

Lost Age of Y'Ara



Heart of Darkmire

- Book One of the Gossamer Trilogy -

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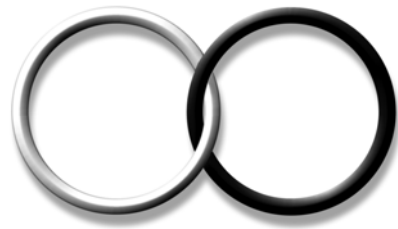
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Lost Age of Y'Ara

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Fred Hurteau

To Troy, George, Scott, Jay and Mike,
for good times that will never be duplicated.
You helped bring Roth and Jobo to life.

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W e go about our daily lives oblivious to the forces and events which change our destinies. It matters not whether we believe we can or cannot change our own fates, nor even whether we believe in fate at all. It only matters that we believe in ourselves, for only those of us who believe in ourselves have any chance at all to change anyone's destiny.

Chapter One



Providence

Roth tugged lightly on Graymist's reins, guiding his huge smoke-gray warhorse along the dirt road, avoiding the deeply rutted wagon tracks now hardened by the dryness of autumn. The seasoned warrior swayed easily in the saddle to the soft squeak of leather rubbing leather, a comforting sound to Roth's ears. The fine dust kicked up by Graymist's great hooves swirled about him on an afternoon breeze, as erratic and unpredictable in its direction as the horse and rider had been for several years.

Roth surveyed the well-used wagon road ahead of him as it wound northwest among the soft green undulating hills of Dunn Vassar. The landscape before him was a patchwork of wild grassy meadows and grain fields ready for harvest, dotted here and there by the animals, haystacks, orchards and simple dwellings of many small farms. Beyond the hills, far to the north, he could just make out the hazy ghost-blue bulk of mountains, of which he knew not the name.

All about him the tall wild faeryweeds lining the road sprouted their fluffy white seed tufts. With every shift of the breeze they released a few wispy seeds, like tiny transparent winged faeries dancing in the air along with the dust. Across the fields in every direction, large rocks jutted defiantly from the land at odd angles in stark contrast to the softness of the grassy hills and golden grains waving in the breeze.

Roth had heard of these great boulders, called the Castle Stones of Dunn Vassar. The old folk tales said these were the stones from giant castles, torn apart and scattered across the land ages ago in a great battle called the War of the Giants. He wasn't convinced there had ever been any such war of giants, but he enjoyed hearing a good tale nevertheless.

The sun's deep yellow glow on the western horizon flashed from Roth's chain mail and breastplate, and washed yellow-white highlights in his silver hair. From a distance his hair was often mistaken as gray, and it made him look older and wiser than his twenty-six years. The two-inch scar on his left jaw was not fully hidden by his sideburns. His straight nose and angular face set off deep eye sockets which couldn't hide his magical blue eyes.

Above his wide shoulders rode the hilt of his great two-handed bastard sword, slung behind his back in its ornately decorated scabbard. A short sword hung from his waist, and two quivers hung from the pommel of his saddle; one full of arrows, the other held crossbow bolts. Roth carried his longbow slung across the shoulder opposite his bastard sword, and his crossbow hung just behind his saddle. The rest of his possessions were meager, filling only his saddlebags and bedroll. It was clear what he considered important.

For the past two months Roth had worked with a company of elite escorts, based in Bragan's Fortress. Their job was to guard merchants' caravans from the ports of Bombi Dara, Corrundy, Euribonn and Jewli, and from the river port of Wiley's Keep, traveling north and east to reach the cities of Abar and Cigbey on the Pamjoran border. Skilled escort was necessary to protect the merchants from Zadi raiders who frequently slipped into Kalaron from Mezza Zadi, and mounted raids from their hideouts in the Halfcrag mountains along the border. He was well-versed in Zadi tactics, having trained with the Silverblade Dragoon in his homeland of Senguri Province, which shares borders with Kalaron and Mezza Zadi.

Like the other work he took in his wanderings over the past six years, it seemed a worthwhile and necessary

service. Then one night, while camped with a caravan two day's ride east of Bombi Dara, he overheard the merchants complaining how they were not allowed to hire private guards. Their only choice was to pay His Majesty's levies on their loads for the king's escort protection while passing through Kalaron.

Roth had not been aware of this. The escorts did not wear uniforms, and gave no hint of being associated with any military units. It had appeared to be a privately operated enterprise. Roth thought the king's methods smacked too much of extortion, and decided he wanted no more part of it. He had his own set of values. He offered his services as a skilled fighter for hire, but only for causes he felt were just. Disillusioned with the escort unit, he left and headed west into Dunn Vassar, having been told he might find work with the Vassar Provincial Guard in Dunn Vassar Hold.

After several days of travel riding west out of Kalaron, he and Graymist made camp last night in a thick evergreen wood. Then early this morning, soon after breaking camp, they came upon this road and followed it out of the frosty shade into the bright morning sunlight.

Soon though the day would be gone. The great diagonal monoliths, giant castle stones of myth, were becoming only stark silhouettes against the slowly setting sun of an autumn day. The warmth he felt earlier from the friendly light was now giving way to the long, cool shadows of late afternoon. It had been a very ordinary day, but a pleasant one, and Roth found himself humming a tune. Graymist's long white bush of a tail swished back and forth with each step, surreptitiously conducting the solo performance behind Roth's back.

As Roth's attention absentmindedly followed another of the wispy clouds of dust floating past his head, he caught sight of smoke wafting lazily above the treetops just visible over the next rise.

"That's probably a village up ahead," he told Graymist. "Come on boy. Let's see if we can find a place for the night. There ought to be some good apples this time of year. I'll see if I can find a couple for you."

Graymist's ears twitched at Roth's voice, and he quickened his steps as if he understood everything Roth said. Roth never quite knew with Graymist, since the animal sometimes seemed to have more sense than a horse ought to have. Graymist's good senses had kept them out of serious trouble more than once. He'd learned long ago to trust Graymist's senses. There had even been times when he almost believed Graymist could read his thoughts.

Soon the pair entered the small settlement, weaving along the single narrow dusty street past horses, carts and people. It reminded Roth of the village where he grew up, named Dazman after his famous grandfather. The lateness of the day had already prompted shops to begin closing their shutters and doors. Children ran past him, laughing and playing, mostly paying Roth and his steed little heed. However, few if any adults who were still out on the street failed to turn their head or stop their conversation long enough to look him over as he rode by. Whether it was Graymist's imposing size, Roth's equally imposing arsenal, or his appearance that brought stares from the curious, he was quite used to it.

Suddenly, a short stocky figure burst from the front door of a shop, and turned down the street toward Roth at a full run, coat tails and dust flying. An old man in robes came charging out after him yelling, "Stop, you miserable thief, or I'll turn you into a three-legged swine!"

As the fleeing man rounded a parked wagon on the run, arms flailing, he glanced back at the old man in pursuit. Not realizing a horse and rider were coming, he was startled when he turned back to see something large and gray right in his path. He flung a forearm out and bounced off Graymist's chest, spun to one side and ran between Graymist and the wagon. Roth's outstretched riding boot caught him in the chin. The thief flopped back limply, landing unconscious on his back. The small bag he clutched went flying, and spilled out several gold coins when it hit the ground.

The old man staggered over to the coins, picked them up and placed them into the bag. He held one hand over his chest as he slowly walked over to Roth, quite out of breath after the twenty-yard chase from his front door.

"Thank you, kind sir," he panted two words at a time, catching his breath between.

"That's quite alright", Roth replied. "I have no time for thieves and ruffians. I trust the coins belong to you?" he said with a questioning inflection.

"Indeed sir, they do." The old man paused to gulp a couple of breaths. "You came along at a most opportune time." He took a good deep breath and continued, "I am indebted to you for your assistance." The old man seemed to have caught his breath now, and was able to speak without gasping for air. "How can I repay you for your kindness?"

"I require nothing, my good fellow. Your appreciation is thanks enough," Roth said through a smile. "Perhaps your local officials can take care of this swift, if not too cautious thief."

"I fear we have no such luxury here," the old man replied. "I don't think he'll bother me after I get through with him though."

From somewhere within the folds of his robes the old man pulled out a glass vial containing a yellow liquid and popped the cork that sealed it. Graymist jerked his head and took two steps backward before Roth caught the stench in his own nose. The old man poured some of the foul-smelling liquid on the unconscious thief's hands, some in his hair, and then poured some on the thief's face.

The thief jerked into consciousness almost immediately, and began writhing in the street like a snake on a hot rock, screaming profanities and flailing the air with his hands. He coughed in the dust he stirred up, and gasped for breath against the horrible smell. Then he rubbed his face with his hands, but it only made things worse. Finally he jumped up with a screaming howl and ran down the road yelling curses at the top of his lungs until he was out of sight, and out of ear shot.

The old man laughed hysterically, as did the crowd of onlookers that had gathered at the commotion, appearing from every nearby door and window. It seemed everyone thought it quite amusing.

"What was that horrid stench?" Roth asked.

"It's just one of my concoctions for dealing with his kind," the old man replied between drunken gasps of laughter. "He won't be able to get within a hundred yards of civilization for two weeks at least. It will eventually wash off, but until then he won't be catching any game with that smell to warn every creature in the woods he's coming their way."

Realizing the justice of the old man's actions, Roth couldn't help but grin.

"He's been a problem in our village for months, sneaking around, stealing from those who are too old or feeble to defend themselves," the old man explained. "As you can see, no one has any sympathy for him. Maybe we'll finally be rid of him for good."

Roth looked the old man over as he stood there talking, with his long gray beard, parted and twisted on each side into two long braids. He was bald on top, with long gray hair hanging down all around his shiny dome. There was a sparkle of youth in the green eyes that flashed under his bushy eyebrows, as gray as his beard. His deep violet ankle-length robe was trimmed in gold-colored braiding, with a braided sash to match.

The old man looked friendly enough, but Roth remembered hearing him vow to turn the thief into a three-legged swine. He wondered for a moment if the old man could possibly be some sort of wizard, but dismissed the thought just as quickly. This small village hardly seemed the place for someone dabbling in magic. Although the old man looked somewhat dressed for the part, he certainly didn't fit Roth's notion of a mysterious, secretive, shift-eyed conjurer. Of course, he'd never actually seen a real wizard before, though he was confident if he ever did, it would be all too obvious.

