a time when I was a curious youth just like you. I pestered the master of my first caravan until he threatened to put me to work."

Stavin stood frozen for a moment, then had to laugh. "At least Sahren hasn't done that to me yet. Thank you, Sir." Stavin continued to wander through the crowd until it was time for him to join Kahndar and the others on guard.

Late in the evening, a delegation of important people from the city came to the caravan and were met by Sahren and Barvil. "How may I be of service, Lords?" Sahren asked as she bowed respectfully.

"We are seeking Friend of Evandia Stavin Kel'Aniston. I am told that this is his caravan," the youngest of the men replied.

"Your information is only partially correct, Sir. This is my caravan," Sahren said with another bow. "Friend Stavin is one of the mercenaries that I hired in Twin Bridges."

That information seemed to throw the men off balance for a moment and then one of the elders spoke. "We would like to speak to Friend Stavin."

Barvil looked over his shoulder and found Stavin and the rest of Kahndar's hand watching from beside the wagons. He raised his hand and held up one finger. Stavin immediately came forward and stopped at Barvil's side. "Yes, Sir?"

"Friend Stavin, these are the local lords and they wanted to meet you," Barvil explained, motioning toward the visitors.

Stavin removed his helmet and stepped forward. "I am pleased to meet you, lords," he said with a bow.

"*He's a child!*" one of the elders said in Old Tongue.

"*This can't be right,*" another agreed.

"*I assure you that I am indeed Friend Stavin,*" Stavin replied in fluent Old Tongue.

All of the visitors froze for a moment, then the youngest spoke again. "*You speak the Old Tongue well, young man. How is this possible?*"

Barvil stepped up to Stavin's side and said, "*Old Tongue was the official language of the court in the Land of Farind. We of the Cat Clans of Kavin still learn it, though the Land of Farind is no more.*" The man looked disturbed by that information and eased back a little.

Stavin smiled and switched back to the common tongue. "Perhaps we should restrict our discussion to a language that everyone understands. To do otherwise would be rude."



"Yes," agreed the elder lord. "Yes, you are correct, Friend Stavin. That would be rude of us, wouldn't it? Friend Stavin, we wish to welcome you to Adak's Cove. How long will you be staying?"

Stavin turned to Sahren and bowed. "Master Trader Sahren, how long will we be staying?"

"We leave at dawn, Friend Stavin," she said, bowing slightly.

Stavin turned back to the lords and the elder spoke again. "That is unfortunate. Lord Warnel Pah'Aflin is out with the fleet, and will not return for several days. He, like you, encountered a dragon in his youth and wanted to share the tale with you."

Stavin found himself bowing automatically. "I am sorry to hear that we have missed one another. If ever I have the opportunity to set foot in your city again, I'll make every effort to see him. If you would, please pass along a message to him."

"I would be honored, Friend Stavin," the younger man said. "What would you like my uncle to know?"

Stavin smiled slightly. "Please tell your uncle that minstrels are not to be trusted."

Everyone, including Sahren and Barvil, laughed at that. "He is of the same opinion, Friend Stavin," the young lord replied with a grin.

## Chapter 39

The lords turned and walked back to the city as Barvil and Sahren led Stavín back to the wagons. "You know the story of Warnel Pah'Aflin's Dragon, don't you Stavín?" Barvil asked.

"Yes, Sir," Stavín said with a laugh, "but I would have liked to hear the true story. After listening to what has happened to my story, I have to wonder what really happened."

The caravan moved on at dawn, and soon a breeze from the sea blew away the stink of rotting fish and brought a refreshing coolness as well. The road they were on paralleled the coast, and they soon reached another fishing village. Sahren didn't want to stop again so soon, but it was getting dark earlier than normal due to a storm that was coming from the east.

The villagers were happy to see the traders and people hurried out to trade, and then hurried back to their homes, casting furtive glances at the sky the whole time. Stavín saw one old man pause and make a gesture to avert bad luck and he asked, "Sir, what is coming that you invoke Alankarah?"

The old man looked at him for a moment, then said, "Omalaha, the God of Storms. This is the season and those are the signs." He pointed to the low, circulating clouds in the east. "Soon the rains will come to bless the fields, but first of all Omalaha will exact his tribute of blood and sorrow." He hurried away, leaving Stavín to wonder what he was talking about.

Sahren explained it to all of their people as they ate that evening. "Omalaha, the God of Storms, is a storm out of your worst nightmares. It builds out over the sea and comes ashore like an avalanche of wind and water. If there was a road inland I'd run for it, but this one stays on the coast. Our best bet is to get to high ground and anchor the wagons to the largest trees we can find."

The sky in the east was blood red when the sun rose the next morning, then faded to a sullen grey as the day wore on. Sahren had her wagons on the top of a hill back up the road and Barvil had his men working alongside the traders to secure everything.

Stavin had been pressed into an unusual role, but he was the best suited for it. He was using the incredible edge of his Dragon's Tongue to cut saplings that the others were weaving together to build the best shelters they could for the animals.

The wind started picking up near evening and Sahren had everyone climb into the wagons and latch the doors closed. The warriors had been divided out amongst the traders, and Stavin found himself wedged into Kethlan's crowded wagon.

Kethlan patted Stavin's knee and saw him jump. "Calm down, Stavin. There's no sense in wearing yourself out worrying about the weather. The Gods Above won't help you if Omalaha comes for you. Just you relax and don't worry about what's outside."

"How can I relax and stay calm, Kethlan?" Stavin asked, looking at the walls as a gust of wind shook the wagon.

Kethlan smiled sadly before he answered. "Because if Omalaha does hit this wagon, you'll only have a moment to know it before you die. There's no fighting it. There's no reasoning with it. Why spend what might be your last moments worrying yourself sick? Relax and think about your young wife. Think of things you didn't do or say to her and write them down so you won't forget when you get home."

Stavin looked at Kethlan and pushed himself back among the goods that he was sitting on and leaned back. "I'll try," he said just as the wind rocked the wagon, "but it's not going to be easy." Stavin brought out the letter he'd been writing Shari and his ink and quill. This would make a fine tale, if they survived.

The wind continued and suddenly rain joined it, slamming into the wagon like a thousand pebbles thrown at the same time. Stavin jerked awake and was amazed to realize that he had dozed off. The storm lashed the wagon for half the night with wind-driven rain and debris it had picked up from the forest. Sometime late in the night the weather calmed, settling into a heavy rain that fell in sheets across the land.

Morning brought clear skies and sunshine to the region, and the warriors and traders assessed the damage. All of the wagons had survived, though one wagon did have an arm-thick branch through its roof. All of the horses and mules were fine except for one mule that had broken loose and they couldn't find.

Sahren had her people prepare to move on as soon as she was sure no one was hurt. The going was slow because of the muddy road and all of the fallen trees. Barvil had Stavín, Karvík, Barín, and Chandar ride ahead of the caravan to clear the road of any large branches or trees, so they were the first to see the village.

Or what had been a village.

Omalaha had nearly flattened it, and people were searching among the wreckage, calling out names as they sought for some sign of life among the rubble. Stavín turned in his saddle and shouted, "Sir, we need you," back toward the caravan and Barvil rode toward them at a gallop.

Barvil reached the group in just a few moments and took in the scene at a glance. "We have to wait. Sahren is paying us, and if she says move on, we must move on," he said in a low voice.

Sahren arrived not long after and answered Barvil's questioning look immediately. "Barvil, take your men and do what you can. We'll park the wagons and join you as soon as possible. Tie your horses at the gate and we'll take care of them." Barvil led his men forward at a gallop and soon they were dismounting at the village to join the rescue efforts.

Stavín and Karvík teamed up and went to the first house they saw. A man was there sorting through the rubble and calling the name 'Amara' over and over again.

Stavín touched the man's shoulder and he spun to face the two young warriors. "How may we be of assistance, Sir?" Stavín asked and the man relaxed.

"I'm searching for my sister, Amara. She lived alone here," he said, then went back to his search.

Stavín and Karvík joined in, Stavín using his Dragon's Tongue to slice through timbers and Karvík using his strong muscles to move them out of the way. They had

only been there a short time when they heard the man shout, "*Amara!*" and turned to see him kneel and began throwing debris aside. They hurried over to help and removed enough debris to discover that Amara had died when the storm had driven a board through her wall and body, then the wall fell on her. The man collapsed and cried in grief, and Karvik pointed to the next house.

Through the rest of the day and into the night the warriors and traders helped the villagers dig through the rubble in search of the trapped, injured, and dead. By morning the task was done. Every destroyed home had been searched, and the survivors rescued.

Sahren called her people back to the wagons as the sun rose. "Sleep now, my friends. By mid day I want to be on the road again," she said, addressing trader and warrior alike.

Stavin and the others were so tired they just grabbed their bedrolls and lay down against the city wall to sleep. Their plate armor was simply leaned against the wall and all of them were snoring within moments.

## Chapter 40

Voices awoke Stavín sometime later, and he opened his eyes to see several men facing Trader Sahren. One of the men was gesticulating wildly as he asked, "Then what are we to do? They always come after a storm when we are weakest. All we're asking for is two days. The fleet should be back by then, and we'll have enough men to defend the city against anything."

"Gentlemen, I am already behind my schedule. I had planned to be in Zigamarad two days from now, and it's seven days away. I'm sorry, but we must get back on the road," Sahren said, putting her hands up helplessly.

The man began to speak again but was interrupted by a shout from the city. "Sail! Sail from the east!"

"Your fleet?" Sahren asked.

"No. Only pirates follow the storm. Flee now if you must. We cannot protect you," the man said, then hurried away with the others behind him.

"Gods Below," Sahren muttered. "Gods Below and Below them," she said and turned to find most of the warriors watching her. "Barvil, take your men and do what you can. We'll hide the wagons up the road and half of us will come back to help."

Barvil snapped to attention and bowed. "Yes, Master Trader Sahren. You heard her, men," he said loudly as he turned away from her, "armor up and form up. This should be interesting. I've never fought pirates before."

All of the warriors helped one another buckle their armor and then joined Barvil in the flying geese formation before marching into town. People were walking toward the coast with tools ranging from long filleting knives to woodsmen's axes, but they slowed and stared as the nine warriors marched past.

As they neared the harbor, women and children filed by in the opposite direction, laden with the few valuables they possessed. The men of the town had

formed a wall across the main road to the piers, and Stavin was confused to see only twenty or so old men and boys.

"Where are the rest of them?" Karvik asked, voicing Stavin's thought.

"Fishing," Barvil said over his shoulder.

The town leaders saw the warriors coming and hurried to face Barvil. "Thank the Gods Above that you stayed. Take your men to the pier and – "

"With all due respect," Barvil said, interrupting the man, "I'll detail my men as I see fit."

"Are you here to save us or not?" another man asked angrily.

"We are here to aid you, not to throw our lives away," Barvil snapped. "Keep your men where they are and let the pirates come ashore. Once they are on land I'll give the order to scatter. When I do, all of you get out of our way. I don't care what they are like on the water; on the land, we are the superior force."

The men backed down and did as they were told. Soon the pirate ship was swinging into the main pier and men were wading ashore to tie it up. Once their vessel was secure, a group of nearly thirty charged up the pier, brandishing axes and short swords and shouting like madmen.

Barvil waited until they were twenty paces away before shouting, "Scatter!" and the town's men all turned and ran up the road.

The pirates stumbled to a stop when they saw the armored warriors. Several of them started backing away. Then someone on the ship someone shouted, "Ye can still take them, men! There are only be nine of them!"

Another voice shouted, "But they're armed warriors, Captain Bel'Koral! Not common landsmen!"

"Kill them or die by my hand, you cowards!" the captain's voice shouted, and the men on the pier started forward again.

Barvil roared, "*Charge!*" and led the flying wedge of warriors into the clustered pirates. The flying swords and darting Dragon's Tongues of Kel'Kavin met the pirates before they could clear the pier and the slaughter began.

For the pirates, it was an unpleasant turn of events. Commoners themselves, they had always fought against other commoners. The old men, women, and children that the fishermen left behind seldom put up much of a fight, and never with real weapons. Only members of the Chosen or Warrior Clans were allowed to own real weapons such as swords. Most of the landsmen didn't even seem to know how to fight an armed opponent.

Now the pirates faced men who had been trained to fight as soon as they learned to walk. Men bred to be stronger, faster, and more deadly than their lesser brethren. Men of the Cat Clans, possessing the fierceness and reflexes of the ancient plains cats.

Stavin was on the outer point of the wedge and took his first opponent with a high strike to the throat, the blade of his golden Dragon's Tongue nearly beheading the pirate as it passed. Stavin ducked and shoved his shoulder into the dying man's ribs to push him off the pier and almost fell in himself. He didn't have time to be frightened by the prospect of falling into the water as another pirate struck at him. Reflex overrode thought as the golden Dragon's Tongue darted out to split the man's heart.

All of the warriors were having similar luck against the pirates. The fine steel of the Kel'Kavin swords, forged in the ancient fashion, cut through the plain steel and common iron of the pirates' weapons as easily as they cut through the unarmored bodies of the pirates themselves.

Barvil didn't stop when he passed the last pirate, and his men followed his lead. The empty pier was in front of them and the men on the ship were desperately trying to free their lines and escape. But there was no escaping the warriors as Barvil led them up the plank to the deck. The pirates on the ship fought with the ferocity of cornered rats, but none of them lasted more than two breaths against Old Farindia's finest warriors.

Stavin found himself facing a man who knew how to use a sword and shield, and took a moment to fight him. He let the man catch his Dragon's Tongue with his sword and used the momentum that the man's push gave him to sweep the lower blade of his Dragon's Tongue up through the shield, splitting it and the man's arm at the same time before sweeping across to behead him and move on to the next opponent.



The fight was done in just a few bloody moments and Barvil led his men ashore once again. The men of the town stood in silent awe as Barvil marched up to them. "That was disappointing. I'd always heard that pirates were fearsome fighters," he said, then turned to his men. "Get your kill counts and war-booty. Dispatch any wounded and head back to the city gates. I don't think Sahren wants to stay here very long."

"What about the ship?" one of the townsmen asked.

Barvil raised his hands and shrugged. "Does anyone want to buy it?"

There was a whispered conference among the town's men, then the leader stepped forward. "We are poor in gold, good Sir. The most we can come up with is about one hundred gold crowns. It's nowhere near what a ship like that is worth, but it's all we have."

Barvil sighed and said, "Well, we can't take it with us. Gather your gold and silver while we gather our due from the dead." He turned away and started searching the men he had killed.

Stavin had accounted for only six pirates in his fight and was disappointed by his count. Four men had fallen to his blades on the pier and only two more on the ship. He was searching the beheaded swordsman when Barvil called to him.

"Stavin, with me. Kar, Kahn, don't let any of the townsmen aboard until we come up." He opened the door into the ship's sterncastle and walked in with his sword in his hand. Stavin was just two steps behind him with his Dragon's Tongue at the ready.

Barvil kicked open the door into the captain's cabin and charged through with his sword ready, but he was alone. Looking at Stavin he said, "Search for a locked box or cabinet. Every story I've ever heard about pirates had the gold and silver in the captain's cabin." The two searched and after a few minutes Barvil said, "Hah! Stavin, come here." Stavin went to Barvil's side and looked where he was pointing. "Cut that open," Barvil commanded as he pointed at a ventilated cabinet.

Stavin brought his Dragon's Tongue up and slid the point of a blade down the side of the cabinet door. The door opened to reveal a strongbox bound with iron. Stavin didn't have to be prompted this time and the lock fell away after one blow.

Barvil opened the box and grunted. "Not much of a treasure, but added to the hundred gold from the town it'll do just fine. Off we go, Stavín. Lead the way."

Stavín led the way back out to the deck and all of the warriors came to ask what Barvil was carrying. "It'll wait. Dav, Kahn, you two carry this. Let Karvik and Stavín carry your booty. Don't stop until you get to our horses. I'll deal with the townsmen."

The box was spotted as it was carried through the town, but nothing was said. Kahndar and Davel led their hands to their horses, arriving just before the traders came back up the road.

"It's over?" Sahren asked.

Davel said, "It's over. We'll be ready to go as soon as Barvil finishes with the townsmen."

Sahren stepped up to Davel and looked him in the eye. "You sound disappointed. Why?"

Davel grimaced and said, "I only got four kills," in a sullen tone. "They were supposed to be fearsome pirates, but there wasn't a warrior among them."

Sahren began to laugh and soon everyone was laughing with her. "Davel, they weren't warriors. They were pirates. Common men, every one of them. They didn't grow up with swords in their hands like you did. Those pirates have probably never encountered competent armed opponents before. They've always just slaughtered other commoners who don't know as much about sword work as a ten-year-old of your people."

"But all the stories about pirates paint them as fearsome fighters who kill everyone they face," Davel complained.

"And what is said of the Warriors of Kel'Kavin?" she asked. "You actually *do* kill everyone you face, and real warriors at that. The stories about pirates are told by the survivors for their raids. Commoners, like the pirates themselves. Of course they consider the pirates fearsome fighters who kill everyone. Most of them have never seen what someone like you can do." Barvil joined them a short time later and they all returned to the caravan.

That night Barvil awarded the kills to his men. "Davel, you claim four. That gives you fifteen. Kahndar claims six for a total of fourteen. Lavin claims five, bringing his total to twelve and earning him his second red stripe. Congratulations, Command Sergeant Kel'Farin. Chandar claims four for a total of ten. Horvan claims five and also totals out at ten. Barin claims six for a total of nine and earns his first red stripe. Congratulations Sergeant Kel'Kandis. Karvik claims seven," he paused to look at his grinning son, "bringing him to a total of seventeen and his third red stripe. Congratulations, Senior Sergeant Kel'Carin. Stavin claims six, also totaling seventeen, and earning him his third red stripe. Congratulations Senior Sergeant Kel'Aniston. I claim six. That's forty-nine, but I counted fifty-two bodies. Who isn't sure of their count?" When no one spoke he looked around and shook his head. "Davel gets one and his third red stripe, and Chandar gets one and his second red stripe and Horvan gets the last one and his second red stripe. Congratulations to Senior Sergeant Kel'Borvan and Command Sergeants Kel'Varin and Kel'Erins. Now there's the matter of the strongbox. Dav, Kahn, I asked for a count. What did you come up with?"

Kahndar answered. "Eighty gold crowns, two hundred sixty-three silver crowns, and five hundred forty-seven copper sparks from five different kingdoms."

"Plus one hundred gold crowns worth of gold and silver for the ship. Does anyone object to equal shares?" Barvil asked, and when no one objected he began counting. When he was done each of them had received the equivalent of twenty-three gold crowns, five silver crowns, and three copper sparks.

The next day they moved on. Trader Sahren smiled as she looked at Barvil. "It looks like good weather ahead. We should have no trouble reaching Zigamarad now." By evening the clouds were lowering and she muttered, "Never give the Gods an excuse to play with you," as the first fat raindrops fell.

Barvil looked at the sky, then north toward Kel'Kavin. He'd been away so many times and always had to wonder how Sahrena was getting along without him. A snort of laughter bubbled up from his chest. "Probably quite well," he whispered so no one would hear. "Probably very well."

\* \* \*

A storm brought rain to the valley and welcome water to the fields. The new crops were growing like weeds, but the weeds were growing just as fast. Every day the youngsters had to walk the fields, gathering the weeds so that the grain would get all of the water and nourishment from the ground.

Dorvina was always among the work parties, and, in the way of such things, those groups sorted themselves out into people of similar ages and interests. In Dorvina's case, that meant she was surrounded by other girls and women in their mid-teens.

"I got a note from Aeron," Nahrene Kel'Jordal said. "His group was in Coravia, in Moravad itself. He got three kills already! One of them had two gold crowns in his purse. Their caravan is headed east into the mountains and may even go all the way down into Luxand. He promised to buy me something from there if he does."

"I haven't heard from Jortan yet," another girl said. "He said he'd send a message when he made his first kill. I hope he does soon."

Nahrene said, "He'll probably have to wait until he does and hope the bandit has some silver on him. It cost Aeron two silver crowns to send his message."

"Have you heard anything from your father or Karvik, Dorvi?" Orana Kel'Davin asked.

Dorvina smiled and nodded. "Dad sent a note from Twin Bridges. They were waiting for a new caravan. They had only been in one fight and Davel and Cordon got the only kills."

"I'll bet Harner was happy to hear that," Orana said with a sly grin.

"What do you mean?" Dorvina asked. "Of course he was happy that his brother got another kill."

"I mean, I'll bet he was happy that Stavik didn't," Orana said. "The fewer kills Stavik makes, the fewer kills he'll need to catch up."

Dorvina bit back a sharp retort. She was, after all, a servant and Orana was one of the highest-ranking girls in the valley. "He won't have any trouble surpassing Master

Stavin. The Warmaster wouldn't start Sta – Master Stavin with a sword because he's so small. Harner already has three years of sword instruction. He'll make his kills. Don't you worry about that."

"Oh, I'm not worried about Harner," Orana said as she turned away from Dorvina. "My father already told him no when he approached him about me," Orana continued with a hint of malice.

"When did he –?" Dorvina asked with a trembling voice.

"Right after your father lost his honor. Franik and Alvar did as well." Orana turned away from Dorvina to pull a weed and hide her vicious little smirk. "My father told all of them that he wouldn't see me wed to an untried boy who'd never left the valley. That's why I was surprised when Harner didn't join the expedition anyway."