The old man felt Roth's eyes scanning him and pretended not to notice. "Now that I've had my revenge on that troublesome oaf, on behalf of the town and myself, I thank you again. My name is Dyaganos. Welcome to our humble village of Chelting. Perhaps you would allow me to buy you a hot meal at the tavern. Will you be staying the night?" Dyaganos asked, looking up at Roth with a smile, and waiting for an answer.

Roth was not one to pass up a free meal. "Your offer is most gracious, Master Dyaganos. I had hoped to stay, provided there is a room to be had. A hot meal would be welcome indeed."

"The tavern is also an inn. It's just down the street there," Dyaganos said, pointing it out. "Darvin will have room I am sure. I'll meet you there after dark." Then Dyaganos frowned. "I'm afraid I didn't catch your name, good sir."

"Roth, Roth of Dazman," he answered. "I accept your kind offer. I shall see you at the tavern then. Oh, is there a stable here as well?"

Dyaganos pointed out Archibald's Livery, just beyond the tavern. He smiled once more as Roth thanked him again and rode up the street. "Hmmm, that name sounds familiar," the old man mumbled quietly to himself. "Dazman, ...Dazman, now where have I heard that name before? Dazman, ...hmmm," he repeated to himself as he walked back to his shop.

Roth took notice of the sign over the old man's shop door as he rode past. It said simply "Apothecary" below a painted mortar and pestle. When he arrived at the livery he found it to his liking. The young stable boy took to Graymist straightway. It wasn't often he was given the care of such a grand animal as Graymist, and he was eager for the silver piece Roth promised him for taking special care of his steed. Besides, a silver piece was more than the boy earned in a month, even if some well-to-do came through town and stayed overnight. They never tipped a silver

piece.

Roth threw his saddlebags across his broad shoulders and walked across the street toward the tavern. The sign out front proclaimed it the Hedgehog's Fancy, depicting a hedgehog curled into a ball, lying next to a fireplace, one paw sticking out of the furry bundle holding a mug of ale. The tavern was built of stone, unlike most of the buildings in the village, which were wooden.

Somewhere in the distance two dogs barked, echoing in the cool evening air. The dusky sky was laced with streamers of clouds, washed with a dull orange gray that said the sun was already below the horizon, though he couldn't see the horizon from the street with buildings around and tall ancient trees behind them. Roth strode up to the Hedgehog's Fancy and went in.

The tavern was warm and as clean as any Roth had seen in some time. Darwin, the innkeeper, quickly settled him into a room directly at the head of the stairs. The room was not very large but it was sufficient, and after a few nights under the stars he wasn't about to complain. In the small fireplace opposite the bed the innkeeper had already started a crackling fire. A round window looked out over the street, and there was a dresser and washstand with a mirror. He asked for a hot bath to be drawn up, and before long he was soaking in a large wooden tub in a room at the other end of the upstairs hall. It felt good, too good. He could get spoiled to this if he let himself. It would have to be just an occasional luxury for him, always on the move, seldom staying in one place for long.

When he needed money, he would take work, like the last job as a merchant's guard. Before that he spent several years in the service of various Lords, fighting in small campaigns over land rights, or protecting the Lord's domain from bands of thieves, cutthroats, highwaymen and other assorted scum that roamed the countryside looking for easy pickings. For the moment though he was quite satisfied to be soaking in a hot bath.

By the time he finished his bath and changed into his blue breeches and brown surcoat, it was pitch dark outside. He could hear voices downstairs as the tavern began to liven up for the evening. He decided it was time to go downstairs and join the commotion.

The wide stone fireplace in the common room crackled with a freshly-lit fire, throwing dancing shadows about the room despite the oil lamps on the tables. Two large chandeliers of candles hung from the huge beams overhead. Folks were gathered about the tables, waving drinks and talking. A few favored the warmth of the fire, smoking their pipes and laughing. In one corner were four well-dressed gentlemen at a table of their own, deeply engrossed in a discussion. Five others with their backs to Roth were gathered about another table talking to someone, but Dyaganos was nowhere in sight.

Roth only had a moment to scan the room when the group of five turned around and parted, revealing Dyaganos, still wearing his violet robe and holding a cup of ale.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Dyaganos proclaimed loudly so as to be heard over everyone's conversations, standing up and gesturing about with his arms outstretched as he spoke. "Let me introduce to you our hero of the day, who has rid our fair village of that vile thief with the mere tip of his boot. I give you Roth of Dazman, good fellow." Everyone's eyes turned to Roth as Dyaganos came over and put one arm on Roth's shoulder. "Let us have a toast," he said as he raised his ale and gestured to everyone. "To Roth of Dazman. May his horse and his sword ever be as swift and sure as his boot!"

With a bit of cheerful laughter everyone raised their drinks as calls of "here, here" filled the room, and they all took a drink. It was obvious to Roth the news had gotten around. Then Dyaganos tugged Roth's arm and said, "Let's get something to eat, shall we?" as he led Roth over to the table where he'd been seated.

One of the finer-dressed gentlemen at the table of four called out to the innkeeper. "Darvin, please see that good fellow Roth here has all he desires of your best ale. I'm paying."

"As you wish, Master Wattley," Darwin answered back in a deep gravelly voice. Darwin grabbed a pitcher and mug from the shelf, filled them both and brought them to the table. "There you are, good fellow Roth. Can I get you gentlemen something to eat?"

"Bring my friend your best cut of lamb, with yams and vegetables, and some of Jenny's pie for dessert." Then he turned to Roth and asked, "How does that sound, my friend?"

"That would be excellent," Roth replied, swallowing a gulp of ale afterwards.

"The usual for me," Dyaganos said matter-of-factly.

"On the way, gentlemen," Darwin said as he disappeared into the kitchen. He was gone for only a moment before returning to the serving bar.

Roth glanced about the room, taking it in. Dyaganos sat back and looked Roth over, wondering about this

unusual fellow that had so serendipitously ridden into town just a short while ago. The silver hair, now that was certainly unusual, and those blue eyes, the color of the winter sky reflected on ice. He was armed to the teeth too. Yet, he seemed an amiable sort. Dyaganos eyed the scar almost hidden by a sideburn. When he noticed Roth's attention shift from across the room back to him he smiled.

"So, what do you think of our fair village?" Dyaganos asked, raising one bushy eyebrow as if to add emphasis to the question.

Roth began wondering why this old fellow was being so ponderously nice to him. The only thing he'd done was to lift his boot to slow down a common thief. He couldn't avoid the impression the old man was up to more than just thanking him for his help. Roth took another drink of his ale, then spoke.

"I can say with honesty the people seem friendly enough, even more so than I would expect for a small village such as Chelting. It's not so different from the one where I grew up."

"Where might that be?" Dyaganos asked with a smile.

"Senguri Province, east of Kalaron."

"Ah, yes. I know of Senguri. Then you are indeed a long way from home, my friend. What brings you so far from home to our humble village?" he asked, twisting one of the braids of his beard with the hand that wasn't holding the ale.

"My horse," Roth replied with a mischievous grin.

"Indeed," Dyaganos laughed, "it would be a long walk otherwise." He wondered though, whether Roth was just quick of wit, or if he desired to keep his business to himself. He decided to change the subject for the moment.

"You certainly made an entrance today, taking out that prickly toad of a thief with no more than the flick of your boot."

"He wasn't looking where he was going and I suppose my boot got in his way. It was little more than providence. I simply happened to be in the right place at the right time, that's all."

Dyaganos replied around a wry grin, "Yes, and that's what fortunes are made of. Being in the right place at the right time can mean everything."

The old man couldn't shake the feeling that he knew the name Dazman. That name had been going around in his head ever since their introduction in the street, and he still couldn't place it. The name was not the only thing that nagged at him either. There was something familiar about this Roth fellow. If he could only get Roth to open up a bit, perhaps something he said would help him figure it out.

Suddenly Darvin appeared with their meals, which he served with freshly baked bread that sparked a broad smile on Roth's face. It smelled of his aunt Eldemere's baking. They talked as they ate, but Dyaganos avoided any further direct questions about where Roth was headed or what he was doing. He didn't want to appear too nosy, though his curiosity had not yet been satisfied.

Eventually he said, "Anyone who knows horses would surely take notice of such a fine animal as you ride. Where did you find such a grand steed?"

"I bought him with the proceeds of an exceptionally fruitful adventure, not long after I left the Dragoon and struck out on my own," Roth replied. "That was almost six years ago. Sometimes I think he's even smarter than me," he added with a sheepish grin. "Once I couldn't get him to go into a narrow defile between two great boulders. He kept backing up and I was getting a bit ill with him. Suddenly a Hill Bear, biggest one I've ever seen, came charging out at us. We retreated far enough for me to nock an arrow and fire. That slowed the bear down and allowed me to get off a second shot. I still had to finish him off with my crossbow. If we'd been caught between those rocks, I probably wouldn't be here enjoying this fine ale."

Dyaganos realized he was finally getting Roth to loosen up a little. "So, you are an adventurer?" he asked.

"I suppose you could call it that. I take work here and there. It all started as a search for my grandfather, but that's a long story," Roth replied.

Dyaganos smiled. "Oh, but I'd love to hear it. I'm not one to pass up a good story. Besides, we have the whole evening, don't we?"

Chapter Two



Tale of Sir Dazman

A few of the men standing nearby quickly caught onto the fact that the stranger was talking of adventure. Roth realized this and decided it might be a good opportunity to tell his story, the same story he'd told many dozens of times as he wandered about in his adventures. He'd told it over campfires between battles, and in taverns between drinks. Lately though, for the last year or so at least, he had been remiss in sharing his story. After so many years with nothing to show for all his efforts, he'd come to the conclusion it was hardly worth the trouble.

He used to believe his chances were good on those occasions when he was in the company of other warriors, or lords and ladies, the sort who might have heard of his grandfather. In a small village as this though, with everyday common folk who never ventured far, and saw far-traveling adventurers even less, what real chance did he have? It was unlikely they had ever heard of his grandfather, much less know anything about him. If he were to ever meet anyone who could give him some morsel of information to aid in his quest for his grandfather, it certainly would not be here in Chelting.

Still, here they were, faces eager for a tale from a traveler passing through. It would be a fair trade for a pleasant evening, a good meal and good ale. What better way to spend it?

"You see, I've been searching for my grandfather for some time," he repeated for those who might not have heard the beginning of the conversation. "My search has turned into quite an adventure, but then it seems adventuring runs in the family. My grandfather was quite famous around Senguri as an adventurer and fighter. His name is Sir Dazman of Glenngolden."