"They all turned away?" Dorvina asked in a choked tone.

"Of course," Orana answered, still not looking at the older girl. "None of their parents would approve of them marrying a servant, and none of them want to wait two or three years for you. You'll probably end up married to a man much younger than you, like Sharindis did. Maybe you'll get lucky and marry someone like Stavin."

## Chapter 41

Torrential rain lashed the caravan, turning the road into a river and the surrounding land into a swamp. Everyone wore rain-cloaks, but they only helped a little. The water that leaked past the cloaks turned to steam and soaked them all to skin. Even Stavín, whose dragon-scale under-padding usually kept cool, was sweating and miserable.

Slowly, indistinct forms in the distance became buildings. As more buildings became visible, Trader Sahren turned her wagon off the road and the others gratefully followed. Once the wagons were parked, Barvil called all the warriors together.

"It's too muddy to set up tents. I'm going to ask for lodgings at the caravansary. They're likely to be flea-ridden or worse, but we can't camp in this muck." He looked down at the ankle-deep mud they were all standing in and snarled.

Davel smiled and commented, "It looks like not selling the wagon worked out in our favor after all, Sir. We can put our gear in it."

Barvil looked thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged. "I'd have preferred the coin. Ah, well, no bad without some good. Dav, take your hand and start rounds. Kahn, see to it that all of our gear is under the tarp and that the horses have some cover." Without waiting for an answer, he turned and walked away toward the caravansary.

"Yes, Sir," Davel and Kahndar snapped anyway, and Davel walked off with his hand filing behind him.

Kahndar looked at his men and waved a hand toward the wagon. "You heard him. Spread that canvas over the wagon and get everything under it."

"Maybe we could ask the traders to let us tuck a horse in with each of their teams," Horvan suggested, pointing to where the traders were stretching tarps out from the eaves of their wagons to make lean-tos for their mules.

"Good idea," Kahndar agreed. "I'll go ask." He walked away as quickly as the sticky muck would allow. The three remaining men worked on stowing their gear until he returned. "Trader Sahren said yes. Start leading the horses to the wagons, and dry them as well as you can once they are settled."

The young warriors made quick work of the task and were back at the wagon when Barvil returned. "We have rooms, but they're as bad as I feared. I've already dusted them with carass powder. That will help with the fleas and such, but watch out for spiders. Solitary browns and red-belly blacks are common here. A good rule to follow in these lands is if you don't know what it is, kill it. There are plenty of them to breed replacements."

Barvil grabbed his gear and led the way, with each warrior behind him bringing his own gear and that of his year-mate. The rooms were small, dingy, dirty, and mildewed. They smelled of rot and carass powder, and underlying both was the smell of rats. Each room held two beds, so Barvil had only rented three. With the hands watching turn and turn-about, there was no need for more. Stavin and Barin were in the first room.

Stavin took the opportunity to strip to the skin and use his blanket to dry off with. He hung his under-padding to dry a little and was in the process of drying the inside of his armor when someone knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" Stavin asked.

"Barvil," a muffled voice said from the hall.

Barin answered, "Come in, Sir," as both young men wrapped blankets around their waists.

The door opened, but it wasn't Barvil who entered. Three men rushed into the room and attacked Stavin. They swarmed him with rope and twisted cloth in their hands, trying to capture him. They ignored Barin until he drove his Dragon's Tongue into the last man's back.

The other two turned to defend themselves, and Barin suddenly found himself facing two swords. He stabbed out at one man and left his Dragon's Tongue standing in the man's chest, then drew his own sword.

The fight was uneven and Barin was being forced back when the man suddenly looked startled and collapsed. Barvil was behind him and had driven his sword through the man's back. "I thought I heard my name, so I came to investigate," he said, wiping his blade on the man's clothing. "Stavin, are you all right?"

"Stave?" Barin asked when there was no answer. "*Stave!*" he shouted and crossed the room quickly to where Stavin was slumped against the wall. He grabbed Stavin's shoulders to shake him, but a spot of red caught his eye. "He's been stabbed!"

Barvil turned over the bed to make room and knelt beside him, grabbing Stavin's hands to reveal the wound. There was a hole in his stomach, just below his ribs. "Kahndar! Horvan! Get in here!" he shouted as he pressed his hands over the wound. The two older men were already in the hall and ran into the room. "Stavin has been stabbed. Kahn, I bought that pot of Heal-All from Elain. It's in my pack. Go. Horvan, armor up and get back as fast you can." Barvil turned back to Stavin, confident that his orders were being obeyed.

Kahndar returned in just moments and handed Barvil the pot of salve. "I brought your sewing kit as well, Sir," he said as he knelt.

"Good," Barvil said as he pressed some of the salve into Stavin's wound. Kahndar had threaded a needle without being told and had it ready when Barvil turned toward him. "Good man," was Barvil's only comment.

Horvan came back armed and armored, and stood in the doorway with his sword bare in his hands. He said, "Armor up, Barin," then turned to face the hallway.

Barin quickly squirmed into his mail and buckled his plate as well as he could, then walked over to stand behind Horvan. "Stand tall, and I'll finish buckling your plate," he said and Horvan raised his elbows without changing his ready pose. Barin was done in a few moments and patted Horvan on the shoulder.



"Your turn, Barin," Kahndar said, and Barin turned to face him. Kahndar made short work of buckling the armor, then left to get his own. When he returned, Barvil spoke to all three of them.

"We are not staying here. Pack up. I'll get a litter for Stavín when I go get our money back." He glanced back to where Stavín was stretched out on the floor. "I don't like the location of that stab wound."

Barvil was only gone for a short time. He returned with a litter and the manager of the hostel. Another man trailed them silently, staying several steps back. The manager was wringing his hands as he walked and blood from a fresh cut on his face told the tale of what kind of persuasion Barvil had used on him.

"This has never happened before, good Sir. We've never had anyone attacked here. Never."

Barvil handed the litter to Kahndar and motioned towards Stavín. "I'm sure Friend Stavín will take comfort in knowing that he was the first person attacked here. I'm sure his majesty will also find the incident quite interesting."

The other man stepped forward and got Barvil's attention. "Goodman Barvil, I would like to see the writ as proof that this is in fact Friend Stavín, please." He spoke softly, but his voice carried through the room.

Barvil went to Stavín's gear and retrieved the writ, and handed it over without a word. The man scanned the document, then rolled it up and handed it back to Barvil. "Very well. There will be no charges against your men."

"Sheriff Kel'Orman, what about—?"

"You're lucky I don't take you before Lord Zel'Ival. You run this place at his pleasure, and I doubt he's going to be pleased to hear that Friend Stavín was attacked under your roof."

"Yes, Sheriff Kel'Orman," the manager said in a very respectful tone.

Kahndar and Horvan had placed Stavín on the litter while Barvil was dealing with the sheriff, and Barin busied himself bundling their gear. Barvil waited until the sheriff and manager had gone before he addressed his men.

"Did you search the bodies?"

Kahndar snapped to attention before replying. "Yes, Sir. Three swords I wouldn't use in practice and twenty-seven copper coins from three different kingdoms. If they were being paid, they hadn't collected yet."

"Very well," Barvil said. "Barin first with the gear, then you two with Stavin." He drew his sword and pointed out the door. "I'll bring up the rear. Head for the caravan."

Barvil watched every shadow on the short walk back to the wagons. With the younger men all burdened, he was their only defense. Several people stopped what they were doing to stare as they passed, but no one approached them.

## Chapter 42

Karvik was the first to see them and broke away from the wagons at a run, shouting, "Trouble from the town side," to bring more help. Davel came at a run to see what the trouble was and met Barvil near their wagon.

"Three men tried to take Stavín," Barvil explained without stopping. "Get some braces to make a tent out of that canvas. We're staying in the wagon."

"How's Stavé?" Karvik asked, crowding forward to look.

"Stabbed, high on his stomach. It looks bad," Barvil answered, patting Karvik on the shoulder. "Get back on guard." He gave Karvik a little shove to get him going, then turned to the wagon. Barin had shoved their gear under the tarp and climbed into the wagon to hold it clear while Kahndar and Horvan slid Stavín in amongst their tack and belongings.

Trader Sahren arrived with several of her people in response to the alarm, and listened to Barvil's terse explanation. She turned her head slightly and said, "Fetch Angeleese," and one of the traders immediately ran off to obey her. "You others, get railings from an unused paddock. Bring lashings so we can throw together a framework over the wagon." When the rest of her people had gone to do her bidding, she turned back to Barvil.

"Angeleese isn't a full healer, but she is an apprentice-class healer-mage. She's dealt with stabbings before." Sahren paused to shake her head. "And once again, someone has tried to kill him because of that armor."

Barvil could only nod his agreement. "They wanted him alive, probably for ransom. He was only stabbed after Barin interfered."

"Don't let the boy hear you say that, Barvil. It's guilt he doesn't need," Sahren said. "It would have been worse if he hadn't acted."

"I know. I just have to make sure he knows."

The traders started coming back with timber railings then and Barvil and Sahren joined in the effort to position them. In just a few moments, they had lifted the tarp and secured an A-frame over the wagon.

Angelese hurried over with a large bag in her hands. Sahren motioned her toward the wagon, and she quickly climbed in. Just a few breaths later Kahndar, Horvan, and Barin climbed out. At Barvil's questioning look, Kahndar raised his hands to his shoulder level and shrugged. "She said get out."

\* \* \*

Inside the wagon, Angelese removed the wad of cloth Barvil had bound over the wound. She placed her hands on either side of the wound, forming an arrowhead with her thumbs and fingers, and pressed just a little.

Stavin's eyes snapped open. He took a deep breath, then coughed once. He stiffened as a bolt of agony shot through his body, and collapsed again.

Angelese smiled slightly once his eyes focused on her. "My apologies, Stavin, but I had to know if your lung was punctured. It would appear that you are luckier than most men. It also appears that the Heal-All is going to be of more use to you than I will be."

"The men—" Stavin began, but Angelese put two fingers on his lips to silence him.

"They are dead." She looked around to draw his attention. "You are safe in your wagon, and your people are on guard. There's nothing for you to worry about. I want your permission to place a sleep-spell on you to help you heal."

"Why my permission?" Stavin asked in a whisper.

"Because I am not powerful enough to do it against your will," she replied with a smile. At his nod, she began chanting and moving her hands in front of his face.

Stavin was fascinated by the sound of her voice and the movements of her hands. He felt himself begin to drift and didn't resist as the warmth of sleep enfolded him.

Angelese kept chanting as she secured a clean pad of cloth over Stavin's wound. The chant and sleep spell worked together to take Stavin into a deep sleep in just a few

moments, and Angelese smiled and checked his breathing one more time before she climbed out of the wagon.

Barvil and Sahren helped her down. "He is asleep and will remain so until I awaken him, or the spell wears off. Three days is the longest I've ever managed. He's lucky you were there and acted as quickly as you did. They missed his lung, but nicked his liver. The Heal-All had already stopped the bleeding, so I just reinforced its magic. He's not going to be good for much for six or seven days."

Barvil seemed to sag a little. "That's a relief. I was afraid this knife might have killed him after all." He held up the blade and Sahren stepped forward.

"That looks like —"

"— The blade that almost got him back at Parvin's Hold. It is. He probably grabbed it to defend himself and got stabbed with it by accident — not that I'd tell the authorities that."

Trader Sahren smiled wryly. "No, I wouldn't tell them that. I had planned to travel on tomorrow, but I think we'd better give Stavin an extra day before we move him." She looked up at the sky and grimaced. "Hopefully this rain will end and we can get some trading done."

The day continued dark and rainy, and night arrived almost unnoticed. Barvil changed back to two-man patrols to spread the load out. Slogging through the mud and rain was much more tiring than most watches. Barvil called his men together as they ate.

"Barin, you did a good job today. When those men attacked Stavin you didn't hesitate to attack them in his defense. With two more kills added to your total, you now have eleven and your second red stripe. Congratulations and well done, Command Sergeant Kel'Kandis."

Morning brought a reduction in the rain, though it never completely stopped. The first customers for the traders arrived soon after dawn, and the traders scrambled to open their wagons and display their wares. When one of the townsfolk walked by

wearing light clothes and carrying a rain shield, Kahndar made the comment, "I didn't think many people would come out in this weather."

The townsman laughed. "What, this?" He waved at the sky. "This is hardly a mist. It'll be like this for weeks, and we can't let a little water stop the world, now can we?"

The day proved to be active for the traders, and Barvil found himself bemused by the attitude of the locals. They hardly acknowledged the rain at all.

Near mid day a carriage arrived and an elegantly dressed man stepped down. Servants kept a pair of rain shields over him at all times, but he still squelched through ankle-deep mud as he walked over to the wagons. Barvil and Sahren went to meet him, and Sahren bowed deeply before she spoke. "Greetings, Lord."

The man stopped and bowed his head slightly. "I am Lord Kahrter Zel'Ival. Where is Friend Stavín?"

"Friend Stavín is spelled asleep in our wagon, Lord Zel'Ival," Barvil replied, pointing to the wagon.

"Will he survive?" the lord asked, looking at Barvil for the answer.

"We believe he will, Lord Zel'Ival," Barvil answered. "However, stab wounds can be deceiving."

"Is he in need of a healer-mage? You said he is spelled asleep."

"One of my family is an apprentice-class healer-mage, Lord Zel'Ival," Sahren said, bowing again. "She feels that the Heal-All that Goodman Barvil applied immediately after the stabbing will be sufficient."

Lord Zel'Ival pursed his lips, then shook his head. "I'd feel better if my healer-mage looked in on him. Carvon is a Master, but he's very close to achieving Adept status. And don't concern yourself about a fee. I pay him well enough." Without another word the lord turned and walked back to his carriage.

Sahren and Barvil watched him go, then went to the warriors' wagon. Angeleese was sitting with Stavín, sewing a shirt while she monitored her patient. "Angie," Sahren said, "there is a Master healer-mage coming to check on Stavín."

Angelese simply nodded and said, "Good."

Master healer-mage Carvon Fel'Horas turned out to be a relatively young man. He had barely thirty years behind him, but he carried himself with a quiet confidence that set most people who met him instantly at ease. He was shown to the wagon and immediately climbed in. "You are the healer for your people?" he asked when he saw Angelese.

"I am an apprentice healer-mage. Until now that has always been enough," she replied. Motioning to Stavin, she said, "The knife missed his lung, but nicked his liver. The Heal-All that his leader used seems to be taking care of everything. I'm just keeping him still so he doesn't undo the good it's done."

Master Fel'Horas nodded and placed his hands on Stavin's torso, one hand above and one below the dressing. After a moment he sat back and smiled. "You are correct. The Heal-All is taking care of everything. How old are you?" he suddenly asked.

"Seventeen," she replied. "I've been apprenticed for five years, but Adept Doranah says this is as far as I'll go. I don't have the power to do much more."

Carvon looked down at Stavin. "You do well enough with what you have. He should stay still for three or four more days. Even then, he shouldn't overexert himself."

Angelese bowed her head. "I had thought five days – if I can get him to stay down that long."

Carvon chuckled. "Young fire-eaters, out to conquer the world. Good luck to him." With that, he climbed out of the wagon and found Barvil waiting for him.

"How is he?" Barvil asked, nodding toward the wagon.

"Resilient and healing. Your young healer is taking good care of him. Keep him still for a few more days, and he'll be fine."

"Healer," Sahren began, "I had thought to move on in the morning. Would that be safe?"

"Yes. Just keep him in the wagon lying down for another day, and sitting still for three more. I won't say he's out of danger, but he should be soon." He bowed deeply and walked back to where he had tied his horse.

Sahren turned to Barvil. "We will move him to the bed in Angeleese's wagon in the morning. That way she'll always be with him. For all that this was an unintended stop, it has been a fruitful one. We'll be stopping again in Miller's Ferry tomorrow. I'm told it's only half a day's travel, even in these conditions."

Barvil nodded, then glanced at the wagon. "We will be ready to travel at first light."



## Chapter 43

The caravan moved on as soon as it was light enough to see. Stavín was in Angeleese's bed, and her wagon had been moved to the number two slot. Kahndar had been moved forward as well, and rode to the right of the wagon. With Barvil to the left of the lead wagon and Karvik left of number three, they all felt that Stavín was sufficiently protected.

The caravan reached Miller's Ferry before mid day, and pulled into the caravansary. The traders had opened their wagons and displayed their goods before the sun had traveled half a span further, but there were still people waiting before the traders were ready.

Stavín was kept in Angeleese's wagon, still spelled asleep. That was deemed better than drawing attention by moving him. Barvil, Karvik, and Kahndar paid extra attention to the wagon as well. No one was going to attack Stavín at this stop.

Trader Sahren decided to move on early the next day and crossed the Zel'Pakrin River not long after sunup. The ferrymen did not want to accept a that a Friend of Evandia was traveling with a caravan of common traders, but finally conceded after the senior ferryman climbed into the wagon and checked Stavín himself.

The Zel'Pakrin was just the first of the major rivers that filled that part of the kingdom. Fortunately, Stavín was awake before the next river was reached.

"Hello?" Stavín said as he slowly regained consciousness.

Angeleese looked back from the wagon's seat, then whistled for the caravan to stop. Barvil and Kahndar climbed aboard before the wagon stopped and Barvil asked, "Is he all right?"

"He is awake," Angeleese answered. "I have to check on him." She climbed into the back of the wagon and looked down into Stavín's eyes. "How do you feel, Stavín?" she asked.

"My chest and stomach hurt. Other than that, I'm fine," he answered.

"There's no need to whisper. It's near midmorning."

"I wasn't—" he said, then cleared his throat and tried again. "I wasn't trying to whisper. It just came out that way. How long have I been asleep?"

"This is the fourth day since you were stabbed, but just barely. You've been asleep for just under three full days."

Stavin stared at her for a moment, then said, "Oh, Gods Below," and tried to get up, but Angeleese pushed him back down with just one hand.

"No, you don't, Stavin. You won't be getting up any time soon."

"But I—"

"Stavin," Barvil said from the wagon's seat, "you stay put. You came perilously close to joining Cordon and Ivalin. Healer Angeleese and Master Healer Carvon both thought you'd need at least five days of rest before that Heal-All will have completed its task. You'll also need to regain your strength after all of the energy it's pulled out of you."

Stavin stopped trying to get up and relaxed. "Yes, Sir."

Kahndar stuck his head in beside Barvil's and grinned. "After you get your strength back, you and I have some work to do."

Stavin twisted in his neck around and asked, "What kind of work?"

Kahndar's grin grew wider and there was a twinkle in his eye as he replied, "I'm going to teach you how to avoid getting stabbed with your own knife."

Stavin collapsed and covered his face, and all three of the others heard his moan of, "Oh, Gods Below."

Stavin regained his strength quickly, though he was still forced to stay in the back of Angeleese's wagon. His mind was kept busy by all of the sights around him.

Angeleese and her family were carvers, and she carried a large assortment of their art. Figures of animals, real and imagined, mixed with representations of iconic figures from the past, all carved from stone, wood, bone, or ivory.

The caravan finally stopped to trade at the city of Zigamarad, one of the greatest imperial-age cities on the continent, two days later. The city and the magnificent bridge that spanned the mouth of the Zel'Horgan River were named for Emperor Zigama Zel'Draval, the man who had ordered their construction. For over a thousand years the bridge had arched gracefully over the waters and commerce of a third of the continent.

Stavin was well enough by the time they arrived that he could sit up with Angeleese and get the full impact of the sight. "Gods Above and Below. I've read about it and seen drawings, but the reality is so much more than I can describe."

"I agree, Stavin. I've never seen it before either," Angeleese said as she guided her wagon behind Sahren's. The traders were forming their circle and Stavin climbed down to unhitch the team as soon as Angeleese had set her brake.

Barvil walked over and looked him over carefully. "How are you feeling, Stavin?"

Stavin took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It doesn't hurt to breathe anymore, Sir. Nothing is tender or tight. Can I please put my armor on now?"

Barvil looked up at Angeleese, and she nodded. "Take him. His fidgeting is driving me to distraction."

Barvil laughed and Stavin blushed. "Very well. Armor up, Stavin. Stay with Kahndar today and eat when you can. I can see your bones. That Heal-All used up all of your reserves."

Stavin snapped to attention and said, "Yes, Sir," then walked off toward the warriors' wagon. Angeleese caught Barvil's attention before he walked away.

"He really should take it slow for a few days."

Barvil nodded. "I know. That's why he's with Kahndar. Kahn has been through the same thing, so he knows that Stavin isn't up to anything too strenuous. He'll keep him from overtaxing his system."

Angeleese smiled and turned away, and Barvil went to join his men. Kahndar spotted him. "We were just helping Stave get dressed, Sir. Are you sure he's ready?"

"No, but he thinks he is," Barvil answered. "Slow and steady, Kahn. Wait a few days before you start knife-fighting with him."

"Yes, Sir," Kahndar answered.

Stavin climbed out of the wagon and faced Barvil. "I'm ready, Sir."

Barvil looked him up and down, then patted him on the shoulder. "Take things slowly for a day or two. Sahren is planning to stay and trade for two days, so you have plenty of time to recover. Same rules here as in Zel'Fray concerning going into the city."

Stavin said, "I understand, Sir," and turned away with Kahndar.

Kahndar led Stavin off to where the horses were corralled. "Kar has been seeing to your horse. Everything else has been divided up by the rest of us."

Stavin spent a moment caressing his horse's nose before he answered. "I'll make up for it, Kahn."

"There's no need, Stave. I just figured you'd want to know. One thing I wanted to tell you is that now is the time to start looking for small things to buy. Dav and I have Barvil's permission to take our hands to the other caravans and the bazaar shops, so long as we stay together." He paused to look at the sun. "We don't have time right now, it's too close to mid day, but this evening we'll have some time."

## Chapter 44

Stavin took his place in Kahndar's hand again after the mid day meal and spent his time thinking of all the things he wanted to buy. Gifts for his family, especially Shari, were foremost in his mind, but he wanted other things as well. Books, especially histories of the empire and old kingdoms, were on his list, as well as the tales of great heroes.

There was still plenty of daylight left when their watch ended and Kahndar led them back to their wagon. Once all four of them were together, he gave his instructions. "We stay together. Always. Stay alert for cutpurses and light fingers; there are always some of both in a bazaar. Stave, I recommend that you put most of your coin in your big pouch and leave it with Barvil. You don't have to, it's your money, but you have more to lose than anyone else does."

Stavin nodded his understanding. "You're right. I'll just take enough for one or two items. I can always go back later if I don't have enough."

Horvan walloped him on the shoulder. "Smart man. I'll add that you don't want to drink much in a place like this. You never know what you're getting."

Stavin hurriedly put most of his silver and gold in the larger of his pouches and took it to Barvil for safekeeping, taking only three gold crowns, twenty silver, and fifty copper sparks with him.

Kahndar led them at a slow pace through three caravans, but none of them was tempted by the items. Then they reached the bazaar. The bazaar of Zigamarad was famous as a place where anything could be had – for a price.

The first thing that caught Stavin's attention was the scent of something he'd never smelled before. It appeared that the scent had caught Kahndar's attention as well, because he altered their route toward the smell.

"Ah, warriors, a sweet treat to eat, yes?" a time-roughened voice asked, and Stavín looked around Kahndar to see a wizened old woman stirring a cauldron over a low brazier.

"What is your produce, good lady?" Kahndar asked.

The old woman laughed. "Honey-spiced nuts, flatterer. A copper a cone," she said, picking up a piece of flat-bread and twisting it into a cone.

Stavín nudged his way past Kahndar and put a spark on her bench. "One please, and if we like them we'll buy more."

The old woman had frozen as soon as she saw Stavín, and now her gaze slowly moved over his armor until it reached the dragon on his helmet. "There's tales of a golden dragon warrior what's traveling the kingdom. Be you that one, Lord?"

Now it was Stavín's turn to laugh. "I'm not a lord, flatterer. Stavín Kel'Aniston, Friend of Evandia." He bowed deeply and removed his helmet. "Those smell really good." The old woman recovered her wits and filled the cone with hot sticky nuts and handed it to Stavín with a smile.

Stavín turned and offered the cone to the others first, and each man took a sample. The wide grins on the faces of his friends told the tale and three more copper sparks hit the bench as Stavín took a nut and popped it into his mouth. The honey was mixed with a spice that gave it a slightly hot aftertaste.

"What is the honey mixed with, if it's not a secret?" Barin asked.

"Makanin. It's a spice from the southern islands. It's common enough here," the old woman answered.

"It's good," Horvan commented.

Stavín concentrated on eating. If this makanin was common, then maybe he could afford some to take home.

When all four of them were reduced to licking honey from their fingers, Kahndar led them farther into the bazaar. Stavín looked around at the shops all around them. He drew plenty of attention as well and people stopped what they were doing to stare as he passed.

Barin was the next to spot something that he was interested in and steered the group toward a shop displaying embroidered wall hangings and pillows. The man under the awning looked up as they approached and scrambled to his feet. "Ah, warriors, how may I be of service? A dainty for a lady? A soft pillow with—"

"Embroidery yarn," Barin said, interrupting the man. "Silk, in as many colors as you carry."

"Yarn, young warrior? Of course, of course, come this way." The merchant led Barin to the side of the stall and showed him a selection of yarns that rivaled a rainbow. "Make your selection, young warrior."

"What is your price, good Sir?" Barin asked, touching the brightly colored string with one finger.

"Five sparks a span, young warrior," the merchant said with a wide smile and Barin's hand snapped back to his side.

"Five! Five sparks a span? Do I look like I'm made of gold? Or do you count me a fool because I'm young? A spark a span, and no more."

The merchant all but wailed his answer. "A spark? You'd rob me and see my family living in the streets? This is silk, from far Cornard, and no finer yarns are to be had. Oh, my wife will beat me and refuse my bed, but business has been slow. Four sparks a span. I can tighten my belt for a while." The merchant looked sorrowful, but Barin wasn't falling for his act.

Barin sneered at the man. "Your belt would thank me if it could. It's already too tight. I could possibly be persuaded to part with two sparks a span, so long as it was my span and not yours."

The merchant replied with a convincing wail of anguish. "Ayee, you steal the food from the very mouths of my children! You are a veritable giant! Your span is half again mine, yet you want me to cut my price? I'd be cutting my own throat."

Barin grinned and put his hand on the hilt of his sword. "I could cut it for you if you'd prefer."

The merchant looked at Barin and stood straight. "Hah! I knew you were a bandit! Three. Three sparks a span, though you force me to sell my daughter to accommodate you."

"My span, and I'll pay three sparks," Barin almost snarled.

"My span. I insist! You have already cheated me!"

"Imperial span, sealed by the Crown," Barin finally said, and the merchant seized on it.

"Done!" he said, clapping his hands once. "Three sparks per imperial span. Now, what colors would you like, young warrior? I have many shades of every imaginable color."

Barin reached into his pouch and pulled out a thin ribbon of parchment. "I have a list," he said, handing it to the merchant with a smile.

The merchant took the list and started pulling skeins of silk yarn from their bins. Once he had all of the colors, he began measuring the lengths. Barin stood at his shoulder and watched him closely as he did, checking each measurement carefully.

When he was satisfied with the colors and lengths, Barin laid out four silver crowns and two sparks. "Fourteen spans by three sparks a span, as agreed."

The merchant scooped up the coins and bowed. "You bargain well for one so young, warrior. Your lady will appreciate your efforts on her behalf."

Barin bowed in thanks, then led the way deeper into the bazaar. Kahndar patted him on the shoulder and said, "Tuck those away someplace safe."

Barin stopped and turned to Stavin. "Stave, unbuckle my breastplate. I'll tuck the yarn into my mail." Stavin did as he was asked while Kahndar and Horvan stood watch. In short order Barin once again had his hands free and his armor buckled, and the four moved on.

Stavin was carefully scanning the shops around them as they walked, looking at the people as much as at the displayed goods, so he was the first to notice that something was wrong. "We're being followed, Kahn," he said in a soft voice. "I've seen the same three men four times now."



Kahndar turned and looked down at Stavín with a large smile on his face. "Don't let on that you've spotted them. Keep watching, but don't stare." Then he laughed and faced forward again.

Horvan turned and grinned next. "Describe them," he said and slapped Stavín's shoulder.

Stavín did as he was told. "First man is Barin's size. Light brown hair, long and dirty. Dirty blue bandanna. Dirty red shirt, lots of patches. The second man is shorter, but wider. Dark hair, dark complexion, beard and mustache. No head covering. Dark shirt, but not black. I can't really tell what color it is through the dirt. Third man is taller than the first, but rail-thin. Blond hair, beard, and mustache. Cleaner-looking. He's wearing a dark blue coat of some kind over a yellow shirt."

"Seamen," Kahndar said. "The coat is the giveaway. I think it's time for this hand to become a claw."

## Chapter 45

As soon as Kahndar finished speaking, the others moved. Horvan slowed a little until he was behind Kahndar's shoulder and clear of his sword arm. Stavín moved out to take a position outside and behind Kahndar, and Barin took the same position by Horvan. In just a few blinks of an eye they had gone from casual two-by-two marching to a battle formation.

For a time, it seemed that their display was enough to discourage the men. All four of them had begun to relax when suddenly the people in the street began to run, clearing the space in front of them to reveal ten armed men, with the blond man in the blue coat a step ahead of the rest.

"We just want that one," the blond man said, pointing at Stavín. "The rest of you can take your lives and go. Only the golden boy has any value."

Kahndar smiled and drew his sword, as did Horvan. "You are mistaken. Friend Stavín is of no value to you. He is, however, valuable to our people. You won't take him."

Kahndar's comment was enough for the men, and they ran forward with long knives and short, curved swords in their hands. When they were three paces away, Kahndar attacked. The rest of the claw was just a blink behind him.

Stavín charged into the men with his Dragon's Tongue flashing as it slid through the bodies of the seamen. He was peripherally aware that the other three warriors were wading in to the fight as he caught a swung sword on the haft of his Dragon's Tongue and cut the wielder's legs off as he pushed away.

The fight was over in moments, and the four valley warriors stood victorious over nine dead bodies. The tenth man, the blond leader of the group, was still standing where he had been when they had first seen him, gaping at the scene. Then he turned and ran.

A man stepped out of the mouth of an alley and stuck his arm out, catching the blond man across the throat and dropping him in the street. Then he hauled him back to his feet and forced him at sword-point back to face Stavín and Kahndar.

"I am Danival Zel'Orvan, Sworn Deputy to Lavad Zel'Carval, Lord Sheriff of Zigamarad. The bazaar is my sector of the city. You," he said, poking the blond man in the back with his sword, "what did you intend to do with Friend Stavín?"

The blond man stared sullenly at the ground and said, "I've nothing to say."

"You'll say plenty to the lord's mage. Friend Stavín, please accept my apologies on behalf of the city. At a guess," he paused and looked at his prisoner carefully, "I'd say they planned to ransom you to His Majesty. This fool is probably a mate on one of the trading vessels in the harbor. When we find out, you will be informed." The deputy then used his free hand to search his prisoner and pulled a heavy purse from his coat pocket, and tossed it to Stavín. "Please accept this as a partial recompense for this unfortunate incident. You may, as is customary, take their arms, but you are unlikely to find much coin. Not on sailors of their caliber. I'll send the grave diggers for the bodies."

Stavín and his comrades bowed deeply to Deputy Zel'Orvan and watched as he guided his prisoner away. Kahndar looked around at the circle of people surrounding the scene and said, "Stavín, Barin, on guard. Horvan, help me check these men and gather their weapons."

Kahndar and Horvan made short work of the task and stood to present Stavín and Barin their share. "Stave got three. Two each for the rest of us. Lord Zel'Orvan was right about there not being much coin," Kahndar said, looking around. "I want to circle back to the caravan. Retracing our steps could be asking for more trouble. Tuck that pouch away, Stave, and keep your eyes open. I think our being ready made them move sooner than they planned."

The group kept their formation as they marched through the bazaar and had people hurrying out of their way. They were nearing the border of the bazaar when Stavín let out a moan of disappointment. "Oh, why did it have to show up now?"

Kahndar looked down at Stavín, then followed his gaze to a solid-looking building. There were books on display under the awning. A bubbling snort of amusement escaped and quickly turned into full-throated laughter. Barin and Horvan joined in, and soon even Stavín was grinning.

"Kahn," Horvan said as he regained control of himself, "we can stop here, can't we? We're almost out of the bazaar."

"You know Barvil won't let him come out here again," Barin added. "Not after that attack."

Kahndar nodded and patted Stavín's shoulder. "Give me those swords and give Barin your Tongue. Don't be too long."

Stavín quickly complied, and went into the bookseller's stall. All around him were tomes of various sizes and ages. He hardly noticed the man near the door until he spoke.

"It's an unusual warrior who comes to look at my books."

Stavín spun to face the voice, then bowed when he saw the frail old man. "I am, or will be, apprenticed to our scribe during the winter, good Sir."

The old man smiled broadly at that. "A warrior scribe, eh? Well then, what do you seek?"

"Old histories. Books from Imperial times. Tales of ancient heroes," Stavín immediately replied.

"I have some like that over here, young man." The old man made his way to a back corner of the stall and opened a cabinet. "Can you read the glyphs, young warrior?"

Stavín began reading the titles out loud in answer, pausing to pull one book or another from the cabinet to examine more closely. In just a few moments he had selected ten books.

"Are you a rich man, young warrior? For those books I would ask twelve gold crowns. Can you make that payment?"

Stavin immediately began to say no, but remembered the pouch that the blond man had carried. "A moment, please," he said to the bookseller, then turned away to count. When he turned back, his face was drooping in sorrow. "I cannot, good Sir. I could pay six gold crowns," he said in a hopeful tone, but the bookseller waved him away.

"You wear golden armor, yet you would deny me just payment for such rare tomes as these? I suppose I could be generous and allow you to have them for ten gold crowns." The old man smiled broadly, showing his three remaining teeth.

"Ten is still beyond me, good Sir. Have pity on me, for I am not rich. This armor was a gift, and it has brought me misfortune far more than fortune. Just moments ago we were attacked in the streets by brigands. Still, you are an honest man, and I could manage eight gold crowns, if I add in all that I carry."

"Eight? Eight, you say? You offer but half what they are worth. I was being generous at twelve. Still, you're the first customer to enter that door today. I'll say nine gold crowns, or I'll say good day to you."

Stavin was about to haggle some more when Kahndar's voice came from outside. "Don't take all day, Stave. It's past time we were back."

Stavin rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Very well, good Sir. A moment, please." Stavin turned away and began counting. He pulled out all twenty of his silver crowns, and added seven gold crowns from the purse the blond man had been carrying, counting them out with great reluctance. "My wife is going to kill me, then take the books for herself," he muttered. "Now I have to carry them back to the caravan."

"I have a crate that will hold them. A moment, please, young warrior." The old man was gone before Stavin could answer and back just a breath later. "Here you are." He quickly packed the books into the crate and smiled as Stavin lifted it. "Good fortune to you, young warrior, and a safe journey."

"Thank you," Stavin said as he carried the box out of the stall.

"Gods Below, Stave!" Kahndar almost shouted. "How many books did you buy?"

"Just ten," Stavin answered.

"Ten?" Horvan and Barin asked together.

"Oh, Shari married the right one, all right. Now come on," Kahndar said, turning to go, "we don't want to be late." Horvan and Barin carried Stavin's weapons and booty on the short journey back to the caravan.

Barvil met them at the wagon. "What's in the box, Stavin?" he asked.

"Books," Kahndar answered with a laugh.

"And just where did those swords come from?" Barvil asked, suddenly all business.

"We were attacked. Ten men were after Stavin," Kahndar said, then gave Barvil a quick rundown of the events.

"There may be more trouble then. Get some rest, all of you. Stavin, here is your pouch. We've already eaten, but there should be some left." Barvil gave each of them an intense stare, then turned away.

## Chapter 46

Stavin hoisted the box of books into the back of the wagon and spent a few moments getting it situated while the others simply tossed their war booty in amongst their gear. Then he pulled out all three of his pouches and took a deep breath as he considered what he was planning. After a moment, he pulled seven gold crowns from his big pouch and put them in the thief's pouch. The other two pouches went back to their hiding places, but he kept the newest pouch in his hand.

Stavin hurried to the cook's fire and got his meal, then sat down with Kahndar and the rest. "I've been thinking, and I've reached a decision. Kahn, divide this out." He handed the pouch to Kahndar. "If I had killed that man this would be mine by right, but I didn't. We were all there, so we all share."

"That is very generous, Stavin," Horvan said, putting down his plate. "You don't have to do it, though. That Chosen deputy gave it to you."

"It's what I believe I should do," Stavin said. "Kahn?"

"Horvan is right. I count ten gold, thirty-seven silver and twenty-two sparks. We'll start with two golds each. That leaves fifty-seven silver, so another gold to Stavin and Barin, and ten silver to Horvan and myself. Seventeen silver gives us four each. That leaves a silver and the sparks."

"You three split that. I have enough for my needs," Stavin said, then stood and walked away.

Kahndar watched Stavin walk away, then shook his head. "I'm not going to argue with him. Not over a few sparks he doesn't feel he deserves. I'll take the silver and you two get eleven sparks each."

When they came off watch that night they found Barvil waiting. "It seems that we can't take Stavin anywhere without him being attacked. Kahndar, you've added two more kills for a total of sixteen and your third red stripe. Congratulations Senior

Sergeant Kel'Horval. Horvan, you are up to thirteen and so are you, Barin. Stavin, you've made an almost unheard-of twenty kills. If you had killed the leader of those men you'd have your fourth red stripe."

Stavin ducked his head in embarrassment as his friends commiserated on his 'bad luck' of killing only three of the seamen.

It was the middle of the next day before they heard anything more about the incident in the bazaar. Kahndar's hand was on guard when four elegant carriages stopped by the caravan and seven richly dressed men and women got out.

Trader Sahren hurried over to meet them and bowed deeply. "Good day, noble lords and ladies. How may I be of service?"

The eldest of the men answered. "We are seeking Friend of Evandia Stavin Kel'Aniston. Where can he be found?"

One of the younger ladies spoke next. "Why is a Friend of the Kingdom standing watch like a common guard?" she asked in an aggressive tone. She pointed and everyone looked to see Stavin coming toward them around the caravan.

"That is what I employ him for. Friend Stavin is a mercenary from the Kel'Kavin Valley in old Farindia. He and his comrades are our protection from bandits," Sahren replied.

"That is hardly a fitting occupation for —"

"That will be all, Andreah," the elder man said, silencing the woman instantly. "We would like to speak to Friend Stavin about the unfortunate incident in the bazaar yesterday."

Sahren bowed and turned to signal Stavin, but he and Barvil were already on the way. Stavin stopped two paces from the nobles and removed his helmet, then bowed deeply. "How may I be of service, noble lords and ladies?" he asked, concentrating on the elder.

"Friend Stavin," the elder began, "I am Cevin Zel'Vadan, Lord Mayor of Zigamarad. This is my wife, Lady Daras. This gentleman is Lavad Zel'Carval, our Lord Sheriff, and his wife, Lady Cahrie. Danival Zel'Orvan you met yesterday, and his wife,



Andreak. Andie is my daughter. And last, but certainly not least, is Northan Zel'Carnic, our Harbor Master. Lavad, would you care to inform Friend Stavín of the results of your investigation?"

"Of course, Lord Cevin," the Lord Sheriff said with a bow. "Friend Stavín, the man that Danival captured yesterday was questioned by Adept Fel'Vasan. He revealed that he was in fact the owner and captain of a small trading vessel called the *Maiden's Cheek*. His intention was to ransom you for ten thousand gold crowns to His Majesty. He was executed this morning at dawn." He paused as Stavín and Barvil exchanged glances. "The *Maiden's Cheek* was boarded by Harbor Master Zel'Carnic and his customs enforcers. Lord Zel'Carnic, would you care to continue?"

"Thank you, Lord Zel'Carval," the Harbor Master said with a grin. "My men boarded the vessel unchallenged. It would seem that you either killed the entire crew, which is reasonable for a craft of that size, or the rest of the crew abandoned ship when their captain didn't return. The vessel has been seized and searched, and in its holds are goods that we estimate to be worth five thousand gold crowns. The vessel itself will fetch between fifteen and twenty thousand gold crowns when sold. Lord Cevin, I believe this discussion has returned to you."

Lord Zel'Vadan smiled as he again addressed Stavín. "Friend Stavín, the laws of Evandia prevent kingdom officials from benefiting financially from the exercise of their duties. Therefore, since it was the attack upon you and your party that led to the seizure of the vessel, it belongs to you as the rightful spoils of conflict."

Stavín stood stunned silent for a moment, then whispered, "A ship? I have a ship?" Turning to Barvil he asked, "Sir, what should I do?"

"This has only happened once before that I know of. That pirate ship. That time it was obvious what we had to do, but in this instance I have no idea what you should do, Stavín," Barvil said, staring at Stavín with a peculiar expression on his face.

"If I may, I have a proposal to lay before you, Friend Stavín," Lord Zel'Vadan said, drawing Stavín's attention. At his nod, the lord continued. "Friend Stavín, you may do as you wish with the vessel and its contents. If you wish to sell it, you will have

to remain here to do so. However, since it appears that you are not staying, my friends and I would like to make you an offer. Our good Harbor Master has estimated the total value of the ship and cargo at between twenty and twenty-five thousand crowns. That is not, however, guaranteed. We would like to offer you fifteen thousand gold crowns for the whole thing. Any risks will then be ours, as will any amount we receive in excess of that payment."

Stavin remained motionless as he considered the offer. Fifteen thousand crowns was more than five times what the whole expedition normally returned with. Stavin again turned to Barvil, this time grasping his forearm.

"Sir, please, what should I do? It's too much, too big a decision. What should I do?" Stavin pleaded.

Barvil took a deep breath, then blew it out slowly. "I would take the offer if I was in your place, Friend Stavin. Lord Zel'Vadan is correct: you would have to stay here to dispose of it in any other way. Trader Sahren wants to leave at daybreak, and we are honor-bound to be with her."

"Honor, above all else," Stavin murmured. Turning to the nobles, he bowed. "I accept your most generous offer, Lord Zel'Vadan. What must I do?"