He stood and walked to the hearth before continuing. It seemed a fitting place from which to tell a tale.

"Dazman had silver hair from the age of eight, or so it is told. It seemed this had something to do with his being chosen by the local wise man, Xzi-Xzo, as a favored apprentice. Although he did well as an apprentice, he wasn't happy in his work. By the age of twenty Dazman decided to give this up, his heart and head pulling him to become a warrior. He soon proved himself worthy in his new profession. As the years went by he became more famous and feared as a fierce and just fighter. Now as everyone knows, there are and always have been evil creatures who are by nature particularly vain, or foolish, or perhaps both, so much so in fact, that they would challenge anyone with little thought. There were those who sought after Dazman and challenged him. However, Dazman was wise, so they say, and was never drawn into such challenges on any terms but his own. He would not strike first. He would always wait until they tried to strike the first blow. In doing so, he would defeat the creature, always. No one knows how he did this, though some say it was magic he learned as an apprentice."

Roth took another sip of ale, then continued. "In one adventure, Sir Dazman killed an especially vile Red Dragon that had terrorized the land for centuries, at least for as far back as the elders could remember stories. This single deed made him so famous that he truly became a legend in his own time."

It seemed just the mention of a Red Dragon was enough to ensure everyone's attention. The only sound in the place now was the crackling of the fire in the hearth, and the creaking of a chair as someone leaned closer to better hear. One of the men smoking a pipe unconsciously puffed on it as if working bellows for a blacksmith.

"The story of Sir Dazman of Glenngolden and the Red Dragon became well known because of a famous sage

named Veldegarr, who years later began spreading the legend far and wide across the realm. The story goes that there once was a very ancient Red Dragon, a great worm named Gryphondon, who was so arrogant and vain, he did not even believe his reflection in a lake was really himself. This Red Dragon was envious of Sir Dazman's fame as a great fighter, though he'd never heard any stories that Dazman went after dragons. Perhaps he wasn't such a fierce warrior when it came to dragons. Gryphondon decided he would take care of this so-called invincible warrior, and ensure his own legend once and for all as the most fearsome dragon in the land."

"As you probably know," Roth continued, "some dragons can use their magic to change form. So Gryphondon disguised himself as a nobleman with a great red gemstone on a heavy golden chain around his neck, and went searching for Dazman. Gryphondon heard Dazman was at a festival to joust and went there. As luck would have it, Gryphondon found Dazman at a tavern in the company of a beautiful maiden named Mirianna. That gave him an evil idea, and he waited for his chance. Before long he saw Mirianna leaving the tavern for her coach. Gryphondon approached her and cast an enchantment on her, using the magic of the red gem to turn her into a golden statue. He then changed back into a dragon, grabbed the statue and carried her off to his lair, demolishing the coach and setting fire to rooftops as he flew away. Gryphondon was so pleased with himself when he reached his lair that this golden statue immediately became his most prized possession. He made a place for it next to his head where he slept on his great mound of treasure. Then he waited for Dazman to come, for he knew the fool would surely try to rescue the maiden."

Roth couldn't remember the last time he enjoyed telling his story this much. He glanced around at their eager faces, and then continued.

"Dazman heard the commotion and ran outside just in time to see what happened to this fair maiden. Of course, everyone immediately looked to him to see what he would do. As expected, he vowed to slay the dragon and return Mirianna. He somehow engaged the assistance of a Silver Dragon in his quest. Dazman had the Silver Dragon cast a spell on him to get him past the Red Dragon and into his lair. The dragon's magic turned Dazman into a large silver egg, studded with dozens of precious gems, and inlaid with ornate gold and platinum work, the beauty of which had never before been seen in this or any other land. Then the Silver Dragon carried the egg into the territory of Gryphondon, to lure the Red Dragon from his lair." Roth gestured with his hands how he envisioned dragon flight would look, though he had never seen one himself.

"Red Dragons are very territorial, you know, so he viciously defended his territory. When the Red Dragon attacked, the Silver Dragon feigned injury, dropped the beautiful egg, and flew away. Gryphondon snatched up the egg in midair and carried it back to his lair to add to his enormous hoard of treasure. Of course, Gryphondon was quite pleased with himself for so quickly defeating his foe. He was too vain to realize it had been all too easy. He was especially excited with his new treasure as well. The beauty of this egg was so great, that not even the Red Dragon could see through its spell. Gryphondon was so taken with this new trinket, that it immediately became his favorite treasure, and he made a place for it by his head, so he could lie next to it, and again he waited for Dazman."

Roth realized if he were to say "Boo!", everyone would have fallen backwards off their chairs. He took a long drink of ale, much to the dismay of the gathering around him. He sat his mug on the mantle and used both hands to form an oval in the air and pretended to hold it up to the light as he continued.

"Though Dazman had been turned into this beautiful egg, he could still see and hear. The gems covering the egg were like his eyes, and he could see in every direction at once." Roth looked all around the room slowly as if he were Dazman looking around the dragon's cave.

"He could break his spell at any time simply by wishing. It was no easy task to resist this, because Gryphondon was constantly gazing at the egg, and Dazman was never quite sure if the dragon was admiring the egg, or trying to see past the egg's beauty to discover Dazman's trick. He was staring death in the face, and it was staring back. It was doubly difficult to keep his composure, since he had been placed next to the golden statue that had been the beautiful maiden. Yet, he kept his resolve, and spent seven days and nights as the egg, taking stock of the dragon's habits, and most of all searching for a weakness. Then, on the eighth day, Dazman finally realized this dragon's one true weakness was his vanity. It was then that he decided the time was right. Dazman made his wish, and turned back into himself right before the startled dragon's eyes."

Roth gestured suddenly with all ten fingers stiffened in a flair, poking them into the air between himself and the group, emphasized by saying "Poof!" as if to represent a magical spell. Several in the group jerked back in surprise, just as Roth intended. This broke the group into a bit of laughter, much to the embarrassment of those who had been startled. When they settled down again, Roth continued his story.

"As you see, this startled the dragon. In fact, he was so surprised that he reared his great head too quickly and struck it on the roof of the cave, knocking rocks loose that fell down on him. It made so much noise it sounded like a great ground tremor. This infuriated the dragon. In his arrogant embarrassment he roared like the great beast he was. Gryphondon was absolutely incensed that his most prized treasure was now gone, and in its place stood the vile warrior he wanted to crush. As if that affront wasn't enough, this worthless human had the audacity to do this right in his face, inside his lair, his own inviolable domain. In his absolute anger and frustration he lashed out with his great tail and struck Dazman without even thinking."

Roth made a "swoosh" sound as he gestured with his arm what it must have looked like. His violent swipe in the air at the faces of those watching made most of them draw back from sheer reflex.

"And so, the Red Dragon was defeated like all the others evil creatures that had challenged Sir Dazman," he said matter-of-factly. "Of course, with the dragon dead the spell was broken, freeing the beautiful maiden, Mirianna, from her golden prison. However, Dazman was injured and never quite fully recovered, for when the dragon struck him, a dragon's scale lodged in his back, next to his spine. With his unbelievable wealth from the dragon's treasure, Dazman summoned every wise man and healer in the realm, offering ten thousand gold pieces to the one who could heal him."

"Great heavens," one of the merchants blurted. "Ten thousand gold pieces?"

"Hush," another one said in apparent irritation, and the merchant blushed. Roth laughed. He was enjoying this, and didn't mind the momentary interruption as much as everyone else did.

"As I was saying, Dazman offered ten thousand gold pieces to the one who could heal him, but it seemed no one could. None of the healers who tried had any success. No magician had a spell or magic powerful enough to rid Dazman of the scale or the pain. He was told it must be a curse if even their magic could not affect it. Whether or not it was a curse, the injury pained him greatly, and made it nearly impossible to wield his sword, or ride a horse, or do much of anything. Even with Dazman's great wealth he could find no one who could heal him and rid him of the pain, and so he retired. He soon fell in love with Mirianna, the maiden he had rescued, and within a few months married her. On the day of their wedding, the old wise man, Xzi-Xzo, for whom Dazman had apprenticed many years before, gave Dazman a wedding gift of a small silver egg, exactly like the one he had been turned into by the Silver Dragon. Not long afterwards, Dazman and his bride both mysteriously disappeared, and were never seen again."

Roth reached for the pitcher on the table closest to him and poured himself another mug of ale. No one objected.

"To this day, old stories persist that he was seen years later, old and withered, and in the company of a beautiful young maiden and a kindly old wizard, but none of these stories were ever substantiated. It's been told that Dazman used some very simple spell to defeat his foes, one that not even a dragon could resist. No one knows what that magic might have been, but it surely must have been simple. He couldn't have been much of a magician, since he never advanced past apprentice level, and he had to have a dragon's magical help to even get into the Red Dragon's lair, if that part of the story is true at all."

"Of course," Roth added, "he was so famous, there were many stories about him, some maybe true, some maybe based on truth, but probably most were mere fantasy. However, they were always useful for entertaining people eager to hear of the great deeds of Sir Dazman of Glenngolden, the most famous warrior in that land."

After a few moments the group realized that was the end of the tale, and broke out in a bit of applause and a hearty round of "here, here". Roth smiled and finished his ale, enduring a couple of hefty slaps on the back. Everyone seemed in a festive mood as they sorted into their groups again and conversations buzzed once more. Roth returned to the table with Dyaganos to work on another mug of ale, but the pitcher was nearly empty.

"A fine tale," Dyaganos said as everyone settled back into their usual routine. "Where did you learn it?"

"As a child, I heard various parts of it a hundred times, mostly from my uncle Dru and aunt Eldemere who raised me."

Dyaganos could see in Roth's eyes that his mind was slipping back to another time. "Uncle Dru and Aunt Eldemere told me that when I was four years old my parents were killed by a thief trying to steal their wealth, which was a bit of treasure my father inherited from my grandfather."

"What about when the story said your grandfather and Mirianna were never seen again? They must have had a child, your mother or father," Dyaganos said, trying to reconcile the obvious error in the tale.

"Of course, but that doesn't change the tale. I suppose my father saw them, but you see, I don't remember

Father. I don't remember either of my parents, Borlen and Airyn, except for vague dreamy memories. I seem to remember they both had silver hair like mine, that seemed to sparkle in the sun," he reminisced, tugging at his own hair.

"I suppose it runs in the family. My great uncle Zeebak, who used to come and visit me when I was a child, had silver hair too. He deals in antiquities, and travels everywhere. Whenever he came to visit he would always bring me some small gift from far away. He would tell me stories of my grandfather too. I suppose I've wanted to be like my grandfather ever since I was a small child. Then, when I turned eighteen, I joined the Silverblade Dragoon and served in Senguri until I was twenty. I was restless though. Military life was too rigid to suit me, so I left to seek my fortune, making my living as a warrior, like my grandfather." He grinned. "I suppose I'm actually more of an adventurer, really. I'm certainly not a great warrior as he was by any stretch of the imagination."

He wondered silently to himself if it could really have been so long ago when he left. He hadn't thought that much about it lately. He'd been so preoccupied with getting by from day to day, the years had somehow slipped past, and he was no closer to the answers he'd been seeking than he was when he left Senguri six years ago. He wondered how Uncle Dru and Aunt Eldemere were doing. His great uncle Zeebak was getting on in years the last time he'd seen him, and he wondered if that gentle old man who always came to visit him, and told him stories, was still alive. His train of thought was taking him deeper into the past.

A distant-sounding voice intruded, and brought him back from his thoughts. "Oh, what was that?" he muttered. It was Dyaganos.

"I was saying how interesting it all sounds, adventuring all about," Dyaganos repeated for him. "Sounds like a fascinating life."

Dyaganos hoped his face hadn't shown it, but he had been having crazy ideas, such foolish, ridiculous thoughts whirling around in his head almost since Roth started the story. He really shouldn't be thinking such nonsense, but he couldn't help it. Roth's story had tied some loose ends together that had dangled far too long. He decided it was time to excuse himself. This tavern was far too public for what he had planned for this young silver-haired traveler.

"I certainly enjoyed this evening, Roth. Your story was a grand success. I know everyone enjoyed it. It has been a most interesting day, I must say, but as you see, I'm an old man, and I need my sleep. If you would be so kind as to excuse me, I must be going."

"Then let me thank you for the dinner, my friend," Roth said. "It was most enjoyable."

"Perhaps you could stop by my shop in the morning before you leave," Dyaganos suggested to him.

"I suppose I could. I'll stop by on my way out of town," Roth confirmed.

"Wonderful," Dyaganos said as he stood. "In the morning then." He got up and went out the door, saying "good-bye" to Darwin.

Roth decided it was time to turn in as well, but first he wanted to check on Graymist.

"Darvin, would you happen to have any ripe apples?" he asked, walking over to the bar where Darwin was washing mugs in a pan of hot water.

"Sure do. How many do you want?"

"I suppose three will do. Put them on my bill please. I'll be leaving in the morning and I'll settle everything then if that's alright."

"For a fine gentleman like yourself, the apples are on the house," Darwin said through a big smile. He went into the kitchen and quickly returned with three huge red apples. "Picked 'em from my own grove behind the house," Darwin noted with some pride.

"Thanks," Roth said with a smile as he turned and went out the front door and crossed the street to the stable. A half moon shed its glow on thin broken clouds, both of which made it hard to see the stars. As Roth entered the stable, the door creaked, waking up the stable boy sleeping inside.

"Who goes there?" the stable boy commanded in as tough a voice as he could muster. Quickly turning up his lantern to see who was at the door, he only succeeded in blinding himself with the light.

"Well, young fellow, I see you are taking good care of my Graymist as promised," Roth answered back. "I'm just bringing a couple of apples for him before I retire for the evening."

"Oh, Master Roth, it's you. Didn't mean to startle you," he said, pretending he'd been awake all along, hoping Roth hadn't noticed he'd actually been sleeping. "That's fine sire. Yes, go right ahead. I'll just rest right here if you don't mind."

By the lamplight, Roth could see his way well enough. Graymist recognized Roth's voice and hung his head

over the stall door, shaking it up and down. Roth gave him an apple and patted his neck, quietly talking to him like an old friend. Then he gave him another apple, which disappeared as quickly as the first. Graymist was crunching on the third apple when Roth got the eerie feeling they were being watched. He turned slowly. The stable's back door was open just wide enough for him to recognize a figure standing outside in the half moonlight, watching them. It was Dyaganos.

Chapter Three



Revelations

The light from the half moon was barely sufficient to illuminate the glossy dome and light hair Roth had become so familiar with across the table from him in the tavern. He wondered why Dyaganos would sneak up on him here at the stable. How would the old man have known where to find him unless he'd been watching and followed him here? He didn't like it. He felt naked without his weapons. He'd let his guard down with all the merrymaking and friendly atmosphere. All he had with him were his two silver-handled daggers in his belt, but that was pure habit. He wouldn't even take a bath without his daggers within reach. Roth casually slipped one hand under his surcoat, grasping the small ornate silver hilt, and held it there.

Dyaganos realized Roth had seen him now. He put one finger to his lips, indicating silence, then glanced from side to side as if to check whether anyone was watching. He motioned with his other hand for Roth to come outside.

Roth realized if the old man was motioning to him, at least he meant for Roth to see him. His concern allayed somewhat, now he wondered what the secrecy was about. He patted Graymist and said, "See you in the morning, old boy." Then he called over his shoulder to the stable boy. "I'm going out the back way. I think I'll take a walk. I'll be back in the morning for my horse."

"Yes, sire," came the mumbled response from the half-asleep stable boy.

Roth turned back to the door, but Dyaganos was not in sight. Roth walked to the back door and carefully looked out, but saw no one. He stepped out into the cool night and backed up against the stable wall, slowly scanning the darkness, trying to see some movement with his peripheral vision in the dim moonlight.

"I don't like playing games, Dyaganos," Roth mumbled under his breath. Then he noticed a figure standing behind a building in the direction of the apothecary. Roth could make out the gold sash and trim on the man's robes by the faint light coming from a small window of the building. The figure stood facing in Roth's direction, motioning with one arm for him to come, then opened the door and slipped into the building.

"Alright, old man," Roth quietly mumbled, "you've gotten my attention." He slipped the dagger out of its place and carefully followed the shadows of buildings cast by the moonlight until he reached the door where Dyaganos entered. The door cracked open by itself, and a quiet voice called just above a whisper, "Roth, Roth, come in, quickly."

He recognized the voice, and carefully slipped in the door, his dagger up and ready in front of him. He was in a hallway, alone. The flickering light of a fireplace lit the floor and hallway wall opposite an open door some eight feet down the hall in front of him. Beyond that the light was too dim to see.

Dyaganos' shadow preceded him, sliding across the floor through the lit doorway. His bald head peered around the door frame. "In here, Roth," he said as he motioned with his hand again. Noting the dagger, his eyes widened a bit and he sputtered, "Heavens, you won't need that thing. Put it away, please."

"I don't like being led around like this," Roth said, obviously annoyed. He walked over to the door at the old man's urging, and followed him into the room.

"I'm sorry if all this seems a bit mysterious, my good fellow, but I didn't want anyone to see us come here together. Please, have a seat." He motioned to a wooden bench next to the fire. Dyaganos seated himself in a large

red padded chair opposite the hearth from Roth, who sat on the bench.

Roth looked around the room. It was larger than he expected, with the fireplace centered on one long wall, and dark red window curtains on the opposite long wall. The walls were mostly covered with shelves, stacked full with books, parchments and scrolls. Near one end was a dark wooden desk with a top of white speckled marble, where sat some writing parchment, a quill pen and inkwell, and a metal candleholder with a lit candle. A large open book with a bright blue silken bookmark dominated the center of the desk.

Dyaganos picked up an ornately decorated curved-stem pipe from its stand next to his chair and lit it with a straw he pulled from the fireplace. Roth's attention turned to some trinkets on the mantle. Several small statuettes and carvings flanked both sides of a large bell-shaped glass. Inside the glass was the largest ruby-red polished gemstone he'd ever seen. It was nestled by four thin gold wires evenly spaced around it. They crossed at the bottom, and came together at the top in a gold loop, as if it were meant to hang from a chain. Yet it was much too large and gaudy for anyone to wear on a chain.

The heavy scent of herbs and smoke filled the air, along with other unfamiliar smells he couldn't make out. Maybe they were potions and medicines, he thought, since this was obviously the living area behind the apothecary shop front.

The old man noticed Roth eyeing the red stone. "So, my good fellow, I suppose you're wondering why I brought you here, especially since we had already agreed you would come by in the morning." Dyaganos drew on his pipe, puffing wisps of smoke into the room.

"Your keen awareness of the nature of human curiosity is most impressive," Roth said with much sarcasm, maintaining his look of mild disgust at being led around in the dark for as yet unknown reasons.

"Now, now, there is no need for that," Dyaganos responded. "As I said, I didn't want anyone to see us come here. My reasons will become quite apparent to you once you've heard me out." His eyes flashed up to the mantle for a moment, then back to Roth. "I see you've noticed my red gem."

"Yes. Who wouldn't?" Roth responded, trying to seem disinterested, but the red stone was the largest gem he had ever seen. Anyone would have to assume it was quite valuable. It could just as easily be some cheap red glass though, since he had not the skill of a jeweler to tell the difference.

"Just my point, but you see, you are the only person in this town, to my knowledge, who has ever seen it. No one else knows I own such an item. Not even old nosy Darwin knows about it."

"Well then, why have you chosen to show it to me of all people?" Roth wondered aloud. "I'm practically a stranger here. Why, I could cut your throat, take it and ride out of here tonight, and nobody would be the wiser. They'd probably think that thief came back for revenge and killed you, and would never know this huge red stone was missing."

Dyaganos chuckled aloud. "Oh, but you wouldn't do that, my friend. I'm a good judge of character, and I can tell you would never do that. The fact that you could dream up such a logical scenario for making it disappear tells me you are a most intelligent man. Your quick wit is obvious, and yet you still have no idea why I'm showing you this. I'm surprised."

Roth was beginning to lose his temper now. The old man was playing games. He tried not to show his growing agitation, so he smiled and said, "Well, I assume it has something to do with this gigantic piece of jewelry. If you're wanting to sell it, I'm afraid I don't carry around enough coin to even put earnest money against the purchase of such a gem as that. It looks like it's worth more money than I'll ever see."

"I doubt that, Roth. Your wits will serve you well in your chosen line of work, ad-ven-tur-ing," he answered, stretching the last word with great flourish to make it sound exciting and alluring. "You'll make money at it, eventually. Just be patient."