Lord Zel'Vadan smiled broadly and raised his hand. An officious-looking young man came forward with a lap-desk and stopped at Lord Zel'Vadan's side. "We anticipated your answer, Friend Stavin. This document transfers the *Maiden's Cheek* to you. It requires your signature to complete it," Lord Zel'Vadan said, handing Stavin the quill.

Stavin signed his name and titles in imperial glyphs. If Lord Zel'Vadan was surprised by Stavin's literacy, he didn't show it. "This second document will sell the ship and cargo to my friends and me for the sum of fifteen thousand gold crowns. Please sign here." The lord pointed to a blank at the bottom and Stavin again signed his name and titles.

Lord Zel'Vadan signaled and eight men came forward with four strong boxes. He opened all four boxes and began counting bags of coins. "Friend Stavin, each of

these bags is sealed by the Gold Merchants' League as holding one hundred gold crowns. Count with me, please," he said as Stavin stepped up beside him. "One, two, three—" they counted, and continued until the last bag of the last box. "One hundred fifty," they said together.

"Where shall I have the boxes placed, Friend Stavin?" Lord Zel'Vadan asked.

"In there," Stavin replied, pointing at the warriors' wagon. "Our things are all in that wagon."

Davel and Kahndar were standing by the wagon and held the canvas up so the boxes could be loaded. As the men returned to the carriages, Lord Zel'Vadan spoke to Stavin.

"I believe we have all gained from this incident, Friend Stavin, as unfortunate as it may have been. I wish you a safe journey and a prosperous future." All four of the lords and ladies bowed, and Stavin bowed very deeply in return. Without another word the nobles returned to their carriages and left.

## Chapter 47

Stavin sagged a little as soon as the nobles were gone. "Sir, I'm — I'm confused. How can this be real?"

"I won't say that stranger things have happened, Stavin, but there have been incidents where our warriors have fallen on their faces only to find gold in the dust. It may just be my suspicious nature, but I think Lord Zel'Vadan and his friends got a much better deal than you did."

"I would agree with that assessment," Trader Sahren said. "I wasn't going to interfere unless you asked, but those people will probably more than double their investment in just a few days. I wouldn't to be so foolish as to call the Lord Mayor a liar or a thief, but I would guess that he understated the value of the ship and cargo by a considerable margin."

"Which makes me look like a sun-struck fool for the pittance that I accepted for that pirate's ship," Barvil said with a wry grimace. "My only consolation is that what we received probably *was* all that the town had."

"It was fair under the circumstances, but you must realize that these circumstances are much different," Sahren said as she patted Barvil's shoulder.

Stavin looked at the road that the carriages were on, then shook his head. "It's still too much. How can we protect that much gold on the road?"

"You cannot," Sahren answered, "and you will not. Before we cross the bridge in the morning we will stop at the Gold Merchants. There you will very publicly deposit your gold with those worthies. You will be able to redeem the deposit in Aravad three days before we reach Markavia Cross."

Stavin thought for a moment, then turned to Barvil. "Sir?"

"I agree completely," Barvil answered.

None of the warriors slept well that night. They all knew what the rumor of that much gold in the open could do. Fortunately, nothing happened and the morning sun found the caravan ready to roll. Sahren had the warriors' wagon take the lead as they headed out. She pointed the way to the Gold Merchants' Chapter House and had everyone stop outside as she and Stavin went in. Moments later, they returned with two richly dressed men.

Stavin went to the back of the wagon and shifted the tarp. "These four boxes contain the gold, good sirs," he said, stepping aside.

The younger of the two merchants nodded. "You will understand that we must verify the count, Friend Stavin." At Stavin's nod, the man opened the boxes and began his count. He finished quickly as a crowd gathered around the caravan. "As you said, fifteen thousand gold crowns," the man said as he raised his hand. Two burly men came out and started taking the boxes one by one into the building. Stavin, Sahren, and Barvil joined the gold merchants as they followed the last box.

"We will open your account, Friend Stavin, and the necessary information will be sent to our associates, including those in Farindia," the elder of the two gold merchants said. "Do you know where else you are headed?"

Stavin looked Sahren, then back to the gold merchant, "We are traveling to Aravad, in Kavadia. That will be the closest city where there is a Chapter House of your guild."

"There is another, Friend Stavin," Barvil said. "Kahrant's Pass in Farindia is where the town keeps its account. I sent our first pay to them from Twin Bridges."

Stavin looked at Barvil, then back to the gold merchant and asked, "Can the information to be sent to both places?"

"It will be sent to all of our Chapter Houses, Friend Stavin," the merchant said. "Is there anyone other than yourself who is to have access to this account?"

"Yes. My wife, Sharindis Kel'Aniston, and also Barvil and Sahrena Kel'Carin. I think that's enough." Stavin turned to Barvil. "If I fall, you will know what has happened and what to do, Sir. We'll tell Karvik as well."

"A wise precaution, Friend Stavín," the gold merchant said, then turned a ledger book toward him. "I need your signature to complete the account."

Stavín signed his name and titles and then let loose a long sigh. "That's a relief. Now I'll be able to sleep knowing it's all safe."

Barvil and Sahren guided Stavín back outside and signaled everyone to prepare to move. The now-all-but-empty warriors' wagon was directed to the end of the line and the caravan headed for the bridge and the eastern half of the kingdom.

\* \* \*

Trader Sahren continued her pattern of stopping to trade at almost every large town, and often at smaller villages as well. Stavín noticed that the traders were selling more than buying again, but this time he knew the reasons. He and the other warriors were buying more as well, taking advantage of the wagon to haul their goods. Stavín found himself the subject of even more intense curiosity for the first three stops after leaving Zigamarad, and several nobles and town officials approached him at each stop.

In the misnamed town of Prosperity, the mayor set the pattern. "Good day, Friend Stavín," the mayor said, bowing deeply. "Welcome to Prosperity. I am Loathan Kel'Arđan, mayor and magistrate of our lovely little town."

"I am pleased to meet you, Mayor Kel'Arđan," Stavín replied.

"I'll come right to the point, Friend Stavín," the mayor said, obviously changing what he had intended to say. "We have a project to build a grist mill on the river, but lack the capital. It is our understanding that you recently came into a large sum of money, and we were wondering if you would care to invest in our venture?"

Stavín looked at the mayor for a moment, then shook his head. "All of my gold is on deposit with the Gold Merchants. I have only a handful of silver with me. I'm sorry, but I cannot invest in your project."

The mayor was silent for a moment. "The Gold Merchants. I should have known. Good day, Friend Stavín." With that the mayor turned and walked away without a backward glance.

Stavin stood and stared after the mayor until he became aware that someone was standing by his shoulder. Turning, he quickly bowed to Trader Sahren. "I wonder what that was about?" he asked as he glanced over his shoulder.

"He was scouting us for an ambush. He wanted to know if you still had the gold with you. This is why I insisted that you use the Gold Merchants." Sahren smiled and patted his armored shoulder. "You know that not all bandits live in the wilderness."

The caravan traveled unmolested for ten days and everyone was in high spirits as Mid Summer's Day was reached. By chance more than design they were in the city of Hardavad, another old Imperial city, on the banks of the Zel'Fadak River.

The caravan was parked in the caravansary on the outskirts of the city, and Sahren had formed their open circle for trade. Davel and Kahndar again received permission from Barvil to take their hands to the other caravans and the bazaar. Barvil joined Kahndar's hand and laughed at the expression on the young warriors' faces.

"You didn't think I was going to miss the bazaar, did you? I went with Davel in Zigamarad, so it's your turn," he explained with a grin. "Don't worry, I won't spoil your fun."

The hand formed around Barvil and he led the way. "It's been five years since the last time I was in this part of Evandia, but I remember this as being one of the better bazaars. Just keep your eyes open and a hand on your pouch."

\* \* \*

Mid Summer's Day was a day of rest for all of the people of Kavinston. Once the livestock was seen to almost everyone walked or rode to the thermal springs and lake. Sharindis walked with her staff tapping the ground and her free hand on Sahrena's arm. The path was old and worn smooth by generations of valley inhabitants and they made the journey without Sharindis tripping on anything.

The springs and lake were the last gasp of the valley's volcanic past. The thermal springs themselves were hot enough to cook meat in, but snowmelt from the valley's sides and peaks mixed in just a few dragon-lengths away to make hot, but tolerable, pools for swimming.

Shari joined her family and frolicked in the hot water. It felt so good to be able to spend as much time as she wanted in the water and not have to hurry to let someone else use the bathing tub.

Sahrena, Dorvina, and Zahrinis joined the Kel'Horval family, and they all laughed and played for half the day. Shared public baths had been one of Luxand's most civilized customs, and they had continued in Kavinston to the point of everyone swimming naked in the hot pools.

Sahrena, Charvil, and Nahrana were together off to the side and Sahrena grinned at her oldest friends. "Looks like Varik is growing up."

"Huh?" Charvil grunted as he looked at her, frowning.

"Look at him," Sahrena said, jerking her head toward the boy. "He can't keep his eyes off the girls."

Nahrana chuckled as Charvil took a deep breath and groaned, "Here we go again."

"I remember how you were, Char, so don't use that tone about your son," Sahrena laughed, and Nahrana joined in.

"I remember as well. You *will* have a talk with him when we get home. I'll ask Arlen for his list." She turned toward Sahrena and grinned. "You know, Zahri will be on his list."

"I know. She's not interested yet, though. Thank the Gods Above. Dorvina is— Oh, no she's *not!*" she suddenly snarled as she spotted her recalcitrant daughter. Dorvina and Harner were off alone together and were close enough to touch, which was not only a violation of the customs surrounding the hot pools but a violation of the bans against contact between unmarried couples. Sahrena launched herself across the pool at the young couple and Charvil and Nahrana were right behind her.

"Dorvina Elise Kel'Carin," she snapped, "get away from that boy immediately."

"Mother, we weren't—"

"Madam Kel'Carin, I was just—"

"Harner," Charvil snapped from behind Sahrena's shoulder, "move back. Now."



Harner looked at the expression on the Warmaster's face and stumbled back, falling and going under the water in his haste to get away from the man's rage.

"Warmaster, I didn't—"

"Lock it closed, Harner," Jorvan Kel'Chamlin snapped as he joined them. "I warned you to watch your behavior around Dorvina, and now I see this. Get home. Your day is done."

"Dad, I didn't—"

*Crack!* The sound of Jorvan's slap across Harner's face rang across the suddenly silent pool. "Get. Your. Butt. Home," Jorvan snarled, and Harner backed away with one hand on his cheek.

When Harner finally turned and fled back toward town, Jorvan turned to Charvil and bowed. "I ask that I be allowed to discipline him without the Elders' involvement."

Zahrinis had brought Sharindis over to the group by then, so she answered. "Harner has been warned, Jorvan. Now you must deal with him before it becomes necessary to involve the Elders."

Jorvan looked at the young woman and bowed his head. "As you wish, Shari. He won't have much time for Dorvina from now on." He turned and splashed away as the whole group rounded on Dorvina.

"You won't have much time for him, either," Sahrena said in a harsh voice. "If your father was here—"

"If he was here, Harner and I would already be married," Dorvina snapped.

Charvil shook his head. "I doubt that. Bar wouldn't approve of anyone dishonorable enough to do the things we've seen Harner do."

"Harner has never done anything dishonorable!"

"He has," both Charvil and Nahrana said at the same time. Charvil continued. "You seem to have forgotten that Harner and his friends have been bullies for years, targeting Stavín and other small boys. *That* is a dishonorable thing to do."

"The Runt—"

*Crack!* Sahrena's slap was harder than Jorvan's, and Dorvina fell backwards in the water. Sahrena waded forward and pulled Dorvina to the surface by the hair. Her other hand clamped down on Dorvina's throat as she held the girl's head just barely above the surface. "If you dishonor our family, I'll drown you myself," she snarled in a barely-audible growl. "Keep your stupid mouth shut or you'll spend the rest of your *life* as a servant." Dorvina could only whimper in reply, and Sahrena pushed her head down under the water again before letting her go.

Sahrena turned and faced her mistress. "Mistress Shari, please forgive us." She stood with her hands clasped tightly in front of her, and her head bowed as far as she could without kneeling.

Sharindis swallowed the rage she was feeling at hearing the contempt in Dorvina's voice when she called Stavín "*The Runt*" and nodded. "Dorvina is your problem. Deal with her as you see fit. But deal with her. Mom, I'd like to go home now."

Nahrana took Sharindis by the arm and led her to the edge of the pool. "Here are your clothes, Shari. I know Dorvina's words hurt. She's as bad as Harner and his friends."

"I hate her," Sharindis whispered.

"Don't. Don't ever let hate take you. Come along, I'll lead you to your house —"

"I want to go home, Mom. Really home, not the Kel'Carin's house." There were tears in Sharindis' eyes as she turned to her mother, her voice trembling with heartache as she said, "I don't want to go back there."

Nahrana and Charvil helped Shari get dressed and then they walked away together. Behind them, Sahrena fumed in impotent rage. She turned on her eldest child and snarled, "Home. Now."

## Chapter 48

The five men strolled through the bazaar and it wasn't long before Kahndar spotted something he wanted. A silversmith was hammering a pattern into a platter as they approached and looked up with a smile when the warriors stopped. "Is there something that interests you, brave warriors?" the man asked, waving to the items displayed on the wall behind him.

Kahndar pointed to an ornate serving platter. "I would like to examine that beautiful platter."

The silversmith bowed deeply to Kahndar. "You have a good eye for fine craftsmanship, good Sir," he said as he retrieved the platter. "This is one of my most prized pieces."

Kahndar examined the platter carefully, feeling the weight of the metal and tapping the back with a knuckle in search of thin spots. "It is truly a wonderful piece. What princely ransom have you placed on it?" he asked, handing the platter back to the silversmith.

"A very reasonable one for such a fine platter. Only thirteen gold crowns." The merchant smiled broadly, but Kahndar didn't.

"Thirteen gold! For that? If it were made of gold rather than silver that might be reasonable, but it isn't. Five gold crowns. Not a spark more." Kahndar crossed his arms and waited for the merchant's wail of grief.

The merchant laughed instead. "I thought you a warrior, but you're not but a traveling jester. Come, make me laugh some more," he said with a grin. "Five gold crowns wouldn't buy the raw silver in that piece. For the amusement you've given me, I'll reduce it to twelve gold."

Now Kahndar laughed, but it was a harsh, humorless bark. "Hah! And what would make me consider such a price any more than I would consider the first? Six gold crowns, perhaps."

"Perhaps not," the silversmith said. "I'm not addled in my wits, young warrior, nor desperate to sell. Off with you if you have nothing more amusing to say."

Kahndar looked at the man and simply turned away without a word. As he rejoined the group the silversmith jeered at his back. "I knew you weren't serious. No barbarian mercenary carries that much gold."

Five helmets turned toward him and Stavín stepped forward. Kahndar said, "Stave, don't," but Stavín continued to walk toward the stall. Stopping at the edge of the awning, Stavín removed his helmet.

"I am Friend of Evandia Stavín Kel'Aniston. My comrades and I are not barbarians. If we were, you'd be dead for the insult you have given my brother-in-law. As for gold, I'm sure you've heard of our dealings in Zigamarad. It seems that everyone has. Know this, you foolish lout – my brother-in-law has enough gold at his disposal to buy every piece you have. He won't, though. Some other silversmith will fulfill his desires." Stavín put his helmet back on and turned on his heel to rejoin the warriors as the silversmith began stammering apologies at their backs.

They had traveled only a dozen or so paces before Barvil's amusement won out and he began chortling. "Ah, Stavín, you've learned the first rule of the verbal knife-fighting: if you stab a man in the gut, be sure to twist the knife."

"Stave, I really can deal with problems like that on my own," Kahndar said, but he was smiling.

Stavín sighed. "I know, Kahn, but I've listened to things like that for years and always kept quiet. It just seemed to be a good opportunity to teach at least one lout a lesson."

Kahndar laughed and slapped his shoulder. "Too true, Stave. Enough of this. The bazaar has more silversmiths to bargain with."

Barvil led them along the corridors of the bazaar, stopping occasionally to look, but seldom seriously considering anything. They had reached the farthest point of the bazaar and had started back when Barvil turned his head and said, "Stavin, look to your left. The glass shop. That's where Shari's crystal came from."

"I'd like to stop there, Sir," Stavin immediately replied and Barvil waved him forward.

The man in the glass shop stood as Stavin entered. "How may I be of service, Lord?" he asked, bowing deeply.

"I would like to see a crystal to make things larger," Stavin said, looking past the man to a shelf that held several such crystals.

The glass merchant brought two crystals out and placed them on a table near Stavin. "Is there something in particular that you are seeking?"

Stavin nodded and used both crystals to examine his fingers. "Do you have any that are stronger or larger?" he asked, putting the crystals down carefully.

"I do, but you must understand that the price increases significantly as the size increases," the merchant said as he turned away. He returned with a crystal lens that was as big as Stavin's head. "This is my largest, and this," he reached over and brought down a very thick lens the size of his hand, "is my strongest."

Stavin lifted the big crystal a finger from the table and carefully set it back down. "That won't do. Please allow me to examine the one you say is the strongest." The man handed Stavin the crystal and he again looked at his fingers. A slow smile crossed his lips. "This is perfect. What are you asking for it?"

"Four gold crowns. It is a good price for a crystal that size," the glass merchant said.

"Two would be a good price. Four is far too much," Stavin replied as he used the lens to look at his armor.

"Two would be a good price for a weaker crystal that size. That crystal took much longer to fashion. Just getting a piece of crystal clear glass that thick with no

imperfections took ten days. I could possibly let it go for three gold and five silver crowns."

"I could possibly pay three gold crowns if you have a good, secure case I can put it in," Stavín said, setting the crystal on the table.

The merchant reached under his table and brought out a box that was almost identical to the one Shari kept her crystal in. "I have a cabinet maker make these especially for me. Three gold, you said?"

Stavín pulled out his small pouch and laid three gold crowns on the table. "As agreed. Several years ago, you sold another crystal to a warrior of my people. Did he trade a brooch for it?"

"I remember a very fierce warrior from four or five years ago, but he paid in gold and silver. Why do you ask?" the merchant said as he carefully boxed the crystal.

Stavín smiled and shook his head. "He bought the crystal for a girl who I had the good fortune to marry this spring. His wife gave up her favorite brooch to pay for it, and I had thought to return it to her."

"I am sorry that I cannot help you," the merchant said as he put the other crystals back in their places.

Stavín took his purchase and walked back out into the street. Kahndar saw the box in his hand and grinned. "You got Shari another crystal, didn't you?"

"Of course. That's why Barvil pointed out the shop. If something happened to Shari's crystal, she would be crushed. This one is stronger, even if it's not as large, so she has a spare in case of an accident," Stavín answered.

Barvil smiled and led the way again. Horvan made a quick deal for a bolt of bright blue cloth. Barin bought a lady's hat with a long feather. Barvil bargained for a bolt of red silk. Then it was Kahndar's turn with a silversmith again.

"Ah, warrior, what can I interest you in today?" the silversmith asked.

"A platter. That one, perhaps," Kahndar said, pointing at a large platter on the wall.

"You have a fine, discerning eye, warrior."

"How much?"

"For you, only ten gold crowns," the merchant said with a smile.

"I'm tired," Kahndar said, shaking his head. "I'll pay seven. No more."

"Seven? Warrior, be reasonable. This —"

"I am being reasonable," Kahndar said, interrupting the silversmith. "Take it or I'll walk away. I'm in no mood to haggle right now."

The silversmith gave him an offended look. "That's hardly the way to do business. Very well then, seven gold crowns it is. I must say though, I'm disappointed. Terribly disappointed."

Kahndar took the platter and walked back out to the street. "I'm ready for something to eat. Shall we head back?"

"That was fast, Kahn. What did you do, threaten to cut his throat?" Horvan asked with a laugh.

"No," Kahndar answered with a grimace. "I told him the maximum price I was willing to pay and told him to take it or no sale. He took it, but he wasn't happy."

"Haggling's half the fun, Kahn," Barvil said, slapping Kahndar's shoulder. "It's the closest thing to combat that they ever get to experience. It's a game of skill for them. You should watch Sahren sometime. She amazes me." Barvil led them back to the caravansary and joined them stowing their purchases in the wagon, then led them to eat.

## Chapter 49

Karvik met Stavín as they exchanged places at watch change. "I saw you bought something else. What was it this time?" Karvik asked.

"Another crystal for Shari. Your dad bought some red silk."

Karvik grinned. "Mom loves silk, especially red. See you after mid night," Karvik said as he headed toward the cook's fire.

Stavín started looking for more varied items after Kethlan made a comment late one day. "Ah, Stavín, word around the caravan is that you've hardly bought anything. You are a wealthy man, my friend. Indulge yourself."

"Oh, I have been, Kethlan," Stavín answered with a grin. "If it hadn't been for Zigamarad I wouldn't have spent much, but those books were expensive."

"That's not what I meant, Stavín. I meant that you only bought those books and a few other things. Maybe you spent more, but your friends are spreading it around better. Have you bought gifts for your parents? Brothers and sisters? I'll tell you what I've seen in other years: No matter how small the item, it'll matter most that you thought of them and spent a few sparks on them. Well, in your case, a few crowns."