He puffed on his pipe once more before continuing. "However, that's beside the point. You see, when you introduced yourself this afternoon, something about your name got my mind to spinning, but for the life of me, I couldn't make any connection with its importance."

He gestured in the air with the bowl of his pipe cupped in his fist as he spoke now. "Then tonight, when you began telling your story, it hit me like a war hammer. Roth of Dazman and Sir Dazman of Glenngolden, both names with Dazman." He puffed again.

"So?" Roth replied sarcastically. He couldn't see anything unusual about that. He wished to himself that the old man would get on with what he meant.

"You see, my friend, I've heard your story before," he continued.

Roth was surprised, to say the least. How could this old man have possibly heard his story before? He wondered if the old man was trying to hoodwink him. Yet, he couldn't deny he was fascinated with the prospect. He decided he would at least hear the old man out now.

"So you've heard my tale before, have you?" he asked skeptically.

"I certainly have," Dyaganos answered enthusiastically. "It was maybe six months ago, I think. Hmmm, let's see, yes, back in the early spring, a stranger came into my shop asking about spells. A sage I think he was. An old man with odd silver hair. Wasn't gray or white like mine. It was silver, just like yours."

The old man squinted in the firelight, eyeing Roth's hair with great interest. "Indeed," he exclaimed, as if he'd discovered something new. "It was like yours. No mistake."

He sat back and puffed on his pipe again, realizing Roth's impatience had vanished. He could tell Roth was more interested than he was letting on.

"He was asking about a spell that could be used by a fighter, or by anyone that was not a magician," he continued. "Of course, there is no such thing. You have to be a magician to cast spells. Fighters don't have the time or means to learn such magic, I told him. Then he said to come over to the tavern that night, and he'd tell me a story I might find interesting. It turned out I did find it interesting, but when I heard your tale, it was doubly interesting, because it was just like his. Well, almost. He tells it better than you, but no mistake, it was the same story."

Roth could contain his curiosity no longer. "What was his name?"

Dyaganos puffed on his pipe again before answering. "I couldn't remember until the name in your story tonight brought it all back to me."

"Veldegarr?" Roth asked. "Do you mean Veldegarr?"

Dyaganos puffed on his pipe again, letting Roth hang in suspense for a few seconds. Then he answered. "Veldegarr; that's the name I remember."

Roth could hardly believe this. He'd never run into anyone who said they had actually seen the sage Veldegarr. "You mean Veldegarr came through here a few months ago? The one from my story?"

"Now, now. Let's not jump to conclusions. I'm just saying that's the way I remember it." He puffed on his pipe again. "However, that's not all that interested me about your story."

The old man leaned forward and poked his fist full of pipe at Roth, using it to emphasize some of his words. "You said that silver hair seemed to run in your family. It stands to reason, if you have silver hair, and your parents had silver hair, and..."

Roth spoke before the sentence was completed. "I see. Yes. Even my great uncle Zeebak has silver hair. So you think this Veldegarr fellow could be related to me?" Roth grinned at the revelation. "I'd never heard that he had silver hair."

"Providing this is the sage in your story," Dyaganos cautioned, "it would seem a possibility." The old man puffed his pipe again before continuing. "There is one more thing. You know the part of your story about the old Red Dragon?" Dyaganos gave Roth the old evil eye stare, lifting one eyebrow to make that eyeball look bigger and more impressive. He wrinkled his face up in a questioning look as if waiting for an answer.

"Which part?" Roth asked, but Dyaganos only stared instead of answering. "Which part?" he insisted again.

Dyaganos turned his head and glanced up at the great red stone in the glass case. Roth looked up too. It took a few seconds for it to sink in, but when it did, all Roth could say was, "Holy Rune Stones!" It couldn't possibly be, Roth thought to himself. How could anyone get hold of it? You don't just walk up to a Red Dragon and pull a gemstone off its neck.

"That can't be the great red gem from my story," Roth objected. "The story says my grandfather got all the dragon's treasure. How could you possibly come to have it?"

"Well, I'm not through yet. I'm getting to that. Be patient. Now, let's see." He puffed again on the pipe and blew circles in the air with the smoke. "You see, a couple of weeks after this Veldegarr fellow came through our village, I went to another town two days ride from here to pick up some herbs and supplies for my medicinal potions. I ran into a person of somewhat questionable background outside one of the shops I frequent. He showed me this great red stone, and offered to sell it to me. Well, I didn't have the kind of money he was asking for it, and besides, I'm not in the jewelry business."

His pipe was burning out now, so he tapped it out on the hearth. He continued his story as he repacked it with the concoction he was smoking, stored in a glass canister on the stand next to his chair.

"He insisted it had some, well, shall we say, special powers that I would surely find useful. Of course I was

obviously skeptical, but he persisted, and eventually he came down to half his original price. Well, whether it had special powers or not, I thought it was probably worth more than the price he was then asking. I don't travel with that kind of money though, so I told him if he would bring it here to my shop after a few days, I would consider purchasing it. I figured I'd never see him again, but sure enough, he appeared in my shop a week later. For some reason he was so eager by then to sell the stone he took a quarter of his original price and thanked me profusely. I reasoned that a giant stone like this had to be worth at least what I paid for it as a large jewel, with or without these supposed special properties he spoke of. I bought it as, well, sort of an investment for the future." Then Dyaganos lit his pipe again and began puffing.

"So what makes you think this has anything to do with the great red stone in my story?" Roth inquired. He didn't yet see where this fit his story except for the size and color of the stone.

"Well, he told me the story behind it. He claimed some of this was fact, and some was maybe rumor, but it was just as he'd heard it. It seems the stone had been passed along through several people since its original owner supposedly found it in the wreckage of a coach that was demolished by a Red Dragon many years ago in the middle of a great festival. The lucky finder eventually sold the stone because he needed money. From there it passed through several owners before he got it from a magician. He claimed he performed some great service for the magician, and was given this stone as payment."

Roth caught the connection now, and was listening intently.

"I didn't believe most of his story. However, the part about a Red Dragon and the wreckage of a coach at a festival fell into place so nicely with the story I'd heard a couple of weeks earlier from this Veldegarr fellow, I was most intrigued by it. Then later I started thinking about all of it and it was just too much of a coincidence to believe. What an idiot I was. I decided I had surely been taken in by two professional thieves. It became obvious these roguish scamps had hoodwinked me with a well-planned hoax. Don't you see? One came along telling this ridiculous tale about a dragon and a great red stone to set me up. Then his partner appeared later with this fake red stone, trying to sell it to me, using some of the same story to get me interested. Since I'd left town on a trip, he had to follow me to another town to catch me. I should have been suspicious when he finally accepted only a quarter of what it ought to be worth. I fell for the whole scheme like some foolish schoolboy."

He puffed on his pipe once more. "So, I put it here on the mantle to remind me not to be so foolish in the future. I was too ashamed of my gullibility to let anyone see it, until now."

"Well, it all fits with my story, Dyaganos," Roth reminded him. "It all seems to fit."

"That is just the point I'm making," Dyaganos replied. "You see, your story changed all that. Veldegarr's story wasn't a fake after all, because you came along months later with the same story, though now it's your story, about your family. It has to be real. So, well, maybe the story behind the stone is real too. Maybe it wasn't a scheme to get an old fool's money after all."

Roth's head was spinning now. He was almost afraid to believe this could truly be a real connection to his story. He wondered how it could possibly lead him to anything useful. After all, it was just a gemstone, magical or not. How could it possibly help him find his grandfather? He needed time to think this all out, sort it, and decide where he would proceed from here.

He looked up at the great red stone. It was big, bigger than he had realized the first time he looked at it. If this was the magic stone used by Gryphondon so many years ago to turn his grandmother-to-be into a golden statue, it was a link with his past. However, if a Red Dragon used it, its supposed magic was probably evil too.

Dyaganos was thinking along those same lines as he stared at the stone, half expecting it to glow, or levitate, or do something magical on its own, now that it had been discovered for what it really was. Yet, it just sat there, huge, and red, and possibly very powerful.

Roth stood up and started pacing back and forth across the room, thinking. Dyaganos watched him for a couple of minutes, saying nothing while he puffed his pipe. He was having a few thoughts of his own.

Finally the old man said, "Listen my friend, I think we have uncovered enough riddles to solve for one night. Maybe you best be getting back to the tavern and bed down for the night."

Roth stopped next to the bench and looked up at the stone again. "To be honest with you, I've got so much going around in my head I can't think straight anyway. If you have any more revelations to spring on me, maybe it should wait until morning."

"Ah, yes, about tomorrow morning. Glad you mentioned that. First, I want you to leave here the same way you came tonight. I still don't want anyone to know we've been talking. In the morning, after you've had something to

eat, come here to my shop, to the front door mind you. If there is anyone around, just pretend tonight never happened. Understand?"

"Agreed," Roth answered.

"I have something else I want to discuss with you in the morning," Dyaganos told him, in a rather business-like tone. "Now hurry up, before old Darvin gets too curious about your absence tonight."

Without further conversation, Roth quietly slipped out the back door. Dyaganos puffed on his pipe for a minute before getting up. He locked the back door after Roth and returned to the mantle. He gazed at the great red gemstone, safely tucked away under its glass dome, wondering what he should do now. He paced the room twice, and then stirred the log in the fireplace with the black iron poker that hung on the wall.

Turning his attention once again to the mantle, he gingerly lifted the glass and took the stone from its stand, examining its brilliant red shiny surface in the firelight. He tested its weight with his hand. Then he carried it to his desk where the great book sat open.

Still holding the stone in one hand, he flipped slowly through the pages of the great book with the other. After awhile he gingerly put the stone down on the desk, blocking it with two small books so it wouldn't roll away. Then he proceeded to choose books from his shelves, carefully looking through each one, reading a bit, then flipping a page or two and reading some more. He continued this late into the night.

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Roth carefully and quietly made his way back toward the smithy on the other side of the stable. The air had cooled and some of the clouds had cleared out. The half moon was lower in the sky, making little or no night shadows now. An owl hooted not far away as Roth slipped between two buildings to the main street. Checking carefully to be sure no one was about, he slipped out into the street and casually wandered back to the tavern.

There was little light in the tavern's main room, only the flicker coming from the fireplace and two oil lamps on one of the tables. As he shut the tavern door, Roth heard footsteps coming down the stairs. He looked up to see a young girl in a long forest green dress and white blouse with full sleeves. A bright yellow apron with hand-stitched flowers embroidered around the edges covered the front of the dress. She carried a candle and looked down at the steps as she descended. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she stepped out into the firelight.

"Oh, there you are, Master Roth," she said softly, keeping her eyes mostly on the floor. She curtsied, smiling rather shyly. "I thought I heard someone come in. I was just putting some fresh wash water and towels in the rooms before I finished up in the kitchen for the night. I brought up another blanket for you too."

Roth hadn't seen her before. She looked to be about sixteen or seventeen, slim but not skinny. Her waist-length red hair was gathered into a ponytail that cascaded forward over one shoulder. Her light skin was sprinkled with freckles, with a slightly denser concentration on her nose and cheeks. Her green eyes sparkled even in the relatively dim glow of the fireplace. Despite the long full dress and large apron hiding her figure, Roth could tell she would make a lovely bride for some lucky young man one day.

"Oh. Well, thank you Miss..., uh..., " Roth stumbled, not knowing her name.

"My name is Jennifer, Master Roth," she said. Flashing a quick glance at Roth with her green eyes, she blushed and looked quickly down at the floor again.

"Yes, well, thank you Miss Jennifer, but I had my bath before supper. I won't be needing anything."

Roth smiled at her shyness. She was really quite a lovely girl. He almost wished he were ten years younger. He remembered she had said she was going to finish up in the kitchen. "Do you by any chance do some of the cooking?" he asked.

"Nearly all of it," she replied softly.

"I should have known Darvin wasn't the cook. It takes a woman's touch to cook like that. My supper tonight was very good," Roth complimented.

She blushed again. "Thank you, Master Roth."

"Oh, but I must thank you. It was most delicious. I do believe that was the best meal I've had in many months."

She smiled. "You are very kind, sir," she said softly. Then she curtsied again and excused herself. She scurried over to the fireplace and poked the logs a couple of times before going back into the kitchen.

This momentary diversion had allowed the war of thoughts in Roth's head to calm a bit. He was grateful for

that. He watched Jennifer as she retreated into the kitchen, then he headed upstairs to his room.

Roth took off his surcoat and his boots and stockings. Then he took off his shirt, and washed his hands and face in the wash basin. He had just started to loosen his belt when he heard a loud scream from downstairs.

"Jennifer!" he exclaimed, realizing it must be the girl.

Then he heard another scream, and the crashing of pots and pans. Roth instinctively grabbed his great bastard sword in one hand. His daggers were still under his belt. He ran downstairs barefooted and headed straight for the kitchen.

Two bright lanterns provided ample light in the kitchen, but Roth saw no one. The back door was wide open to the night air. Roth dodged around one side of the large butcher's block and worktable full of pans and utensils that dominated the center of the room. He leaped over several pots scattered on the floor and darted to the open door. He looked out into the darkness, but there was no one to be seen. The half moon was near setting and had slipped behind some wispy clouds, making it difficult to see much of anything. The only sounds were the barking of a dog in the distance, and the chirping of crickets.

He turned around to scan the kitchen again and saw Jennifer, crumpled on the floor on the other side of the butcher's block. She looked like a rag doll that had been dropped. She wasn't moving. Quickly he bent down on one knee and both hands, putting his ear to her face, listening for breathing. Suddenly Roth felt something sharp poke him in the back next to his kidneys.

"Move an inch and I'll skewer ye like a roast chicken," yelled a deep gravelly voice.

Chapter Four



Dancing in the Dark

Night in the forest was quiet except for the occasional hoot of an owl, or the rustle of dry leaves as small creatures searched for food in the dark. It was cooler here because of the altitude, and were it not for the cover of evergreen trees there would be frost on the forest floor. Suddenly a searing, blinding flash of light, accompanied by a loud, thick "Foomp!" shattered the nocturnal peacefulness.

Through the ringing in his ears Dyaganos could hear the wild fluttering of wings, the screeching of birds and the screams of other unknown and unseen creatures. He heard the rustling of their legs and paws and feet and tails frantically scrambling through the underbrush. He could smell the unseen smoke that engulfed him, as it rose up like a miniature mushroom cloud into the tree branches overhead. He also smelled singed hair, burned cloth, and the unmistakable scent of burned leather. All he could see was a white flare, throbbing in his eyes.

His first panicky thoughts were concerned with what had happened, why was he blinded, and what was on fire? Then suddenly he felt a burning sensation on the soles of his feet, as if he were walking barefoot on hot rocks in midsummer at noon. The heat welled up so quickly it hurt before he could react.

"Oh! Oow, ooh, oow, ooh, ahhh, ouch!" he panted at the top of his lungs as he danced in place, spinning around, prancing and hopping up and down like a dwarf that just found the mother lode. It felt as if his feet were on fire.

"Aagh!" he screamed. "My feet! Oow, ooh, oow. Water, I need water! Somebody get me water, I'm on fire!"

He could see nothing but blinding white shapes as if he'd looked into the sun. Hopping on one foot he reached down to pull off his sandals one at a time, but lost his balance and fell down. Cursing aloud he sat up to pull the sandals off. They were so hot they nearly blistered his fingers, but he got them off. He fanned his feet frantically with his hands and tried to scrape dirt from the ground to cover them up, but it was useless. He jumped up and began dancing around from one foot to the other, trying to see through the blinding white spots before his eyes. He was still prancing barefoot when he recognized the faint sound of running water somewhere behind him.

"A stream. Water," he exclaimed aloud. He followed the sound of water, hopping along on one foot, then the other. His tender feet stepped on a rock, and then a sharp twig, and another. He had been unable to see anything for nearly a minute, but it seemed like five. Finally his eyes began to adjust to the absence of light after being blinded by the bright flash. Though the half moon was near setting, enough moonlight filtered through the branches to make out dark shapes against the darkness of the forest, punctuated by little white glowbugs still dancing around in his eyes. He noticed now the scent of trees and vines, and the sting of cold air in his nose.

He trotted toward the sound of the water, slamming headlong into a low branch. It caught him across the chest and nearly knocked him off his feet, which were still burning as if he were walking on hot coals.

Finally he could tell by the sound of the water he was getting close. Just then his feet slipped on the muddy bank and in he went, bottom first, yelping as he fell in the dark. It was icy cold. Luckily, the stream was but a foot deep with a soft bottom. His feet cooled almost instantly, as did everything else immersed in the frigid stream. Still his feet throbbed, the soles from the minor burns, and the rest from the chill of the water. He sat there for a moment, completely stunned and shaken. He could now see part of his robe floating on the water. Places along the

bottom of the robe glowed like embers in a fire. He quickly dunked them under water to put them out.

The cold soaked in now and he started to shiver just as his eyes caught a strange red glow in the water directly in front of him. It looked as if a great shining red underwater eyeball looked up at him from between his legs.

"Great Bells of Kinsling," he yelled and jumped up as quickly as an old man could, who was weighed down by a long, soaking wet robe, and sitting in a stream with a muddy, slippery bottom. He managed to get to his feet only after falling twice more into the cold water face first as he frantically scrambled for the bank. He managed to slip on that too before he could extract himself from the cold stream.

He lay there on his back among the leaves for a moment, trying to catch his breath, shaking like a cornered rabbit. His chest was heaving from the hot-foot dancing and the mad dash through the woods, not to mention the fright and fearful surprises he'd had in the past three minutes. He tried to calm himself.

He brought his hands to his face, and as he did they were lit by another red glow. He froze for a second. Then with both hands he snatched up the great red stone lying on his chest and looked at it. It glowed red, but only slightly now. It seemed to throb, brighter, dimmer, back and forth. Each time was dimmer than the last. It was mesmerizing. He couldn't take his eyes off it. After a minute or so he could discern no more glowing at all. It seemed as if the stone had been alive, and now it was dead.

He let it fall back to his chest, its deed done. It slid down over his shoulder, dangling from the heavy string that held it around his neck. He let his gaze go up to the night sky where but few stars peaked between the branches above. He wondered now how he'd survived so long in this world. He was, after all, a foolish old man who had been messing with magic for years without benefit of an experienced master. He should have known better. It was a miracle he hadn't already lost a hand, or permanently blinded himself, or worse.

He lay there for a minute, eyes closed, regaining his composure, though it seemed like half an hour. His mind was numb. He tried not to think. He just wanted to rest. His feet still throbbed, but not as badly. Finally he'd caught his breath, but he shook even more now from the cold. His robe and undergarments were soaked, and the cool night air brought a heavy chill. "I'll catch my death if I don't get warm," he said aloud to himself.

He opened his eyes to get up, but to his fright there was a ring of spear points floating about his head, visible only because his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness while they had been closed. Attached to the other end of each one was a slim silhouette against the deep blue-black of the night sky.

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Without shifting his body Roth slowly turned his head. He saw Darwin standing over him. Both of his huge hands grasped the far end of a long halberd. The business end of it rested against Roth's bare back.

"Get away from her," Darwin ordered, pressing the halberd until it almost drew blood.

"I didn't do anything," Roth insisted, but he didn't move. "I was in my room when I heard screams and I ran down here."

"Get...away," Darwin said again slowly, emphasizing each word through gritted teeth, and pressing harder on the halberd. Roth had to lower his back against the pressure or it would surely have drawn blood.

"Alright, alright. I was just listening to see if she was breathing. She's alive. Now get that thing out of my back and help me with her."

Darvin eased up a little so Roth could move. Roth let go of the sword, leaving it on the floor, and delicately turned Jennifer's head. They could both see she had a bruise on her forehead. A small cut accompanied it, but it didn't look too bad.

"Pick her up and put her on the big table by the fireplace," Darwin ordered, emphasizing his seriousness with the halberd tip again. He was becoming a bit less concerned about Roth, focusing now on his precious Jenny.

Roth picked her up gently and started to the other room. He suddenly caught a horrible smell and stopped in his tracks. His head jerked involuntarily as he screwed up his face and shut his eyes. A chill ran down his back and his shoulders quivered slightly. "Great Gorgons!" Roth blurted. "Do you smell that?" he called to Darwin.

Darvin's nose suddenly caught it too. It made his eyes water a bit, and he screwed up his face. "Great dragon piles, what is that?" he demanded.

"I'll never forget that smell," Roth offered. "That's the stuff Dyaganos poured on the thief in the street this afternoon."