Stavín took Kethlan's advice to heart and started buying small things for his family and friends. Some not-so-small items were included as well. Before they passed into the highlands again Stavín purchased twenty bolts of the light cloth that was used for clothing in the hot lands in a rainbow of colors. When he was asked why, he'd simply answer with a big chipmunk grin and say, "You'll see."

The road they were on once again started up into the hills and Barvil took a moment one evening to gather his men. "We've been lucky since Hardavad, but it can't last. The population is getting thinner, so I expect the bandits to get thicker. Keep your minds on that and not on what you'll buy at the next town." He looked directly at



Karvik and Stavín when he said that and nodded at the looks of chagrin that crossed their faces.

Barvil's warning was well-timed because two days later a group of bandits attacked. Ten men ran out of the forest to the right of the road, straight for the lead wagon. Stavín joined the driver of the number two wagon shouting the warning, then attacked.

Stavín rode straight into the men, planning to ride through and scatter them, but two of the men turned toward him and threw a rough sack over Tru's head, blinding her and forcing her to stop. The man to his right died with the point of Stavín's Dragon's Tongue through his helmet and head while the man to the left struck at Stavín's leg with a small ax. The ax slid harmlessly off of Stavín's armor, but bit deeply into the back of Tru's leg, causing her to collapse onto him.

Stavín rolled clear as Tru fell, then took a moment to stab the trapped man through the heart before attacking the rest of the bandits from the rear. Two men had climbed up on to Sahren's wagon, trying to throw her off and got their legs cut out from under them as Stavín passed. Shouts from the other side of the caravan attested to the fact that this wasn't the only attack.

Barin reached the front of the caravan moments after Stavín did and was attacking his second man while his first opponent bled out from a cut throat. Two more men were turning to attack Stavín when Horvan reached the scene. He vaulted from his horse and crashed bodily into the back of one man and left his knife in the man's back as he engaged the other with his sword.

Stavín and Barin each took one of the last two men. Stavín used his Dragon's Tongue to take the sword away from his opponent, sword hand and all, then drove a point into the man's throat. Barin took just a moment longer before he powered through his opponent's guard and took off the man's head.

Kahndar had seen that he wasn't needed and crossed over to the left side of the caravan, only to return moments later. "The fight is done over there as well. Any injuries?"

"*Tru!*" Stavín shouted and hurried back to where the animal had fallen. She was still alive, but couldn't get up.

"Don't let her suffer, Stave," Kahndar said in a gentle tone.

Stavín knelt beside his horse's head and caressed her nose one last time. "I'm sorry, *Tru*," he whispered, then drove his Dragon's Tongue deep into her brain. He stood and walked away from his friends, not wanting them to see him cry. He was ashamed that the death of his horse was affecting him more deeply than the deaths of Cordon and Ivalin had.

Barvil's shout brought everyone back to the caravan. "Is anyone hurt?" he asked, looking at each man in turn.

"No, Sir, but Stavín lost his horse," Kahndar answered.

Barvil looked at the bodies and asked, "What's the count?"

"Two for me, Sir," Horvan answered.

Barin grinned widely and said, "Three this time."

Everyone looked at Stavín and Kahndar said, "*Five?*"

"I was closest. Besides, they killed *Tru!*" he almost shouted.

Barvil looked at him and shook his head. "Well, I guess we won't have to take turns driving the wagon for a while. Too bad we didn't keep Cordon or Ivalin's mounts, but it didn't seem to be worth the expense at the time. Only six on the other side. Search your dead and get the bodies off the road."

Stavín searched his kills and ended up with three swords, two axes, five knives of various sizes, one silver crown and eighty-four sparks. Then he had to strip his saddle and gear off his horse and load them into the wagon.

Chandar offered him a sympathetic grin as he climbed up to take the reins. "At least you got to fight," he said as he mounted his horse. "I had to just sit here and watch."

Stavín looked at him and said, "You are an incredibly annoying person, Chandar Kel'Varin."

Chandar looked at him for a moment and said, "Thank you," before riding forward.

Barvil waited until after the evening meal before asking for the attention of warriors and traders alike. "My friends, tonight is special for many reasons. During the attack today Davel Kel'Borvan brought his total number of kills up to seventeen. Lavin Kel'Farin brought his total number of kills to thirteen. Horvan Kel'Erins brought his total number of kills to fifteen. Barin Kel'Kandis brought his total to sixteen and earned his third red stripe. Congratulations Senior Sergeant Kel'Kandis. Karvik Kel'Carin brought his total to nineteen. But Stavín Kel'Aniston has surpassed them all. On this, his first expedition to the lowlands, Stavín has made twenty-five kills and earned his fifth red stripe. To my knowledge, no one in the history of Kavinston has ever achieved even four red stripes on his first expedition, but Stavín has. Even if he never draws blood again, Stavín's achievement will live on in the stories of generations to come. Congratulations, Sergeant Major Kel'Aniston."

Stavín smiled as his friends congratulated him, but inside he was crying. Tru was dead.

## Chapter 50

The caravan continued on the road and reached the city of Northridge the next day. Northridge and its sister city of Southridge sat at the ends of the last major bridge that they were going to cross in Evandia. Between the two cities was the Zel'Yavin River Gorge. While the gorge was only two dragon-lengths across, it was nearly ten deep, and the Zel'Yavin was as wild a river as any of them had ever seen.

Sahren stopped for the day in Northridge and set up to trade. Stavín took advantage of the stop to see if he could replace his mount, but he was disappointed.

"Sir," Stavín said as he walked up to Barvil, "none of the horse merchants have a decent battle-trained horse for sale. They all seem to think we'll have to wait 'til we are in Coravia before I'll be able to find one."

Barvil nodded and patted Stavín's shoulder. "They would be the ones who would know, Stavín. Even if you found one, it wouldn't be trained our way. You'd likely be fighting it all the way back to the valley."

"And so ends my first expedition, driving a wagon," Stavín said as he collapsed in a sulk.

"Five red stripes and you want to sulk?" Barvil asked with an amazed laugh. "I'll remind you that Kahndar didn't earn his first red stripe until we were attacked in Twin Bridges, and this is his fifth expedition." Barvil shook his head as Stavín looked up at him. "You've acquired status that not even Charvil can match for a first season, and riches none of us could ever dream of matching. Not only that, but we still have a third of the season ahead of us and part of that will be Kavadia. I've never been to Kavadia that I didn't get attacked at least twice. Don't count yourself done until we reach the valley."

Stavín tried to look a little less glum and said, "Yes, Sir."

Trade was brisk, and Trader Sahren had her people divesting themselves of as much merchandise as they could. Stavín watched the traders carefully and finally he decided to ask why. "Angelese, why are you all trying to empty your wagons?" he asked as he stood watch beside her booth.

"We are on our way to the border with Coravia. Your status won't save us taxes or tolls there, so we're turning as much of our cargo into coin as we can. They tax our goods, not our purses. Your wagon will be taxed as well."

That tidbit of information was a jarring reminder to Stavín. He'd become so used to just signing his name that he'd forgotten that he was only exempt in Evandia. In Coravia, Kavadia, and even Farindia, his status as a Friend of Evandia was all but meaningless.

The next morning the caravan approached the Zel'Yavin Gorge Bridge at sunrise. Stavín rode ahead on Karvik's horse to deal with the toll while Karvik drove the wagon.

Sahren kept on straight through Southridge and out into the mountains. By her estimation they had eight days left in Evandia and only one more stop before the border. The caravan pushed on for three days before reaching the mountain village called Dragon's Nest.

Dragon's Nest sat in a bowl-shaped mountain valley and drew its name from a curious formation of basalt pillars that appeared to have been piled in a circle around seven large boulders that were roughly egg-shaped. No dragons had ever been seen near them and no mage had ever detected even a trace of magic around them, so the whole thing was just assumed to be an accident of nature.

Sahren formed a line of booths with her wagons in the village festival ground, and the caravan was soon besieged by men and women from the village. The sound of haggling grew louder and Stavín started to worry that there would be trouble.

He watched as Kethlan ended a trade for far less than Stavín would have dreamed he would accept. As the woman walked away with a happy smile lighting her face, Stavín stepped over to Kethlan's side. "Is there a problem, Kethlan? I never thought I'd see you take a deal like that," he said.

Kethlan smiled and shook his head. "In the lowlands, no, I wouldn't have, but these good people know how the wind blows, Stavin. That dress will never be worn here. It'll be sold to a trader coming into Evandia and at a profit. Even so, I got more than I paid, and I'll not be taxed on it. It's how trade is done, Stavin. If I took that dress across to Coravia, the tax would make it a losing proposition. Just you wait till we reach the border. We'll be selling at or slightly below our cost to avoid the tax. On the other side we'll restock with goods sold off by other caravans headed this way who've divested themselves of goods for the same reason."

According to the locals it was a four-day trip to the border from Dragon's Nest, and it was on the second day that trouble once again found the caravan. This time the attack was from the rear, and the target was very definitely Stavin.

The first indication they had that they were under attack was when something hit Stavin in the back and nearly sent him sprawling forward onto the tongue of the wagon. As he struggled to right himself, something hit the side of his helmet hard and one of the draft horses screamed. Stavin saw a crossbow bolt in the horse's flank, and after a breath or two, surged back into the seat, and grabbed his Dragon's Tongue just as Davel rode by shouting, "Attack from the rear!"

Stavin looked behind the caravan and saw Davel and Kahndar engaging twelve men as Lavin, Horvan, and Chandar rode into the fight. Stavin stumbled and nearly fell as the wagon came to a sudden stop. Looking to the front, he saw that the injured horse had fallen and knocked the other horse from its feet. Their struggles shook the wagon, but Stavin had other worries.

Two men had broken away from the fight and were riding hard toward the wagon. One shot another crossbow bolt at him, striking his breastplate dead center and knocking him backwards onto his hind end. The other jumped onto the wagon and swung a sword at Stavin's neck.

Stavin instinctively brought his arm up to protect his neck and the blow crashed into his mail, not cutting through but breaking his arm anyway. Stavin screamed in pain and swept his Dragon's Tongue toward the man, but he caught the haft and

yanked it from Stavin's hand. As his weapon flew away from the wagon, Stavin fell back on instinct. His foot came up and he kicked, driving the heel of his boot into his assailant's crotch. His desperately seeking hand closed on a captured sword and he brought it up as the man collapsed forward, driving the point into the man's mouth as he started to scream.

The second man had discarded his crossbow and drawn a sword before climbing into the wagon. He saw that Stavin was down, as was his accomplice, and stepped forward with a grin. "Time to die, boy," he snarled and stabbed forward with his sword.

Stavin managed to divert the blow with his good hand and kicked again, this time only causing his opponent to trip on a bolt of cloth and fall on his butt, facing Stavin. Stavin had grabbed another sword and threw it like a spear at the man's head as he tried to get to his feet. A second sword followed the first, but neither did anything but keep the man down. Then his searching hand closed on the haft of an ax and he threw that as well. The ax flew straight and true and crashed into the man's helmet, knocking him unconscious.

Stavin collapsed against the back of the wagon's seat and slowly became aware of two things. First, the fight was over. Second, and more importantly, his arm hurt worse than he'd ever hurt before.

Someone was calling his name, and that drew his attention away from his pain. He looked up as Karvik climbed into the wagon. "Stave! Are you all right?"

Stavin shook his head and said, "My arm is broken and my Tongue is out there somewhere."

"Any other injuries?" Barvil asked from the other side of the wagon.

"No, Sir," Stavin answered.

"Stay with him, Kar."

"Two more dead to his credit. That gives him his first red star," Karvik said, grinning at his father.

"Only one," Stavin said through gritted teeth. "That one's not dead."

"One was enough," Karvik said with a grin.

Barvil checked the man. "No, he isn't dead yet. We'll see to that later." He looked up the road. "Barin, free that horse and put the other one down. We'll use some of their animals in the harness now."

"Yes, Sir," Barin answered and a sound like an ax hitting wet wood immediately followed.

"I've got your Dragon's Tongue, Stave," Kahndar said as he stopped beside the wagon. "How did they get close enough to get it away from you?"

"Crossbow," Stavin said, pointing in the direction the bandits had come from. "One in the back and one off my helmet, and then another in the chest."

Kahndar picked up the dead-man's sword and examined it. "Your mail ruined this one, Stave. It looks like he's been cutting rocks. Now this man," Kahndar said as he stripped the helmet off of the unconscious man, "looks familiar. Recognize him, Stave?" he asked as he held the unconscious man's head up.



## Chapter 51

Stavin looked at the man and nodded. "Carad, from Zel'Marran. That sergeant was right. I should have killed him when I had the chance," he said, shaking his head slowly.

Carad slowly regained consciousness, and found Stavin sitting in the wagon facing him with his Dragon's Tongue in his right hand. "You've failed again, fool," Stavin said as Carad's eyes focused on him. "I spared you once and you tried to shoot me in the back. I won't make that mistake again."

"Give me my sword and we'll see who's the fool, boy," Carad snarled.

"No. I gave you one chance. That's enough." Stavin's hand snapped forward driving the point of his Dragon's Tongue into Carad's chest. "Maybe executing you is beyond my authority, but simply killing a bandit isn't. I just wanted you to be awake when I did it."

Carad's mouth worked, but no sound emerged. Stavin's Dragon's Tongue had severed his windpipe just above his lungs. In moments, Carad was dead. Once Carad's eyes went blank, Stavin let Barvil and Kahndar take him to Angeleese's wagon.

That night, Barvil called Stavin up in front of his comrades. "Stavin Kel'Aniston, you have done what no man before you has ever accomplished. Never in the history of our people has a man earned his first star on his first expedition. With twenty-seven kills, you have done that today. In accordance with the traditions of our ancestors, you have earned the rank of Warleader Sixth. It won't do you any good until you are on your fifth expedition, but you have earned it."

Stavin snapped to attention and bowed deeply. "I understand completely, Sir," he said. "I just can't wait to see the look on Dorvina's face when she sees it."

Karvik began laughing so hard that he fell backwards off of his bench and rolled on the ground. "She's going to *scream!*"

"And what about Shari?" Kahndar asked.

"She isn't going to scream. She's going to make me tell the tale over and over and over again until she has it all written down," Stavín said with a grin. "Shari is the one who is going to make Dorvina scream. After all, Harner didn't go out this year."

"We're not done yet," Barvil said and the warriors quieted down. "Kahndar, you claimed three today, bringing your total to nineteen. Davel, you claimed two, also bringing your total to nineteen. Lavin, you claimed two for a total of fifteen. Horvan claimed one for a total of sixteen and his third red stripe. Congratulations, Senior Sergeant Kel'Erins. Chandar claimed two for a total of thirteen. Congratulations to all of you on a job well done."

The caravan reached the border town of Fort Zel'Narlís two days later. The Evandian side seemed to be one large caravansary, and Sahren had her wagons stop in a straight line. Stavín was once again driving the warrior's wagon, but he had a horse tied to the back. One of the bandits' horses had proven to be well-trained, and Stavín had traded the two horses he had claimed to Davel for it. The combination of Bone-Heal from Angeleese's kit and Heal-All from Barvil's pack had left him sore but functional by the time they arrived.

Stavín tied the reins to the brake and followed his orders, no matter how much he hated them. Barvil had issued them as soon as they had come out of the mountains. "Stavín, you stay on the wagon and guard our belongings. Sahren said this is where a lot of goods vanish. I also don't want you in a fight until you're more steady on your feet."

Stavín said, "Yes, Sir," with barely disguised reluctance, and Barvil gave him a piercing look. "I will, Sir," Stavín assured his commander, and Barvil finally nodded.

"See that you do," was Barvil's final comment before riding to the front.

Stavín watched as dozens of men and women came from other caravans to browse Sahren's wagons. The sound of haggling was like the murmur of a city, and soon Stavín was having a hard time keeping his eyes open.

"And what are you selling, golden warrior?" a man's voice asked, causing Stavín's head to snap around.

"Nothing, good Sir. These are goods we have purchased to take home," Stavín answered as he fought to calm his racing heart.

"You'd pay tax to the Coravians on your goods?" the man asked.

"If needs be, yes," Stavín answered.

"They'll demand five percent of the value. You'd do better to sell here and buy again over there." The man smiled and Stavín grew suspicious.

"How do we know we can find the same goods over there?" Stavín asked, leaning forward.

"It could be that the exact same items could be found on the Coravian side of the border. Perhaps still packed in the same wagon." The man smiled as Stavín nodded.

Barvil walked over and interrupted any further conversation. "Be on your way. There's no trade to be had here," he said, laying his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"I was just speaking to this fine young man about –"

"Smuggling. Sahren warned me. Be gone." Barvil snapped and bared a finger of blade.

"I'm gone. I'm gone," the man said as he hurried away.

Barvil turned toward Stavín and scowled. "Good guards don't let themselves be distracted like that, Stavín. Two men were creeping toward the wagon while you were concentrating on that fool. Concentrate on your job and let me worry about anything else."

Stavín snapped, "Yes, Sir," and bowed deeply as Barvil walked away. In what seemed to be a short time to Stavín, the wagons jerked into motion again and Stavín hurriedly took his seat and joined them. Sahren led them straight to the border crossing and men in the uniform of the Coravian Army walked up to each wagon.

The soldier who approached the warriors' wagon appeared to be a young boy until he spoke. That's when Stavín realized that he was a girl. "What cargo do you carry?" she asked.

Stavin recovered from the shock of seeing a woman in uniform and replied, "Goods we have purchased to take home."

The girl looked up at him, but didn't smile. "You're an unusual group, then. Few warriors buy a wagonload of goods."

"Few warriors have their resources, trooper," a middle-aged man said from behind her.

The girl turned and snapped to attention. "Sir, this man claims that these are not goods for trade," she reported.

"Possibly so," the man, a Coravian major, said as he looked up at Stavin. "I am Major Kel'Kahri. Am I right in thinking that you are Friend of Evandia Stavin Kel'Aniston?"

"Yes, Major," Stavin replied, coming to attention in his seat.

"What is the total value of the goods in your wagon, Friend Stavin?" the major asked.

"Sir, I believe the value of our purchases is between fifteen and twenty gold crowns, Sir," Stavin answered.

The girl snorted and the major took a step back. "That is quite a bit, Friend Stavin. Are you sure?"

Stavin said, "Yes, Sir. The fifteen is mine, so I'm sure of that. The other five is a guess based on what my comrades have been buying."

The trooper was openly gaping at Stavin and the major chuckled when he saw her expression. "What's the matter, trooper? Haven't you ever heard an honest answer before?"

"No, Sir! No one ever admits what they really have, Sir," she said as she came back to attention.

The major smiled and said, "I'm inclined to believe Friend Stavin. Make the proper entries in your book. Friend Stavin," the major said as he looked up again, "your tax will be one gold crown. Trade goods or not, all goods entering Coravia must be taxed. Sorry, but that's the law."

Stavin nodded and picked up the gold coin that was beside him on the bench. "I was prepared, Sir," he said as he handed the coin to the major.

The major actually laughed at that. "If only everyone was as honest and accommodating as you are, Friend Stavin, this would be a much more enjoyable post. Good journey to you, and safe roads."

The trooper was still staring at Stavin, and when he transferred his attention to her she spoke. "Can I touch it? Your armor?" Stavin nodded and leaned toward her as her hand came up to meet him. Her fingers brushed the surface of his breastplate and she sighed. "It's as smooth as silk. I never thought I'd touch dragon scale. Thank you, Sir. You may go," she said as she recovered her military bearing.

Stavin nodded and snapped the reins to get the horses moving, hurrying to clear the area. Most of Trader Sahren's wagons had already moved on and he joined the caravan. Barvil walked over as he stopped.

"Any trouble, Stavin?"

"No, Sir. I told them what I estimated the value of our goods to be and they took me at my word. The tax was one gold crown."

Barvil raised an eyebrow at that. "We've spent more than that, Stavin."

"Yes, Sir. But they asked what the value of the goods in the wagon was, not what we spent to get them." Stavin smiled and Barvil laughed.

"That's a fine line you are walking, Stavin," he said, slapping Stavin's arm.

Stavin shrugged. "I can't lie honorably, Sir, but that doesn't mean I have to be a fool. I answered the question I was asked fully and honestly."

Barvil shook his head in mock despair. "You've been spending too much time with Kethlan," he muttered. "That sounds like something he would say." Stavin didn't have an answer to that, so he just kept quiet as Barvil walked away.

## Chapter 52

The traders had somehow refilled their wagons on the Coravian side of the border and were involved in active trading just four days later. In the city of Ahram's Holding the traders began to load up again.

Barvil gathered his men briefly to give his orders. "There is no tax crossing into Kavadia, so now is the time to buy any bulky items that you wanted. There just aren't any big cities with bazaars on our route, otherwise I would have told you to wait. There also aren't any cities big enough to have a Chapter House of the Gold Merchants, Stavin, so what you have on you is all you have available."

Stavin grimaced. "That shouldn't be a problem unless I run into another bookseller, Sir. I'm still weighed down by my purse."

"Don't say that too loudly, Stavin, or someone is likely to help lighten your load," Kahndar said, dropping a heavy hand on Stavin's shoulder.

Kahndar's hand had the first watch, and watch they did as more people brought goods into the caravan than left with them. Items of every type were brought in to trade. After the watch changed, Stavin started doing some of his own trading. A pretty trinket here, a bolt of fine cloth there, and he was surprised by the variety available.