Roth carried Jennifer to the other room. Darwin followed, still holding the halberd, but not poking Roth

anymore. "The thief must have broken in trying to steal some food," Roth continued. "That's the only place that smell could have come from, unless Dyaganos has been in there mixing potions."

He put her down on the large eating table as ordered, then headed to the kitchen to find cold water. Almost immediately she started regaining consciousness. In a few moments she squealed and tried to sit up, but she held her head and laid back down just as quickly.

"Ooh, my head," she muttered and began to sob quietly.

"It's alright, Jenny, it's alright." Darvin put the halberd down now and picked her head up with one big arm to comfort her.

"I was going out back to throw out some dirty water, and this man jumped at me when I opened the door, and he was dirty, and he smelled awful, Father, and, and he scared me, and I screamed. Then he grabbed me and I guess I screamed again, and he pushed me and I hit my head. Ooh, it hurts, Father. My head hurts." Then she started whimpering and sobbing again, touching her fingers to her forehead.

"It's going to be alright, Jenny. I'm here. Nobody is going to hurt you, Baby," Darvin comforted.

From the kitchen Roth heard every word. She had said, "Father". He hadn't realized Darvin was her father. He knew now why Darvin had seemed so protective of her. He came back with a bowl of water and a cloth, and put it on the table next to Jennifer. Darvin started wiping her head where it was cut. He made a cool compress for her forehead and sat her up.

"You have a very nasty bump there, Jennifer," Roth commented.

"Where did you come from, Master Roth?" she asked him through her sobbing.

"I was in my room and heard you scream, so I ran down to the kitchen. I didn't see anybody, but I tell you I'd know that smell anywhere. It was that thief we caught this afternoon. Dyaganos poured that awful smelling stuff on him to run him off. I'd wager fifty gold pieces he was looking to steal some food from the kitchen and you surprised him."

"Ooh, he smelled horrible! And he was awfully dirty. I thought it was some kind of crazy man. He looked at me as though he might kill me. I was scared. I didn't know what he was going to do."

She sobbed less now, but the grimace on her face told them the headache was bad. Roth dipped the cloth again, and gave it back to her.

"I'm going to get some medicine for your head, Baby," Darvin told her. "I'll be right back." He headed for a cupboard behind the bar and brought out a mug, pouring something into it. He returned with it and told her, "Dyaganos says this is good for a headache. Here."

Jennifer took a sip and nearly choked. "That's awful!" she exclaimed as her face wrinkled up more from the medicine than from the headache.

"I think that's what it does, Jenny. It tastes so bad you forget about your head and start worrying about your stomach," Darvin teased.

Jennifer halfway giggled.

"Now drink it all down," Darvin insisted. "Come on, all of it, or it won't help."

Jennifer finally drank all of it. Darvin took her to her room and put her to bed for the night. Roth went to the kitchen, picked up his sword, and went out the door. He walked around the tavern, sniffing to see if he could pick up the smell and maybe follow it, but a light breeze had carried away any trace of the thief.

Roth returned and reported his findings to Darvin, who was now down stairs beginning to pick up the mess in the kitchen.

"Listen, Roth, I hope there's no hard feelings. You can imagine my thoughts when I found you half dressed on the floor with my daughter. I almost didn't stop when I poked you with my goblin sticker."

"No offense taken. She spoke to me earlier this evening, when I came in from the stable, but I didn't realize she was your daughter until a bit ago when I heard her talking to you." Roth edged his way toward the stairs. "I think I'll get to bed now. I'm tired after all this excitement, and I do need to be getting on the trail in the morning."

"Oh, yes, quite," Darvin nodded. "Well, thanks for your help. I'll see you in the morning then."

Roth climbed the stairs to his room. He took time to warm himself by the fire before going to bed. Soon his head was spinning again with all the things that had happened, not the least of which were the revelations, and even more so, the questions he and Dyaganos had uncovered. When he went to bed it took awhile before he finally drifted off into a fretful sleep.

Sunlight coming in the window woke Roth before he was ready, though once awake he was glad to see the sun,

despite getting little sleep. He was eager to talk to Dyaganos again. He remembered the tone in the old man's voice when he said he had something else he wanted to discuss. He wondered what it could be. The room was chilly so he dressed quickly and hurried downstairs to where he was sure there was a warm fire in the main room.

Breakfast was not what Roth expected after the wonderful meal he'd had the evening before. With Jennifer still in bed, Darvin filled in and his cooking was by no means a match for Jennifer's magic in the kitchen.

Roth asked how Jennifer was, and Darvin said she was still sleeping. What with folks coming in the tavern that morning, the news of the previous evening's events was soon all over the village. A lady from the village came in to watch after Jennifer, even before Roth had finished his meal.

After his breakfast Roth checked on Graymist and gave him another apple. Then he went to see Dyaganos. Already children were out playing and villagers went about their daily chores. Soon he arrived at the front door of the apothecary, but it was locked. Roth knocked and waited, and knocked again. There was no answer. He called to Dyaganos, and went to the windows in front, trying to see in. No one came to the door.

It didn't make sense that he was not answering the door and was not open this morning. The old man had seemed so eager to talk to him about something. He knocked again and waited, but no one came.

By now Roth was beginning to attract attention. A middle-aged lady with two small boys in tow stopped and told Roth the old man sometimes went out collecting herbs early in the morning. She suggested he should come back later and Dyaganos might be in. Not wanting to attract any further attention, Roth thanked her and left, walking back up the street toward the smithy next to the stable.

Confused and anxious why Dyaganos had not kept their appointment, he wondered if something had happened to the old man. Maybe the thief had come back last night and taken revenge on the old man before he came to the tavern and attacked Jenny. For all he knew the old man was dead in front of his fireplace and the great red stone was gone. He needed that stone, that possible link to his grandfather. He was still concerned about the old man, but he was also not about to let that link slip away from him now after so many years of searching. He decided it was best to investigate, but he would have to find a way in. He walked back up the street toward the Hedgehog's Fancy, then changed his mind and headed for Archibald's. He had an idea.

Chapter Five



Breaking and Entering

As Roth neared the smithy the steady *bing, bing, bing* of Archibald's hammer rang out from inside the large double doors announcing he was at work. The stable boy was fetching water for the quenching barrel, and Archibald looked to be making a plow blade. Roth told Archibald he might be staying overnight again and paid him for the previous night. Roth stalled for time, chatting with the smith about horses, while secretly eyeing a pile of scrap iron. He hoped to find a metal bar that would make a good pry bar.

Before long Archibald went to the storeroom, so Roth pretended to excuse himself also. When the smith left, Roth quietly borrowed a bar that looked like it would do the job and slipped it under his surcoat. He was sure Archibald wouldn't mind, since he planned to return it. Besides, asking permission would have defeated his purposes.

Roth watched the road to ensure no one was paying him any attention, then casually walked around behind the stable. He made his way to the alley behind the apothecary as he had the night before, being careful he wasn't seen.

The back door of the apothecary was locked, but Roth had seen it from the inside and felt he could force it open if he pried in the right place. He tried the bar several times, this way and that. Finally he heard a crackle, then a crack and pop, and finally a snap. The door slowly opened about a foot. Roth looked in, but it was dark. He slipped inside, closed the door and jammed the bar under it to wedge the door shut. He waited there in the hall for his eyes to adjust to the relative darkness inside.

Soon he could make out the form of the hall. A faint slit of light leaked under the curtains at the far end of the hall leading to the shop front. There was no firelight visible from the study they had occupied the night before, though he could make out the shape of its doorway down the hall.

"Dyaganos?" Roth called quietly so he would not be heard outside. "Dyaganos, are you here?" He waited.

"It's Roth. Are you here, Dyaganos?" Only silence answered back.

He walked up the hall to the study where they'd been and looked in. He could see well enough to tell no one was there. Then he went further down the hall. He came to a cupboard on the right, with goods on the shelves. Beyond that were two doors opposite each other; one was a kitchen, the other a bedroom. Enough light leaked around the dark curtains here too that Roth could tell no one was there. The kitchen looked like it might have been used for mixing concoctions. Roth made a mental note to himself not to eat anything Dyaganos cooked.

"Dyaganos, it's Roth. Are you here?" Still he heard nothing. He pulled back the curtains at the end of the hall. Even more sunlight leaked around the drapes on the front windows, letting him see quite well in the room. From the posts and rafters hung the tangled silhouettes of all sorts of vine-like leafy things, and bulbous roots knotted onto strings, drooping from overhead beams all across the room. A cacophony of aromas assailed his nose. A bench sat by the front door, and shelves of bottles and jugs covered the walls. Behind a long counter were a couple of tables with more boxes, jars, jugs and utensils. More shelves lined the walls behind the counter, filled to overflowing with herbs and liquids. Still there was no sign of Dyaganos.

Roth left the hall curtains open to give light in the hallway and made his way back to the study again. The room smelled of half-burned wood. A few glowing embers remained on the log that had gone without poking until it died

out.

He slowly opened the study curtains, but just slightly, not wanting anyone to know someone was here. The light revealed the room pretty much as he'd left it the night before, except for a pile of books and scrolls on the desk where only one large book had been. The candle on the desk was burned completely down and had gone out.

It was then that Roth noticed the glass bell on the mantle had been moved and the great red stone was no longer under it. He looked around the room for it, but found nothing. Then he saw the floor behind the desk.

"What happened here?" he mumbled aloud. There were two charred spots on the floor shaped like feet or shoe soles. Around them was the charred outline of a circle two feet in diameter. Between the circle and the foot marks the floor looked perfectly normal. Could this be some kind of magic symbol, he wondered? Was it new or had it been here all along? He had not been invited behind the desk last night, and had no idea how long this had been burned in the floor.

He examined the pile of open books stacked on the desk. He tried reading them, but they were total gibberish to him — diagrams, and symbols, and archaic phrases that meant nothing. He wondered if these might be books of magic. He skimmed through them looking for notes or a bookmark, or something. He thought that if they were books of medicine, he might at least recognize plant names, but he could not. If Dyaganos was actually a wizard masquerading as an herbalist, it seemed logical he would have a magic symbol or magic circle of some sort inscribed in the floor. Oddly the smell of burned wood seemed stronger here, and didn't seem to be coming from the fireplace at all. He gave up on the books and got down on hands and knees to get a good whiff of the burned marks.

"Whew, that's a fresh burn alright," he said aloud. He figured it couldn't be more than a few hours old. That didn't necessarily answer the question of what happened to Dyaganos or the great red stone though.