Kethlan shook his head slowly when Stavin brought the subject up, "Do you remember Dragon's Nest, Stavin?" Stavin simply nodded in reply. "Four days from the border, just like here. I suspect that's the only reason this place exists. Four days from the border you get rid of as much as you can, and then four days across the border you load up again. All of these good people will make a modest profit selling us things that they bought from another caravan. We get another load, and the Crown doesn't tax us out of our livelihood."

Stavin shook his head slowly. "There is so much more to trading than I thought. Maybe by the time I've made my fifth expedition I'll understand it."

Kethlan slapped Stavin's shoulder. "You might at that, Stavin. You keep asking why and you just might come to understand."

The caravan traveled north through Coravia, trading as it went, and the warriors all relaxed as several Coravian army patrols swept by them going in both directions. In one instance the patrol stopped the caravan for inspection.

A grizzled old major with a scar across his right eye stopped his horse by Sahren's wagon and bowed. "Your pardon, Trader, but I must ask you to allow us to search your wagons for contraband."

"This is most unusual, Major," Sahren replied, stopping her wagon in the middle of the road.

"It's training, ma'am," the major replied apologetically. "My troops are mostly new, and they need to learn what they are looking for. Will you please ask your people to cooperate?"

Sahren looked at the major, then at the sky. "It's close to mid day. We will eat and let you show your people how to do their jobs."

The major bowed once again and had his troopers dismount. "Cadre, take your subordinates and show them what to look for while you check the wagons," he commanded. The troopers split into teams of six with one veteran and five youths in each.

Stavin was once again driving the wagon and tried not to smile as a tall, exceptionally pretty woman wearing a lieutenant's insignia stepped up to the wagon.

"What are you hauling?" she asked.

"Goods that my comrades and I have purchased in the lowlands of Evandia, Lieutenant," Stavin replied.

"And that golden armor?" she asked, looking directly at Stavin.

"A gift from a dragon," he answered.

"We've heard the story. Troopers, remove the tarp," she commanded and the five youths behind her immediately obeyed. Once the wagon was uncovered she began her

inspection. "When you search an open wagon like this one, you have to look for hidden panels."

"There are no hidden panels in this wagon, Lieutenant," Stavín offered helpfully.

"Never believe it when you're told that, no matter who tells you," she said to her subordinates. "Check under the wagon and look for signs of a double bottom. That's a favorite trick with this kind of wagon. Check the seat as well."

A tall, massively built young man stepped up to the side of the wagon and carefully examined the seat from where he was standing. "It's just boards, ma'am, but there's a box tucked up under it," he reported and the lieutenant looked at Stavín.

"What is in that box, good Sir?"

Stavín said, "Books."

"Books? What would an illiterate backwoods barbarian want with books?" the lieutenant sneered.

Stavín felt the adrenaline rush of rage suffuse his body and he looked the lieutenant straight in the eye as he replied, "Hav Cova Parin Kel'Kavin, Shanat. Vel Zel Ova Den Orad Bel Ova Kan."

The lieutenant was staring at him with wide eyes as she replied. "Coh Hava Bel Canat, Zel Contan," she nearly whispered as her troopers stared at them both.

"What was that, ma'am?" one of the troopers asked, drawing the lieutenant's attention.

"Old Tongue, from Imperial times. This young man is a scholar and found my comment to be rude. I guess it was. Cover the wagon and tie down the tarp. We're done here," she commanded and the troopers quickly obeyed her.

Looking up at Stavín, she offered him a slight bow. "You are a surprise, good Sir, and I offer my apologies for my poorly considered words."

Stavín bowed deeply from his seat. "I accept your apology, Lieutenant. Please remember in the future that the warriors of the Kel'Kavin Valley all learn to read, write, and speak Old Tongue at an early age."



She nodded slightly and walked away with her troopers in a file behind her, and continued until she reached her commander and saluted. Stavín was much too far away to hear what she said, but the major gave Stavín a very curious look before returning her salute.

The caravan moved on and stopped for the night at the next town. Trader Sahren planned to spend the next day trading. The town was next to the Coravian Army Fort of Kel'Vardil and shared its name.

The next morning the people of Fort Kel'Vardil, civilian and soldier alike, came out to trade, and Stavín joined the other warriors standing guard beside the wagons. The watch had just changed hands and Stavín was eating when the same lieutenant came looking for him.

"Good Sir, my commanding officer would like to have a word with you. Will you come with me, please?"

Stavín stood and bowed. "Yes, ma'am," he replied, grabbing his helmet and Dragon's Tongue.

"You won't need those. General Zel'Enred simply wants to meet you," she said and smiled when Stavín put them down. She and Stavín then walked to the fort without saying anything else.

At the general's office the lieutenant came to attention at the desk of another young lieutenant and said, "Lieutenant Zel'Coy reporting to Lord General Zel'Enred with Friend of Evandia Stavín Kel'Aniston, as ordered."

The other lieutenant stood and bowed his head. "I will inform the general that you are here, Lieutenant," he said and walked to the door behind his desk, knocked once, then entered. He returned moments later. "You may escort the general's guest in, Lieutenant," he said, standing at attention behind his desk.

Lieutenant Zel'Coy led Stavín into the general's office and came to attention. "Sir, I wish to present Friend of Evandia Stavín Kel'Aniston from the Kel'Kavin Valley."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Wait outside to escort him back when we are through." The general paused as the lieutenant left the room. "Welcome to Fort Kel'Vardil, Friend Stavin."

Stavin bowed deeply. "I am honored to meet you, Lord General Zel'Enred."

"I asked Lieutenant Zel'Coy to bring you here because I'm curious. You told her that all of your people learn to speak, read, and write Old Tongue. Is that really true?"

Stavin nodded. "Yes, Sir," he snapped, then added with a grin, "Not everyone remembers it after the lessons, though."

"That sounds remarkably familiar, Friend Stavin. Come over here, please. I have something I would like you to look at," the general said, motioning Stavin over to the side of the room.

Stavin joined the general and found himself looking at the tattered remains of an ancient book. "This book was found in an ancient tomb that was accidentally discovered at a rock quarry near here," the general explained. "It is written in glyphs, which I was never very good at, but the language doesn't seem to match what I remember of Old Tongue. Would you care to take a look?"

Stavin was almost shaking with his desire to look at the book and he immediately stepped forward saying, "Yes, please, Sir."

Stavin carefully opened the book and looked at the parchment pages. They were stained and tattered at the edges, and some sort of insect had burrowed into them, but most of the writing was legible.

"Ikal Intav Inatat. So Van Ikal Inatat. Doh So Invatal Sah Kaval. Cam So Lem Ikal Inatat," Stavin read aloud. "King Inatat sleeps. In sleep, Inatat dreams. Let he who discovers this place tremble. Honored is King Inatat," he said as he translated the passage. "I have only seen one small parchment in this language, Sir. Master Kel'Zorgan let me see it and taught me the difference in the glyphs. This isn't actually Old Tongue: it's older than that." He looked up at the general. "When Dandarshandrake taught the Chosen of Luxand to read and write the glyphs, he brought them from somewhere in the west. It's always been assumed that he meant another continent when he said that,

but you may have proven that he meant something closer. After all, we are far to the west of the original city of Lux."

The general was staring at Stavín with a curious expression. "I thought you were twisting Lieutenant Zel'Coy's tail, Friend Stavín. How many of your people could read this?"

"Master Scribe Kel'Zorgan and my wife, Sharindis, though I doubt Shari would be able to make out the glyphs. She lost most of her sight when she fell off a horse five years ago," Stavín answered, looking at the book again.

## Chapter 53

The general leaned toward Stavín with an intensely curious expression. "Twenty scholars from Moravad, Twin Bridges, and Luxand have examined this book and pronounced it gibberish," the general said as he stared at Stavín. "Gods Above and Below, Friend Stavín, do you realize what this means?" he asked loudly.

Stavín was suddenly afraid that he might have been a little too proud and insulted someone. "No, Sir, I don't think I do," he said, shrinking back timidly.

"This means that the history of our people extends farther back than we've ever dreamed. My hobby is the ancient past. I've dug up and collected hundreds of items over the years, but never anything as definitive as this." He smiled broadly and grasped Stavín by both shoulders. "Friend Stavín, would you be willing to try and translate this book? Even if you can only translate part of it, it will open up a chapter of our past that we didn't know existed."

"I would be honored, Sir, but I don't know if I can. Perhaps Master Kel'Zorgan will help me."

"I had hoped that you would consent to staying here for the winter, Friend Stavín," the general said as he looked down into Stavín's eyes.

Stavín bowed before he replied, "I would be honored, Sir, but I don't think my wife would understand, and I am honor-bound to complete my five expeditions before I would be allowed to take the time away from my duties this project will require. In addition, I have to admit that I don't know if I translated that right. The parchment that I was talking about is only about half a page and is from an ancient teaching book from Old Lux, from the early years of the Empire. Only Master Kel'Zorgan knows it well enough to be sure of his translation."

The general nodded. "Would you be able to work on it during the winter in Kel'Kavín?"

"Yes, Sir," Stavín answered, coming to attention automatically.

"I am loath to allow it out of my possession, but I don't see a way around it. Given the security of the Kel'Kavín crater, and the reputation of your people, I suppose it would be safe enough. I just wish I could go along." The general shook his head sadly. "Duty forbids me that option, just as duty forbids you the other."

Stavín bowed deeply. "I will guard it with my life, and when I tell my commander what it is, I'm sure he will ensure its safety even if I die."

General Zel'Enred gave Stavín a gentle shake. "I'm going to have to be satisfied with that. And you are correct, Friend Stavín, that the more minds on this the better. A translation by a Master Scribe is also going to be more easily accepted than a translation by a youth, no matter what his qualifications. Knowledge is like food, Friend Stavín: even a tidbit is better than none. Here," the general said, turning to the side, "I usually keep it in this." The general set a box the size and shape of the book next to it on the table. "My Master Battlemage was amused by the idea and agreed to put a protective spell on the book to keep it from crumbling, but there's no sense in taking unnecessary chances." The general closed the book and put it in the box, then closed and latched the lid.

Stavín picked up the box and bowed deeply. "Lord General Zel'Enred, thank you for the opportunity to examine this book. During the winter I will endeavor to translate as much of it as I can with the help of Master Kel'Zorgan. I will send you messages when I can, detailing what I have discovered."

"Friend Stavín, thank you for agreeing to examine it. I'll let you get back to your duties now, and I'll get back to mine." The general escorted Stavín to the door and motioned him through. He smiled at the young lieutenant as she turned toward them. "Lieutenant, escort this extraordinary young man back to his friends."

"Yes, Sir," Lieutenant Zel'Coy snapped and motioned Stavín to join her. When the general's door closed, she looked hard at Stavín and asked, "Could you really read it?"

"Yes, though just barely. Master Kel'Zorgan will be able to read more of it than I can," Stavín said as they headed out of the office. Nothing more was said as they walked back to the caravan, and Lieutenant Zel'Coy left Stavín at the wagons with one final comment.

"I wish you luck, Friend Stavín, and a safe journey." Then she turned and briskly walked away.

Barvil and Kahndar met him at the wagon. "What's in that box, Stavín?" Barvil asked.

"A book, Sir."

Kahndar laughed. "Somehow, I'm not surprised."

"Nor I," Barvil agreed.

"Well, I was, Sir," Stavín said, then detailed all he knew about the book.

Kahndar and Barvil were stunned silent for a moment, then Kahndar spoke in a breathy whisper. He said, "If that is genuine, then it may be the most valuable book in existence, and the general just sent it off with you? That doesn't sound right, Stave," as he looked at the box.

Stavín shrugged one shoulder. "Everyone else thinks it's gibberish, Kahn. And the general didn't just send it with me. He wanted me to stay here, but I explained why I couldn't, and he acknowledged that the same reasons prevent him from going with us. The box and book are also spelled by the general's Master Battlemage for protection." He pulled his lips tight and shook his head as he looked at the box. "The only problem I see is that it's a flat book, not a scroll. I'll let Master Kel'Zorgan determine if that means anything," Stavín said as he shoved the box in beside his box of books.

"Why is it not being a scroll a problem?" Kahndar asked. "Lots of books are flat instead of rolled."

Stavín nodded without looking around. "New books, or I should say, *newer* books are often flat, but ancient texts, from the time of the early empire, were almost always rolled scrolls. If this is as old as it appears, it should be in a tube, not a flat box."

Stavin wedged the box carefully in place and covered all of the books with a piece of oiled leather and lashed the whole thing back in place.

The caravan continued on toward Kavadia the next morning and met an early winter storm before mid daymid day. Freezing rain fell sporadically and the wind blew it into everyone's faces. Sahren kept them moving until it got so dark that she was afraid to continue. The caravan formed a protective circle and Barvil sent his men out in twos. He really wasn't concerned about bandits in this kind of weather, but that didn't mean he was going to let his guard down completely.

Morning dawned cold and clear and the caravan continued along its way. Sahren began pushing the pace as the weather continued to remain cold. When she had stopped only briefly to trade and then moved on before nightfall at three towns, Barvil asked why.

"That was an unusual storm, Barvil, and it has continued to be colder than normal. We're still twelve days from Markavia Cross and we shouldn't be facing this kind of weather yet."

Barvil nodded and looked at his men. They all knew that an early cold snap tended to bring out the bandits as well as poor people who weren't prepared and were just trying to survive.

The caravan reached the town of Fallen Leaf, just across the border into Kavadia, four days later and stopped as the sun went down. Trader Sahren didn't have to tell her people to circle the wagons. This was the Kavadian border region. There was no other formation that they dared take.

Sahren spent a day in Fallen Leaf, trading for information as much as anything else. "Barvil," she said as she joined the warriors at the evening meal, "there are already rumors of attacks farther up the road. I'd like to put one of my people in your wagon and move it up to a less exposed position. That will put all of your warriors in the saddle where they belong."

"That would be best," he agreed. "For our part, I'm putting on extra guards at night and we'll keep close to the caravan during the day."

The caravan moved on, planning to stop at each town for the night, no matter when they arrived. That was fine at the next town up the road, but trouble met them before they reached the one after that.

The sound of shouting came from up the road. Barvil had Sahren stop while he investigated. What he saw infuriated him. Bandits had hit a caravan and were busily searching the wagons while a few amused themselves with a pair of women. Barvil drew his sword and waved it in a circle over his head, calling his men to him without using his horn and warning Sahren to circle her wagons at the same time.

Stavin rode forward from his number two position and stopped beside Barvil. Karvik arrived just a breath behind him. As soon as the rest of the warriors joined them, Barvil kicked his horse into a gallop.

Barvil's first targets were the rapists, and he vaulted from the saddle before they had pulled their pants up. Both men fell, dead before they hit the ground, and Barvil turned toward the wagons.

Stavin had dismounted and attacked a swordsman. His Dragon's Tongue flicked out and the man died with a cut throat. Another man bled to death after Stavin cut his sword arm off and then removed the other arm for good measure. Stavin's third opponent tried to use a spear to keep him at bay, but Stavin was running too fast. He took the spear point off with a sweeping gesture and opened the man from crotch to collar with the return blow. Then he saw a man holding a knife at the throat of one of the rape victims and slowed his pace.

"Stay back!" the man shouted. "Stay back or she dies!"

"She dies, you die," Stavin said as he walked away from the caravan to circle the man and his hostage.

"All I want to do is escape. That's all I want to — *URK!*" The man's eyes bulged as Kahndar's armored hand grabbed his wrist while its mate drove a knife into his back.



## Chapter 54

Stavin and Kahndar stayed together as they walked along the caravan. They found the four warriors who had been this caravan's protection laid out by the road. They had died together with their hands tied, and Stavin realized what must have happened: they had surrendered to save themselves.

A pitiful groan drew them to a man in a Master Trader's vest. "Don't rob us. Don't just save us for yourselves," he whispered.

"That would be dishonorable," Stavin replied, and he saw a flicker of hope in the trader's eyes before he breathed his last.

Barvil walked up with his sword still dripping blood. "Is everything secure?" he asked, looking at Kahndar for an answer.

"Yes, Sir. Three dead bandits on my count," Kahndar replied.

"Stavin?"

"Three more for me as well, Sir. That man was the Master Trader. These were the guards he hired," Stavin said, pointing at the bound dead men.

"Better to fight to the death than be slaughtered like sheep," Barvil said, quoting the Code of the Warrior. "Start helping the survivors." Barvil took his horn and blew one long tone to signal to Trader Sahren that it was safe to come forward.

Stavin and Kahndar snapped to attention, then walked away to obey the order. It took just a few moments to discover that with the exception of the two rape victims, there were no survivors.

The women were huddling together, crying. Stavin wanted to go to them, to help, but they flinched when he stepped closer. Backing away, he clenched his teeth as hard as he could. When the caravan arrived he ran back to Angeleese's wagon and got her to drive around while he explained the situation.

Her eyes were bleak as she asked, "Did you kill them all?"

Stavin answered, "Of course," without looking at her.

"Good."

Karvik walked up beside Stavin and spoke without looking away from the pile of bodies. "They killed them all. They killed the men first, then the children, then took the women – they took the women and raped them."

Stavin nodded. "I saw. Their guards surrendered to save themselves, but they were slaughtered anyway. How many did you get?"

"Four. Two who hardly even defended themselves, one who thought a woodsman's ax was a weapon, and a fourth coward who was running away."

Stavin's expression lightened as he looked at Karvik's shoulder. "I don't think Sharvan or Rohana will find anything to object to when you ask for Orana. Not with four red stripes on your shoulder your first time out of the valley."

"So long as she hasn't accepted anyone else while I was gone," Karvik whispered.

Barvil's horn called them back to their caravan and they found him in conference with Trader Sahren. As soon as everyone was together, Barvil told them what had been decided.

"That caravan was from Reynadia. Sahren and I have agreed that since there are survivors, they still own the wagons and goods. Sahren is going to have her people drive the wagons and we are going to spread out to protect them all." He looked at his men and nodded once. "Kahn, take your hand and begin rounds. Dav, you and your men start loading everything back into the wagons."

All eight of the young warriors snapped, "Yes, Sir," and headed off to their assignments. Stavin began marching around the caravan, watching the surrounding trees. He slowed his steps as he approached Angeleese's wagon, but he didn't go near it. It seemed that half of the women from the caravan were there, and he was sure more were inside.

Davel and his men used their horses to drag the bodies of the bandits off the road and into the forest, then started loading the wagons. Sahren had sent six of her men forward with shovels and they started digging a large grave-pit well away from

the road. When they were ready, Davel and his men helped carry the bodies of the traders to the grave and laid them together. Then all ten men worked to fill in the grave, stamping the dirt to compact it, and scattering the remainder to hide the grave from the road – and the survivors.

The Reynadian caravan had eight wagons, and Sahren had them dispersed among her wagons. The elongated caravan moved on as soon as it could to get away from the site of the attack. They had stopped long enough that night was upon them before they reached the next town and Sahren made the decision to stop when it became too dark to see their surroundings clearly. She didn't explain why, but then, she really didn't need to. There was only one likely place for those bandits to have come from.

Barvil gathered his men before setting his guards. "Dav, take your hand and begin rounds. Kahn, get some sleep. Sahren wants to be on the move as soon as she can. Change hands at mid night."

The warriors all snapped, "Yes, Sir," before going to carry out their orders.

In the morning, Barvil briefly gathered his men. "I claim four. Kahndar claimed three and his fourth red stripe. Stavik claims three. Karvik claims four and his fourth red stripe. Now stay alert. This is still Kavadia and anything can happen."

The sun found the caravan already moving again and they reached the town of Fel'Hadak by midmorning. Sahren kept on going, not stopping to trade as she had been doing. There might be questions that she didn't want to answer.

The caravan pushed on after dark and reached the city of Varindia not long after the moons rose. The guards at the caravansary didn't question their late arrival. This was Kavadia: no one camped if they didn't have to.

In the morning Kahndar's hand accompanied Trader Sahren and the two survivors to the local Traders' Guild Chapter House. The man behind the desk looked up, then almost leapt to his feet.

"Master Trader Sahren, welcome. You're late this year." He looked behind her to the warriors and especially Stavin. "So it's true. We heard wild rumors that you had a gold-clad warrior with you."

"It is true, Ardic. We have grim news for the Council in Aravad, but it will wait." She motioned the survivors forward and said, "These two women are the only survivors from a caravan that was attacked south of Fel'Hadak. They have eight wagons of trade goods from Reynadia and are under the protection of Zel'Vandar. They *will* be treated properly, won't they?"

The man took a step back and swallowed before bowing deeply. He said, "As you say, Master Trader Sahren."

"Good," Sahren said in a lighter tone. Turning to the women, she smiled softly. "You are as safe as my own daughters would be. Your goods will be inventoried and you will be allowed to keep or sell what you wish. The Zel'Vandar Trading House will buy what you don't want at a fair price. Not a good or generous price, you understand, but a fair one."

The younger of the two women was barely twenty, but she had recovered far better than her older cousin. "We thank you, Master Trader Sahren. Beyond one wagon and our personal belongings, there is nothing we wish to keep. If it hadn't been for you and your warriors, we wouldn't even have our lives."

"I want to go home," the other woman said in a barely audible voice.

"In the spring, we will find a caravan going to Reynadia and we'll go home. I promise," the younger woman said and hugged her cousin.

Sahren looked at the man again and said, "Ardic, I will be checking on these women from time to time. Don't give me a reason to come looking for you."

"Yes, Master Trader Sahren," Ardic said, bowing very low.

Sahren turned to the women and said, "Stay with Ardic. My family will take your wagons to the Guild docks. Ardic will ensure that everything is taken care of."

Both women said, "Thank you."

With that, Sahren led the way out of the Chapter House. "Ardic doesn't usually act like that, but the presence of you four threw him off-balance. He will take proper care of them for fear that I'll bring you with me when I return. He's really a decent sort most of the time but – this *is* Kavadia. If I hadn't put them under my protection, he would have waited until I was in Aravad and stolen everything, and then sold the women to a whorehouse."

"He would have died if I found out," Stavin said and received grunts of agreement from the others.

"That's part of why you were there. He knows the Kel'Kavin warriors from his days on the road." Sahren smiled at all of them. They were silent as they walked back to the caravansary. The eight Reynadian wagons had already been taken away and Sahren's family was busy making some of the last trades of the season. The caravan resumed its journey early the next morning and traveled unmolested to the next town, and then on to Aravad.

## Chapter 55

Aravad was the ancient capital of Kavadia from Imperial times. Several kings and warlords had tried to retake power and rule from Aravad in the five centuries since the fall of Luxand, but no one had ever lasted for more than a dozen years. At the present time the kingdom, if a land with no king could be called that, was loosely ruled by a cartel of noble houses like Zel'Vandar.

The wool weavers were the most powerful group, mostly because there were so many of them. The major trading houses were next. They were the wealthiest group. Woodsmen, iron workers, quarrymen, and herders were also represented, but all of them together could not overcome the wool weavers or traders. Master Trader Sahren led the way into a large area with the Zel'Vandar crest over the gate. Dozens of people ran out to meet them, and Barvil called his men to him.

"We're not going to be needed here until the day after tomorrow. Sahren has a lot to discuss with the elders of her clan. That, of course, means that we have two free days to make some arrangements of our own. She has already paid us, including the four days it will take as to reach Markavia Cross and her home. That'll give us one hundred and twenty-nine days with her, so she paid sixty-four gold and five silver crowns. I'll be depositing that with the Gold Merchants. She also paid twenty gold, six silver, and nine sparks as half of the tolls and taxes that Staviv saved her. That will also go to the town account. That, my young friends, almost ensures us the award for the best season this year." Everyone smiled broadly as he continued, "Sahren also told me that it'll take us about twelve days to get back to Kel'Kavin from Markavia Cross. We're going to have to take the road because of the wagon."

"Well, if we have to, we have to," Kahndar said. "I don't see why we should take the wagon back half-empty, though. I'm sure the Elders have already purchased the supplies for the town, but there's no reason we can't buy extra for our families."

The warriors all accompanied the wagon as Barvil made the rounds of the merchants who dealt in bulk food stuffs. The delicate items they had purchased were carefully stowed so the bags of wheat, beans, barley, and other grains could be loaded. Hard sausages, wheels of cheese, and assorted cured meats were added since it was cool enough for them to keep. Everyone bought spices, especially salt and red peppercorns.

Kahndar laughed at the amount of food that Stavín was buying. "You still get an allowance from the town for every member of your household, Stavín. You don't have to feed them all by yourself."

"I have a lot of in-laws, Kahn," Stavín said. "Brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, mother- and father-in-law." He grinned at Karvik and laughed. "And what about Kar? He must be buying for friends and family who don't live with us. Or maybe he is planning for someone else to move in with him?" Stavín grinned even wider at the look on Karvik's face.

Everyone was focused on Karvik now and he blushed as he raised an index finger and pointed at Stavín. "Stave, you swore —"

"I didn't tell, Karvik, but I'll bet you have to now," Stavín said with a laugh.

"Come on, Kar, who is she?" Lavin asked.

"How come you waited?" Chandar asked.

"Yes, Karvik, who is she?" Barvil asked, staring at his son.

Karvik looked at Stavín and raised a fist in mock threat. "Stave, I can still murder you before we get back to the valley."

"Karvik," Barvil said sharply and grabbed his son's shoulder to turn him around. "You never mentioned this to us."

"Come on, Kar," Kahndar said. "Who *is* she?"

Karvik finally relented and said, "Orana."

"*Kel' Davin?*" Barin almost shouted.

"You don't aim low, do you?" Davel asked.

"Until Stave came back with that armor, I didn't need to," Karvik answered hotly. "She has already agreed and I was going to ask – but then Stave came back and I was a servant and –"

"I'm sorry, son," Barvil said quietly.

"It won't matter when he gets back. Not with four red stripes of his own in one season," Kahndar said, reaching up to touch his own stripes. "Besides, Sharvan only has one star. You have your fourth star don't you, Barvil?"

"Yes, as of the last fight, I do. I just haven't painted it yet." Barvil looked at Karvik and slapped his shoulder. "You know what your mother is going to say, don't you?"

"How could you *keep* something like this from me?" Karvik said in a fair imitation of his mother's voice.

"Among other things," Barvil agreed with a laugh. "Come along now. This wagon isn't full yet."

The group continued on among the warehouses, buying staple foods of different kinds and little luxuries as well. When the sun had set, Barvil led them back to the Zel'Vandar compound. Barin was the first to voice something that was on everyone's mind.

"I'm hungry. I wonder when – I wonder *if* the cook is making the evening meal?"

Barvil chuckled. "No, but Sahren recommended an inn just up the street. We'll cover the wagon and see to the horses, then we'll go eat." The wagon was parked, covered, and the team tended in record time with everyone pitching in.

Barvil led them to the Fighting Stag Inn and they were met by the innkeeper as soon as they entered. "Yes, good sirs, how may I help you?"

"Food for nine. Beer or ale as well," Barvil answered.

"Very well. This way, please," the innkeeper said as he led them to a table near the wall. "I am guessing that you are the warriors that Master Trader Sahren hired. Is this correct?"

"Yes," Barvil answered as he took a seat that put his back against the wall.



The innkeeper bowed slightly. "I thought so when I saw the youth in the golden armor. She has instructed me to send the bill for your meals to her House. Your food and beer will be here shortly." With another bow, he was gone.

The food turned out to be elk stew. It was full of roots and tubers of various kinds and spiced to give it some extra heat. Crusty sourdough bread and sweet butter made a fine counterpoint. The beer was better than any they'd had in the lowlands, and Barvil did not restrict their consumption this time. Even so, none of them got drunk.

The night passed quickly and dawn brought frost with it. Barvil looked at the white crystals that were riming the buildings and fences and grimaced. It was too early in the year for this much frost.

## Chapter 56

The warriors were once again left to their own devices and Stavin found himself the center of everyone's attention. The story of his encounter with the dragon had made it to Aravad halfway through the summer, and just about everyone had heard it. Some people just wanted to touch his armor, as the trooper in Coravia had.

Sahren led a distinguished-looking older man to where the warriors were standing and smiled, motioning Stavin to her side. "Stavin, this is my uncle, Davin Zel'Vandar, Lord of Zel'Vandar, and the leader of our House. Uncle Davin, this is Friend of Evandia Stavin Kel'Aniston, of Kavinston in the Kel'Kavin Valley."

Lord Davin acknowledged Stavin's deferential bow. "I am pleased to meet you, young man. Your presence made Sahren's journey much more profitable, and you and your companions did an excellent job of protecting them." Turning his gaze to Barvil he smiled. "Warleader Barvil, please relay a message to your Council of Elders. House Zel'Vandar would like to employ six of your teams as escorts for our caravans next year. If young Stavin is included, his group will go to Evandia under the same conditions as Sahren offered concerning tax and tolls."

Barvil bowed deeply before replying. "I will pass your message to the Council, Lord Zel'Vandar. I'm sure six guaranteed contracts will catch their interest."

Lord Zel'Vandar turned to Sahren with a smile. "It's too late for you to leave today, Sahren, so come have supper with us. You can leave at first light tomorrow." Sahren stepped over to her uncle's side and he and the rest of the nobles turned to make their way back to the building while the warriors gathered around Barvil.

"Six teams, Sir," Barin said excitedly. "More than half the expedition hired by one House, and sight unseen at that."

"Dad is going to laugh until he cries," Kahndar said with a grin. "For as long as I can remember, he has been talking about sending the expedition someplace other than Trade Town."

"And for as long as I have been on the Council, Sorval has been saying *no*. He considers it to be too much of a risk," Barvil said, turning to walk back to their fire. "It will still require his approval as Chief Elder, but I can't see him passing up an opportunity like this. That means that Stavín, and whoever's with him will be going back to Evandia next season."

Karvik looked at Stavín and grinned. "That would be fine by me, dad." He reached out and patted Stavín's star. "Maybe I'll get my star next year."

"That's probably a sure thing, considering the number of attackers who have been attracted by that armor. For now, though, I'm in the mood for food. Let's go back to the Fighting Stag," Barvil said and led the way up the road. The innkeeper again seated them against the wall.

"Food and beer again, good sirs?" the innkeeper asked.

"Yes, and we are celebrating tonight, so keep the beer coming," Barvil said, and the innkeeper smiled as he walked away. The meat in the stew was mutton this time and everyone washed it down with plenty of beer. It was still early when Barvil led his band of tipsy men back to their bedrolls.

\* \* \*

Stavín was awakened by the urgent need to relieve himself and scrambled out of his bedroll to make his way to the privy. He looked at the sky on the way back and saw that the stars were already fading in the east.

Other warriors were awake and passed him as he made his way back from the privy. Stavín knelt down and tapped Karvik on the forehead to wake him up. "Time to get up, Kar. Hit the privy and I'll start packing our gear."

Karvik groaned and rolled over, then made a face as the night before caught up with him. "Have you seen the rat that made a nest in my mouth?" he asked, shuddering with revulsion as he swallowed.

"It probably died when you breathed on it," Stavin said as he waved his hand in front of his face. "Now get out so I can pack your bedroll." Stavin grinned as Karvik crawled out of his bed and stumbled away.

Stavin had all of their gear packed by the time Karvik returned. He grinned as Karvik very slowly and carefully sat on the edge of his empty bed box. He only said one thing. "I think my teeth have grown fur."

## Chapter 57

The rising sun greeted the warriors as they walked over to their horses a short time later. Karvik wasn't the only one who was queasy and pale. Barvil took pity on them and handed out packets of Madras powder. It was a pain reliever and stimulant combined and usually worked to cure a hangover in just a few spans.

The caravan had dwindled to just six wagons, including the warriors' wagon. The traders had offloaded all of their trade goods and Sahren planned to travel straight through to Markavia Cross, the seat of the Zel'Vandar lands.

It took four days to reach Markavia Cross, and nothing noteworthy happened the whole way. As the city that she called home came into view, Sahren called Barvil to her side. "This is as far as you need to go, Barvil. That road leads to Trade Town. From there you know the way. Safe roads and clear skies to you until we meet again."

"Safe roads and clear skies to you as well, Sahren. I feel certain that the Council will agree to your uncle's request, and if Stavik goes to Evandia, Kar and I will be with him." Barvil bowed deeply in his saddle, then veered off on the road to return home with his men behind him.

\* \* \*

The warriors had to travel for eleven days to get home, and though the road was through the wilderness, no one bothered them. Near mid day of the eleventh day they reached the gap in the wall of the Kel'Kavin crater.

"You are overdue, Barvil," a voice shouted and four men emerged from the watchtower of the original Fort Kel'Kavin. Sharvan Kel'Davin led them and clasped forearms with Barvil. "What's in the wagon?"

"Extra food and other goods. We had a very good season," Barvil said with a grin. "You, my friend, are in for a surprise."

Sharvan looked at the group and shook his head. "You lost two men, Barvil. You're not the only one, but this isn't the time or place to discuss it. Did your greenlings get blooded?"

Barvil looked over his shoulder at his men. In response to the cold they had all bundled up in cloaks, even Stavín. Barvil let a trace of humor color his voice when he said, "Yes, indeed, but, as you said, this isn't the time or place to discuss it."

Sharvan looked curious as the group passed and Kahndar and Davel gave him a hint as they rode past. Both of them let their cloaks open enough to show the red stripes on their shoulders.

The men at the gap used mirror-code to let Kavinston know who was coming, and a large group was waiting for them at the gates when they arrived. It was a joyous occasion until the missing men were noticed. Then Cordon and Ivalin's families grew quiet and left to mourn in private when they realized that their warriors were not coming home this time.

Stavín almost fell out of his saddle as he hurried to Sharindis' arms. He left his helmet on his saddle horn so that nothing could get between their lips. Sharindis surged into his arms and grabbed his head, holding him tightly as nine moons of waiting came to an end.

"Oh, Stavín, I've missed you so much," she whispered.

"And I have missed you, Shari," Stavín murmured as he almost collapsed into her arms. Stavín opened his eyes and saw Barvil and Sahrena in an almost identical pose, and Karvik was being hugged by his sisters.

A familiar voice said, "Welcome home, son," and he turned his head the other way to find his father and mother beside him, and all of his brothers and sisters behind them. He reached out a hand and his parents both grabbed it.

"Stavín," Sharindis said, "is Kahn—?"

"Kahn has his arms full of Amahlan and Moranah, and— and when did Varis have another baby?" he suddenly asked.

Sharindis laughed. "Oh, Stavi, it's so good to have you home."

Karlit and Marinis squeezed Stavin's hand to get his attention. "Once you get settled, come over and tell us about your expedition," Karlit said.

Stavin grinned. "I think the whole town will be hearing about this expedition, Dad. And speaking of settling, we will be moving home. Barvil earned his fourth star."

"Oh, Stavin, that's wonderful!" Sharindis said and hugged him tightly.

"That is good news, son. I know you weren't comfortable being master of the Kel'Carins, and we heard about what you did on the way out to remedy the situation." Karlit paused and finally asked what all of them wanted to know. "How many stripes did you come home with?"

"None," Stavin answered, but his grin threatened to split his face.

"None?" Sharindis asked.

Stavin stepped away from her arms threw back his cloak. "I didn't come home with any stripes," he said as his shoulder came into view. "I came home with a *star*."

Everyone was stunned silent for a moment, then they all started shouting at once while Stavin continued to grin. Barvil and Sahrena had come over to join them just before Stavin revealed his honors and Sahrena waited until the shouting had subsided before addressing him.

"Congratulations, Master Stavin," she said, bowing her head deeply.

"I am your master no longer, Madam Kel'Carin," Stavin said, bowing as deeply as his grip on Sharindis would allow. "Your husband and son have won back your family's honor and more."

Sahrena stood motionless for an instant before carefully pulling the cloak away from Barvil's shoulder to display four freshly painted stars where there had only been three. Dorvina was staring in stunned disbelief at the star on Stavin's shoulder as Zahrinis ripped Karvik's cloak aside to reveal his honors.

"*Four red!*" she screamed. "Four red stripes!" Karvik's expression mirrored Stavin's while Barvil smiled proudly at his family.

Sharindis was tracing the outline of Stavin's star with one finger. "This tale will be one for the history books," she said as she transferred attention to Stavin's face. "Tomorrow."

Sharindis' comment reminded everyone that there was still a lot to do before the day was done, and Barvil directed everyone's attention to the wagon. Raising his hand he said, "Men, we have some sorting to do." Everyone was in high spirits and laughed as they crowded around the wagon. "We'll do best by driving the wagon to each house rather than carrying all of this. Stavin, you're up."

Stavin quickly climbed aboard and a laughing Sharindis was lifted up beside him. Barvil took the lead and walked to each of his men's homes. "Stavin, you have the most, so you go last," he commanded, then had to grin at Sahrena's questioning look. Each man had marked their goods and it was a matter of moments to unload their purchases and the all-important weapons that proved their kill counts. When everyone except Stavin had unloaded their goods, there was still a lot in the wagon.

Karlit looked at everything his son had brought back and asked, "How much silver did you collect? This is incredible."

Barvil and Karvik had unloaded last and they were still in front of the Kel'Carins' house, so Barvil heard the question. "Don't answer that, Stavin," he commanded and Stavin's mouth snapped shut. "They might faint, and I don't want to have to carry them home," he continued with the mirth in his tone obvious to everyone.

Stavin laughed and said, "Yes, Sir," as his parents looked at him suspiciously.

Marinis looked at her youngest child and her eyes narrowed. "What did you do?"

"Barvil is right, Mom. It's something that we should discuss in private," Stavin said and smiled at the scowl on her face.



## Chapter 58

Stavin's brothers and brothers-in-law helped unload the wagon while his sisters and sisters-in-law took the horses to the field. When his brothers started pestering him for information, all he would say was, "Wait 'til the girls get back. I don't want to get hit for leaving them out."

When all of his family was present, Stavin began detailing the honors and fortune that he had won. Nobody fainted, but Karlit did go to the cupboard and pour a glass of Tiger-Sweat when Stavin told them of the ship and gold merchants. "— And so, because of this armor as much as anything, I have come home a wealthy man."

"What of all this?" Marinis asked, waving at the bags of grain, bolts of cloth, and sacks full of assorted items.

"Gifts, mostly. The cloth is from the lowlands of Evandia and I thought it would make good summer clothes for everyone. I bought a bolt for each woman of my family —" he grinned at his suddenly excited sisters and sisters-in-law, "— as well as Shari's mother. There is some for Sahrena, Dorvi, and Zahri as well. Barvil hadn't earned his fourth star yet when I bought it. We all bought extra food for the winter. Sora, would you and Aric bring those two wooden boxes over here?" he asked as he pointed. He was wedged between Sharindis and his mother, and there was no chance of them letting him up.

Stavin leaned forward and used his big knife to pry open the box, then tossed it negligently aside as he opened his real treasure. Sharindis reacted to the smell and sat forward.

"Books?" she asked with a grin.

"Nine gold crowns' worth," Stavin said, then read the titles as he put them one at a time in her lap. "And this as well," he said, putting the box with her new crystal in her hand.

"You bought another crystal for me?" she asked as tears trickled down her cheek.

"If something happened to your other crystal, it would mean that we couldn't share our books anymore. I couldn't let that happen," he said, then stopped talking as she kissed him.

Farlit, Stavin's oldest brother, had picked up the knife and was examining it with the rest of the men. "This is a water-steel blade, Stavi. Where'd you get it?"

"That story will wait, Far," Stavin said with a wry expression.

"Is it blooded?" Aric asked, and everyone was startled by Stavin's laugh.

"Sorry. Yes, it's blooded," Stavin said.

"What's so funny?" Karlit asked as Stavin continued to grin.

"It was my blood," he answered.

"I want to hear all about it, but not tonight," Marinis said. "Let's let Stavin and Shari get reacquainted tonight. His story will wait until tomorrow when he faces the Council."

Stavin led Sharindis up to the guest room of his father's house and closed the door behind them. "Oh, Shari, I've missed you so much," he breathed as he once again took her into his arms.

Sharindis grabbed his head with both hands to kiss him deeply, then pulled her head back just a little. "It'll be awkward unless you take off your armor," she whispered as she unbuckled his breastplate.

The passion of half a year flared to life as Stavin and Sharindis rediscovered the joys of marriage. If Karlit and Marinis didn't get much sleep, they didn't mind. Their joy at having Stavin home was only slightly less than Shari's.

The sun was well into morning when Karlit knocked on the door to awaken them. "Stavi, Shari, Dorvina brought over some of your clothes. She said Sahrena will be packing you up through today. Stavin, you have an appointment with the Elders Council after mid day. Your clothes are at the door."

Stavin and Sharindis exchanged a glance and Stavin answered, "Yes, Sir."

Sharindis stretched leisurely and smiled up at him. "I'm so glad you didn't get hurt, Stavi."

"I did," Stavín said, taking her hand and guiding her fingers to the knife scar on his stomach. "This is why I laughed when Aric asked if that knife was blooded. I got stabbed with my *own* knife. I also got my arm broken, and would have lost it if not for my mail. That sword was ruined, by the way. I also got a concussion from an ax in Twin Bridges. That's when Kar saved my life the first time."

Sharindis patted his stomach. "We are going to spend the winter writing your story."

Stavín got up and retrieved their clothes, then helped Shari dress. For himself, he donned his under-padding and mail in preparation for facing the Council. Stavín led Sharindis down to the family room and wasn't surprised to find his brothers and sisters-in-law as well and his sisters and brothers-in-law. "Good morning, everyone," he said.

"Good morning, Stavi and Shari," a babble of voices replied.

"Mom, you get a first pick of the cloth," Stavín said, then added, "except the blue silk. That's Shari's." Marínis took a light-rose-colored bolt of cloth and his sisters and sisters-in-law went next in the birth order of Stavín's siblings.

"It's hard to pick," Sorandis said. "They're all so beautiful."

Stavín smiled and directed the men to their gifts. As Kethlan had said, it was more important that Stavín had gotten them something rather than what it actually was. He had more as well.

"Each household gets two of the sausages and a bag of grain to help with the winter. There are eight bags of assorted spices to go with them. One each, Ahvana," he said before the most acquisitive of his sisters could grab more, but he was laughing when he said it.

"What's this, son?" Karlit asked, holding the box and that held the ancient book.

"That is not mine, Dad. Be careful with it. It belongs to Lord General Zel'Enred of Coravia." He briefly explained the history of the book as his father carefully put the box down. "We'll need Master Kel'Zorgan to help decipher it."

Stavin gave his family a brief outline of his season in the lowlands until it was time for the mid day meal. Marinis took her daughters and daughters-in-law to the kitchen, including a happily smiling Sharindis, to prepare something to eat.

When the women had gone, Darvan, Stavin's sister Varanis' husband, brought up something that was on all of their minds. "You know the Council isn't going to want to believe you earned that star, Stave."

Stavin nodded. "I know. I have the weapon of every man I killed, Darvan, and witnesses to all but three of them. Unless they want to call Barvil and the others liars, they'll have no choice. It was this armor that did it. It seemed to draw trouble."

"It's your mouth that draws the trouble," his brother Bahrandik said. "Even going to the dragon's cave was because of your bragging that you were as brave as anyone."

"I am," Stavin said softly. "I think I've proven that."

"But you didn't need to prove it, and the girl you wanted to prove it to *still* doesn't like you," Bahrandik said in an exasperated tone.

Stavin shook his head. "Maybe I really needed to prove it to myself."

## Chapter 59

The mid day meal was punctuated by Stavín's stories of his comrades until it was time to go before the Elders Council of Kavínston. Sharíndis, Marínis, and Karlít accompanied him to the council chamber and took seats as Stavín joined Kahndar and the rest at attention.

Barvíl entered the chamber last and stood in front of his men. "Elders, I bring before you two hands of men, though two men were lost early in the season."

Chief Elder Kel'Davín looked at Barvíl and said, "You may begin."

Barvíl began by detailing the deaths of Cordon and Ivalín, then went on to kill counts, beginning with his own. As he recited the accomplishments of each of his men, they laid the proof of their claims on the floor of the council chamber. In accordance with an agreement that had been made on the road, Stavín was last.

"Stavín Kel'Aníston claims thirty kills and his first star," Barvíl said as Stavín knelt to lay out the swords, axes, and knives of his slain enemies.

"This is an unheard-of accomplishment, Barvíl," Chief Elder Kel'Davín said as the others nodded. "Were all of these kills verified?"

"They were, Chief Elder," Barvíl answered.

Warmaster Kel'Horval looked at Kahndar and asked, "Did you see all of Stavín's kills, Kahn?"

Kahndar stepped forward and replied, "No, Sir. Three of them occurred out of sight of any of us, but were attested to by Master Trader Sahren Kel'Vandar. Stavín was alone with her and four men when they tried to steal a consignment from her and kill Stavín. She killed one, Stavín killed three."

Elder Kel'Landis looked at the men and focused on the younger members of the group. "Horvan Kel'Erins, Chandar Kel'Varín, Barín Kel'Kandis, step forward." He paused as the three took one pace forward and came to attention. "You three were not

known to be friends with Stavín before this expedition. As a matter of fact, each of you has been disciplined at one time or another due to conflicts between you and Stavín. Do any of you wish to dispute his kill count?"

Almost as one the three young men answered, "No, Sir!"

"Do any of you have any idea how he managed such a feat?" the elder asked, leaning forward.

Chandar cleared his throat. "Sir, Stavín was able to kill so many men because so many men were trying to kill him. That's why all of us got so many kills."

Elder Kel'Landis sat back and gestured for the three men to return to their places. "Stavín, it would appear that your armor is a luck charm, though for good or bad is a matter of interpretation. I'm satisfied."

One by one the four other elders announced their satisfaction, with the Chief Elder going last. "Stavín Kel'Aniston, the Council of Elders agrees with your commander and grants you the right to wear a star on your shoulder, and claim the title of Warleader Sixth of Kel'Kavín."

Stavín bowed deeply to the Elders, then spoke. "Sirs, I would like to do something formally now that our kill-counts have been confirmed."

"And that would be?" Chief Elder Kel'Davín asked.

Stavín smiled and turned to Barvil. "Barvil Kel'Carín, face me, please." When Barvil had stepped out and turned to face him, Stavín continued. "A year ago, you became my servant and all that you possessed became mine. We've been ignoring it all summer by my order, and especially since you made your hundred-and-first kill, but this must be said. With the return of your honor, I formally return everything to you, in the presence of the Elders Council."

Barvil bowed deeply to Stavín. "You have proven yourself to be an extraordinary young man, Stavín. With my honor, I accept and thank you for the return of my household." He paused to smile wryly. "Another season in the lowlands with you and I'll be taking Charvil's place." He grinned at the suddenly surprised-looking Warmaster. "I wonder if he and I will be taking turns taking you on your expeditions?"

"I wonder how long it will be before he surpasses both of us?" Charvil asked.

"No, Sirs," Staviv said with more than a hint of humor in his voice. "I'm after Master Kel'Zorgan's chair, not yours."

\* \* \*

Karvik waited until after the Council had accepted his status and, perhaps more importantly, the honor of his family had been formally restored before he approached Orana.

He felt his pulse begin to race as soon as he saw her home, but he remained cautious. He was far more afraid of Orana than he had been of any of the men he'd faced in battle. After all, the worst they could have done was kill him.

Karvik was still wearing his armor when he walked up to Sharvan Kel'Davin's house and knocked on the door. Orana opened it before his second knock. "Hello, Kar. It's good to see you." She looked at his shoulder and her smile outshone the sun.

Karvik caught his breath at the sight. "Orana, I was looking for your father, unless I'm too late. I wouldn't blame you. I was a servant, and you — you are you, and —"

"I have my honor as well, Karvik. My promise was given and I haven't changed my mind," Orana said as she took his hand and led him into the house.

Sharvan Kel'Davin looked up as an armored figure came through the doorway of his library and stopped. It took him a moment to realize what was going on, but his disobedient daughter's presence was a good clue. "Yes, Karvik?"

Karvik knelt and placed his forehead against the floor. "Sharvan Kel'Davin, I ask for your daughter, Orana, to be my wife."

Sharvan looked at the grinning imp in the doorway and a year of frustration suddenly made sense. "Why do you choose my daughter?" he asked.

"I choose Orana for love. I choose Orana for life. I choose Orana for the mother of my children," Karvik replied.

"What is going on here?" Rohana Kel'Davin asked. "Don't tell me that you are considering allowing a servant to wed my daughter?"

"Oh, be quiet, Rohana," Sharvan snapped. "Look at his shoulder and you'll see that—"

"I don't care! His family is still in servitude to—"

"My father's honor has been restored by the Council," Karvik said in a respectful tone without raising his head. "His fourth star is confirmed."

"Your father needed nineteen kills for his fourth star," Rohana snapped. "That's almost impossible for a single season."

Karvik stood and turned so that Rohana could see the four red stripes on his shoulder. "I have twenty-three kills this season."

"Barvil said I had a surprise coming. What other surprises do you have in store for us?" Sharvan asked while his wife scowled at him.

Karvik spent few moments detailing the honors that the others in his group had received, saving Stavín for last. "And Stavín came home with thirty kills and his first star, as well as being honored by the King and Princess of Evandia as a Friend of Evandia. Our group earned a total of eight hundred and fifty-one silver crowns for Kel'Kavin, as well as full purses for each of us."

Orana stepped up to Karvik's side and looked at her parents. "Daddy?"

Sharvan looked at his wife, then turned back to Karvik. "Karvik Kel'Carin, I grant you Orana for love, for life, and for the mother of your children." He stopped talking because there was no way Karvik could hear him with Orana holding his head like that.

"I won't release your dowry," Rohana snarled.

"*Mom!*" Orana almost shouted, but Karvik just laughed.

"We don't need it. Even with everything I bought, I still have over twenty gold crowns. None of us came back with less than that except Kahndar, and that was only because of the seven-crown silver platter he bought for Varis."

"How did you—?" Rohana asked, looking into his eyes.

"Most of that was from some pirates," Karvik said, then went on to detail the incident. "Trader Sahren was also very generous after Stave and I saved her life. I would have given her back her gold, but she said to keep it."



Rohana drew her lips into a tight, angry line, then turned and stomped away. Sharvan looked at the empty space where she had been standing and took a deep breath. "I'm going to be hearing about this for years." Turning back to Karvik and Orana, he smiled. "You could have told me, Ori. I would have kept your secret. You're not done yet."

Karvik nodded and turned so that he faced Orana squarely. "I greet you, my wife, and give to you my name, and with my name, all that I possess – which is a lot more than it was last winter."

Orana giggled. "I receive from you your name, and return my father's name to him. Mom will relent in a day or two and give you my dowry. It's mostly things for our household."

Sharvan patted both of their shoulders. "You two have always made a beautiful couple. You're right about your mother, Ori. Especially after she talks it over with Sahrena. Now go on, you two. Barvil and Sahrena are probably waiting for you."

When Sharvan opened the door to let them out they found not only Barvil and Sahrena waiting, but half the town as well. The crowd of well-wishers cheered and escorted Karvik and Orana to the Kel'Carins' house amid shouts of congratulations.

\* \* \*

Harner spent three days mourning his big brother, Cordon. It was a blow that Cordon had died and the Runt had returned, and especially that the Runt's star had been confirmed by the council.

Harner spent every moment he could denouncing the Council's decision. "There's no way that little runt killed anyone. He couldn't have," he raged at his father.

"There is ample evidence that he did, Harner. I've spoken to Lavin about what happened," Jorvan said as he held his crying wife. "Cordon befriended Stavon on the expedition. Don't dishonor his memory this way."

"The Runt is the one who dishonors my brother's memory! He has no right to wear that star. I'll bet Ivalin was killed because he wouldn't –"

"*Silence!*" Coriannis shouted. She looked at her youngest child with tears streaming down her face. "If you can't honor your brother's memory, then get out!"

Harner backed away from his parents and fled, seeking his friends. They knew the truth about the Runt. They understood.

On the fourth day Harner went to approach Barvil about Dorvina. He walked up to the Kel'Carins' door and knocked. For a change the door didn't open before his third knock. Instead, he was left waiting on the porch long enough that he almost knocked again. Then Sahrena opened the door and stared at him.

"Yes, Harner?"

"I've come to speak to Barvil about Dorvi," Harner said, looking at Sahrena expectantly.

Sahrena didn't move. "You may find that your opinions have damaged your suit, Harner," she said in a cool tone.

"I don't understand," Harner said as he took a step back from the look in her eyes.

"You have called my husband a liar by claiming that Staviv's kill-count was exaggerated. You have called him a liar in front of the whole town by swearing by the Gods Above that 'The Runt' couldn't have killed even one man." Sahrena stood with her arms crossed as she glared at Harner.

"It's the truth!" Harner all but shouted. "The Runt is too small to face a real warrior."

"And exactly what would you know about real warriors?" Barvil asked from behind Sahrena's shoulder.

"I know the Runt isn't one!" Harner snapped, his hands balling into fists.

"For a boy who didn't even join the expedition, you certainly have a strong opinion about those who did. Leave my house now and never return," Barvil snapped. "If you were anything but an untried boy, I'd have you in the circle for a lesson in manners."

"I've come for Dorvi," Harner said, glaring past Sahrena into Barvil's eyes. "You can't deny me my chosen wife."

Barvil laughed. "Fool. Do you think you're the only one interested in Dorvina? Franik Kel'Coris has already unofficially approached me. He earned two stripes this season. Darak Kel'Markat has also been testing the winds. He earned three stripes. Why would I give my daughter to a boy when there are men who want her? Men who *have* proven themselves in battle, and not boys who snuck around behind my back while the others were away."

"You can't—" Harner began, but was cut short by the one person he had been counting on to be on his side.

"It's over, Harner," Dorvina said from behind her father. "You accused my father of being dishonorable in front of the whole town. Even if he forgave you, I will not. You are refused, even though you haven't asked yet. Now go away before I ask my true suitors to remove you."

Harner stood still for a moment, then turned and walked away with his whole body screaming at him to fight, but knowing in his heart that he would only dishonor himself further.

\* \* \*

Only one group remained to follow Barvil and his men into Kel'Kavin. When that group arrived, the Elders called a town meeting.

"My friends," Chief Elder Kel'Davin said as he faced almost all of the valley's residents. "We gather to mourn the loss of our young men in the service of our community. This has been a bad year. Of the one hundred and ten men who went out, only ninety-six returned. Two veterans, one fifth-year, three fourth-year, three third-year, two second-year, and three first-year men were lost in the lowlands. This is not the greatest loss we have ever suffered, but it is great nonetheless." Chief Elder Kel'Davin stepped back to let Elder Kel'Landis take his place.

"It is the fate of our warriors sometimes to die in the service of their people, and we honor the memory of all who sacrificed their lives so that their people might

continue. The names of the fallen have been added to the rolls of our honored dead, to be read in the ancient ritual at Mid Winter." Elder Kel'Landis stepped back and let Chief Elder Kel'Davin once again address the crowd.

"It is the custom of our ancestors to reward the group of warriors who provided us with the most gold with gold of their own. This year that honor belongs to the group led by Barvil Kel'Carin." He paused as polite applause was offered to the winners. "Barvil, lead your men before us," the Chief Elder commanded and Barvil walked forward with his eight men behind him.

"We are at your command, Chief Elder," he said, coming to attention.

Sorval looked down at Barvil, and smiled slightly. "I wonder how long it will be before it is you who commands, Barvil? Only five kills separate you from Charvil's score. Back to the task at hand. In accordance with custom, each of your men is awarded one gold crown. Step forward now and receive your due." The Chief Elder gestured to where nine gold crowns glinted in the sun.

Barvil stepped forward, but his hands remained at his sides. "I give my award to the fallen," he said loudly, then returned to his men's side.

One by one the rest of his men followed his example, with Karvik going last. "Chief Elder, it is the wish of my family," he fought not to grin because his 'family' in this case was the Chief Elder's granddaughter, "that my award also go to the fallen," he said loudly.

All five Elders stood together to face Barvil's men. "It is unusual for a warrior to refuse a reward he has so clearly earned. However, it is well known among the community that you all returned with sufficient gold to see to your families' needs for years to come, and your generosity to the families of the fallen is accepted and appreciated."

Barvil's men bowed deeply, and then stepped forward as one. When they stepped back, the nine gold crowns had been supplemented by five more, and no one but the watching Elders would ever know who had placed them there. Barvil spoke for his men. "Let each family receive the same, for each family's loss was the same."

\* \* \*

The snows soon closed the gap into Kel'Kavin, sealing Kavinston in the valley and the rest of the world out. This was the quiet time for the people, the time when families settled in to await the spring sun.

Stavin and Sharindis were comfortable in his father's house as the winter progressed. Stavin was relieved to be back in the old, familiar role of the youngest boy and took up his chores with gusto. Sharindis learned her way around the house and took great joy in aiding her mother-in-law in the kitchen.

In accordance with his request, Stavin was apprenticed to Master Scribe Kel'Zorgan, and every day after his chores were done he walked Sharindis to the scribe's office, then went to work among the stacks of records and books at his master's direction.

The ancient book of Inatat was a private project, but Master Kel'Zorgan set Stavin the task of copying the damaged manuscript in his evenings. Each day during their light mid day meal, Master Kel'Zorgan translated the glyphs as well as he could, and both Sharindis and Stavin wrote down the translation in the common tongue. All three of them learned by doing, and soon they could all read the ancient glyphs fluently.

*"Inatat, son of Corat, Sixteenth King of Vaskan, came to power upon the death of his father,"* Stavin read as he reviewed the beginning of the ancient book. *"Well, of course. The death of King Corat had been long and painful, and the Priests of Eshokanal decreed that his personal servants should be sent with him to the Skyholm. In accordance with the priest's decree, twenty servants of the late king were bound and placed among the timbers – could that be logs? – of his pyre. Didn't they at least kill them first?"* he asked, looking at Sharindis with a disturbed expression on his face.

Sharindis shook her head. "Probably not. I've read other histories that mentioned sacrifices like that. Thank the Gods Above the practice ended."

"Gods Below, that's horrible. Actually, I'd expect something like that from the Gods Below. Anyway, *Inatat stood as close to his father's pyre as he dared as lamp oil was poured over the timbers. The muffled cries of the servants – they were alive – reached his ears,*

*but not his heart. When the sacred oil had been poured, Devat, High Priest of Eshokanal, handed a torch to Inatat. 'It is your duty and honor, King Inatat, to send your father to Skyholm.'* Inatat took the torch and walked sunward around his father's pyre, lighting it at the five sacred points. It sounds like we inherited the Gods Above and the Gods Below from these people as well as the glyphs."

Sharindis sat back and nodded. "It's possible. However, it's possible that they inherited them from Dandarshandrake or another dragon. Remember, according to Solavan, Scribe of Emperor Helakan Zel'Lastal, Dandarshandrake was supposed to have mentioned the Old Gods in his early decrees to the people of Lux, long before they had formed the empire."

Stavin grunted his agreement. "Even dragons fear the Old Gods," he murmured. "I wonder if—"

"No," Sharindis said in a firm tone. "You are not climbing back up to that cave to ask the dragon if it will tell you of the Old Gods."

"But, Shari, it would only take—"

"No, Stavin," Sharindis said again as she turned toward him. "Dad and the Elders have made the cave off limits to everyone. Gods Below, do you want to risk making the dragon angry? Up until you went up there, everyone just ran away. Now they know what the fear is, and what the pile of gold really is as well. While you were gone there were about fifty boys making plans to go up there and see if they could get dragon scale armor and Dragon's Tongues like yours. It took an official decree from the Council and three examples to get the boys to settle down."

"Examples?" Stavin asked.

Sharindis sighed. "Two boys went together, and Dad and three warriors had to go get them. They caught them halfway up the slope and brought them back bare-butt naked, then set them to hauling water. They were both in their last year, but Dad set them back two years so they could learn how to follow orders."

"You said three."

Now Sharindis looked sad as she replied, "The third one went alone, like you did. His body was found outside the cave. There was no mark on him, and no sign that he actually entered the cave, but that was enough to stop the boys."

"The dragon said it didn't eat humans. It didn't say anything about killing us." Stavín sighed gustily. "I guess I'll just have to be satisfied researching it in the archive."

The winter turned bitter, and everyone turned to quiet, energy-saving pastimes to conserve food and fuel. At Master Kel'Zorgan's insistence, they stopped going to the archive so no charcoal would be used to heat the rooms of boxes. Soon even the classrooms were closed, and the students kept home. It set them back, but the big classrooms took too much charcoal to heat, and were too cold without it.

Stavín and Sharindis spent their days by the one window in the Kel'Aniston house that faced south so Sharindis had enough light to read by. Stavín used her old crystal to help him read the damaged portions of the book of Inatat and copy, while Sharindis used the stronger lens to write down the translation.

The eleven days of the Mid Winter Festival were soon upon them, and Stavín and Shari joined the mourners, remembering their dead for the first five days as tradition decreed. Stavín had a lot of people to remember.

Mid Winter Day dawned clear and cold, but there was no fire in Kavínston. Every fire had been extinguished at mid night, and the hearths and stoves were cleaned to prepare them for the fresh fires of the New Year. No food was served, and only suckling babes were fed at all. Even the livestock was restricted to just water on this day.

Chief Elder Kel'Davín led the Elders Council to the platform in the center of town and looked out over the sea of faces. Dark brown or black clothing wrapped tightly around shivering people was all he saw.

"As is the custom from the time of our ancestors, Mid Winter is when we remember and honor our dead." He pulled a scroll from the pocket of his cloak and began reading.

One by one, the Elders read the Roll-Call of the Honored Dead. Stavín knew every name on those rolls. It had been one of his duties to copy them when the old scrolls had begun to fade.

Elder Kel'Kaffrey, as the most recent addition to the Council, went last, reading the scroll that held the names of the most recently lost warriors, and Stavín couldn't help catching his breath when Cordon's and Ivalin's names were read.

Chief Elder Kel'Davin once again stepped forward and addressed the crowd. "We mourn this day the passing of another year, and the passing of our friends. Remember them with honor." With that he turned and led the Elders from the platform, then everyone returned to their homes.

As the sun went down, the people huddled together for warmth in darkened houses, telling the histories of their families and singing dirges in the dark.

Sunrise was greeted with joy by the people of Kavinston. At every house the youngest child was given the honor of starting the first fire of the New Year. Stavín knelt by the tinder that had been laid on the clean hearth and blew on his fingers to warm them enough to use the flint and steel of the fire starter. Sparks flew, spraying onto the dry grass and twigs, and he blew the flames of a New Year to life, then placed them among the kindling and charcoal of the family fire. Then they changed into their brightest festival garb and the party began.

For five days, the people celebrated the birth of the New Year, and the hope of a bright future. Even the training grounds were empty to let the boys play in the snow.

Soon after Mid Winter Sharindis became ill, and Stavín feared for her life. Sorandis and their parents sat with him while Healer Kel'Kadus was with Sharindis. When the Healer came out of their room, Stavín rushed to face him. "Is she all right? She isn't going to die, is she?" he asked anxiously.

Healer Kel'Kadus laughed merrily. "Of course she's all right, Stavín. She isn't sick – she's pregnant!" Then he stepped forward in concern. "Did he just faint?"



All that Glitters

END OF BOOK ONE

The adventures of Stavin Kel'Aniston will continue in  
*Traders and Traitors* March 2017.

## **About the author**

A U. S. Navy veteran, Loren K. Jones served as a nuclear reactor operator on attack submarines for six years before his honorable discharge in 1986. Loren makes his living as an instrumentation and controls technician, and writes because the stories won't leave him alone until he does.