Roth got up and looked around the room again. There was no sign of a struggle or forced entry. He realized the thief could not have come back and stolen the gem, since all the doors were locked from the inside. Somebody had to be here, which meant Dyaganos had to be here. So where was he?

Maybe there was a secret door, or a hidden passage, or perhaps a cellar or tunnel under the floor. He knew he couldn't just go looking about the place banging on the walls or the floor. Someone might hear him. He began quietly looking for secret doors and panels, and anything else that might provide a clue to the old man's whereabouts.

He noticed the old man's pipe was on the desk, and it was cold like the fireplace. "Well, that means he's been gone several hours, I'd say," Roth mumbled quietly, as if there were someone else to hear him. Other than that, he found nothing in the study that hinted where Dyaganos might have gone.

Roth headed back toward the hall. Then just as he reached the doorway, from behind him came a soft "Foomp" sound and a faint flash of light. It startled him so badly he almost jumped out of his skin. When he spun around to see, he hit his elbow's funny bone on the door casing.

"Oh, ahhh, ooh," he cried and laughed at once, holding his elbow with the other hand. As he did so he looked up to see Dyaganos standing where the strange burned spot was behind his desk. There was something glowing red between the fingers of one hand that covered it. Leaves and mud clung to his robe and his damp stringy hair hung across his face, his eyes peeking from between the tangled strands. His beard was matted with small sticks and moss. He looked like he'd been in a fight with a bear.

Unknown to Roth, Dyaganos heard and saw none of this. After having been marched into an encampment, he'd been watched by two guards while some of the men that captured him argued about whether they would kill this intruder or sell him as a slave. By the light of the campfire, he eventually figured out from their olive skin and reddish hair that they must be Zadi. He was amazed, for unless these raiders were much closer to Dunn Vassar than he thought they could possibly be, he had gone further than he thought possible with the spell he attempted.

Cold and shivering, and scared half out of his wits at what he knew the Zadi capable of, he made his decision. It would be better to try the spell again and hope for good luck than to wait for them to kill him. He didn't believe they would consider someone of his apparent age to have value as a slave.

He was thankful that when he discovered their spears pointed at him, he had kept enough wits about him to realize his red stone was dangling out of sight behind his head as he lay there covered in mud and debris. He had carefully slipped the stone inside his robes when he rolled over to get up, making a show of being old and feeble. Apparently his acting fooled them, for it seemed they considered him no real threat, and had not searched him. So while pretending to have a hacking cough, he managed to ease the stone out of his robes and place-shift home again. Now here he stood in a nearly petrified daze, frightened and expecting to find himself, or at least his feet, on fire

again.

Roth squirmed in the hall doorway rubbing his tingling elbow while Dyaganos just stood there like a statue with one hand poised in front of his chest cupping a red light. His mouth hung open wide, breathing heavily like he had run a mile. His wild eyes seemed transfixed on Roth, though it looked as though they stared right through him.

Still nursing his funny bone Roth managed to yell through gritted teeth, "You scared the flaming heebie geebees out of me. Where have you been hiding?"

Dyaganos had been frozen in place for scant seconds, just long enough for Roth to get that sentence out of his mouth, when the old man began a long drawn-out moaning scream. Still blinded from the flash, he flung both his arms out in front of him and began banging about like a blind man running from the dark, feeling his way around behind the desk. He knocked most of the books from the desk, and several from the shelves. Finally realizing where he was, he turned and blindly ran for the kitchen. From Roth's perspective, Dyaganos had suddenly turned without warning and run straight at him screaming, with arms reaching ahead as if he were going to strangle someone.

Roth jumped back just in time as Dyaganos ran right through the door, crashed his way down the hall and turned into the kitchen. He searched frantically for water for his burning feet until he realized they were not burning at all as he expected. Roth first heard pots and pans crashing all about, then suddenly the commotion stopped.

"He's raving mad," Roth mumbled to himself. "You're a brainless madman," he shouted down the hall at Dyaganos. He'd had enough.

"I'll see you when dragon's breath makes flowers bloom, you crazy old man," Roth angrily called down the hall. Still working his sore elbow he turned and headed for the back door, but he found it wouldn't open. It was stuck. He jerked on it with both hands, but it wouldn't budge. Then he remembered he'd wedged it with the iron bar.

"I'm going crazy too," he mumbled in frustration through gritted teeth. "The old man is making me crazy."

Just as he started to kick the bar from under the door there came a loud knocking at the front door. A man's voice called out, "Dyaganos, is that you? Open up. What's going on in there? Are you alright? Open up. Open up." Then bam, bam, bam, as the man knocked on the door again.

Roth froze where he stood. From the kitchen he heard the old man's voice, "Just a moment, Wattley, be patient. I've got my hands full. Give me a minute. I'll be right there."

Why, the old man almost sounded sane, Roth thought. He turned to see Dyaganos come out of the kitchen and go into the front room, pulling the hall curtains closed behind him. Now Roth couldn't see what was happening, but he could hear the door being unlatched and opened.

"My word, you look awful. What happened to you? I heard crashing about and voices, like you were fighting with someone. Are you alright?" a man's voice asked.

"My dear Wattley, I'm fine. Just a bit wet and dirty I'm afraid. I was out picking some herbs in the woods and I fell into some water and got muddy, and then I slipped and fell again. Then when I got back here I managed to knock over some pans I had piled in the kitchen and made an awful racket. It's just been one of those bad mornings, but I'm fine, just fine. I'm sorry if I worried you," the old man explained.

"Herbs?" Roth thought to himself. He didn't see any herbs. The old man was lying. He didn't come in here with any herbs. Come to think of it, how did he get in here anyway? Where had he been hiding?

"Are you sure? I was just passing by in the street and heard the noise, but you were locked up. I heard voices, someone yelling something about being crazy," Wattley replied.

"Oh, goodness, that was me, chiding myself for being so careless and making such a mess. Really though, I'm fine. I must clean up the mess though, and clean myself up a bit before opening up today. So if you don't mind, I really need to get busy with this mess I've made," Dyaganos told his friend.

"You're sure you're alright?" Wattley asked again.

"Oh, quite, quite, but thank you for your concern. I really must get the mess cleaned up before it dries hard."

Absolutely none of this made any sense to Roth. Dyaganos didn't sound crazy at the front door. In fact, he sounded quite lucid, and had a good answer for what was going on, even if it was all a lie. Now that Roth had a few moments to get over his anger, he decided to find out what really had been going on.

"Oh, well, yes, certainly. Sorry to have bothered you."

"That's quite alright, Wattley, quite alright. I'll see you later then."

Roth heard the door shut and latch. Hurried footsteps came back toward the curtains. "Roth, Roth, where are you?" the old man whispered as he parted the curtains to the hall. "Oh, there you are," he said, and came pitter-patter back up the hallway with the great red stone dangling from a string held in his right hand.

Roth could see the old man was walking rather gingerly. He was barefoot, and his damp robe was burned almost all the way around the bottom edge. Where had this man been?

"How did you manage to get in here? What are you doing here?" Dyaganos demanded.

"I came looking for you. I thought something might have happened to you after what happened at the tavern last night. It looks like that thief did come back after all and dragged you through the woods. As for how I got in here, I came in through the door. What I want to know is how you got in here."

"That's a long story, my friend, something I'd rather forget." He saw the utter puzzlement in Roth's face, but didn't quite know how to go about explaining things. "I wager you think I'm crazy, don't you?" he asked Roth.

"Oh, I thought I made myself perfectly clear on that point a minute ago. You are raving mad insane crazy, that's what you are," Roth blurted. He stuck out his tongue sideways, screwed up his face, crossed his eyes, and made unintelligible noises, imitating his idea of a lunatic.

Dyaganos laughed heartily at this. Roth did look quite ridiculous. Then shortly Dyaganos stopped laughing and his face became deadly serious.

"Oh, but I'm not crazy, my good fellow. I realize I look it, and my actions have surely seemed odd to you, but I assure you I am not crazy. Excited? Yes. Practically scared out of my wits for awhile there, I suppose, but definitely not crazy."

He held up the stone in front of Roth's face. "You want to know what I have here?" He shook it. "You want to know what this does? You want to know where I've been? You want some help to find your grandfather?"

His voice had gotten louder and more excited with each question. Then he lowered the stone, and stared at Roth with the most serious look he could muster. The last question caught Roth completely off guard.

"What do you mean by help to find my grandfather?" Roth asked.

"Exactly that," Dyaganos exclaimed firmly, taking Roth by the arm and turning him again toward the back door. "Now you run along. Go out the back door, and don't let anyone see you. It must be halfway to noon I'd guess. You run over to the tavern and find something to do as if nothing has happened. I'll get cleaned up and come over for you later. Then we'll talk."

"But, but," Roth objected.

"Now go ahead. You just wait until I get there. I promise you won't regret it."

Baffled and somewhat frustrated, Roth kicked the metal bar aside, picked it up and started out the back door. Then Dyaganos grabbed his arm again and said, "Wait a minute. Did you say something happened at the tavern last night? What happened?" Before Roth could open his mouth Dyaganos changed his mind and said, "No, never mind. I'll find out later. You run along now. I'll be there soon. Go. Go," as he pulled open the door and ushered Roth outside.

Roth wondered what it would feel like to use the front door, just once. That shouldn't be too much to ask, should it? Dyaganos motioned with his hand for Roth to go on, and closed the door except for a thin crack he could peek through. Roth frowned as he slipped the bar under his surcoat and started toward the smithy to return it.

Dyaganos watched Roth carefully wind his way back toward the stable and grinned. "This Roth fellow is surprising," he thought. "I think we're going to get along just fine."

He pulled his head back, closed the door and looked at his broken latch. He realized now how Roth had gained entrance. He turned down the hall to clean up and change clothes. Then he made a decision. "Yes, indeed, we're going to get along just fine, Roth and I," he said aloud to himself. "We'll make a fine pair. Now let's see. I'm going to need a horse — no, two horses — and some saddlebags, and let's see, what else?"

Chapter Six



Proposition

When Roth reached the stable he heard Archibald talking to someone inside, so he slipped around to the forge. While no one was looking, he quickly returned the bar to the pile and walked back to the tavern. Upon entering, Roth thought he heard Jennifer in the kitchen talking to Darwin. Then Darwin came out.

"Well, there you are. I thought you were going to leave this morning," Darwin smiled. "Changed your mind?"

"Uh, yes, my plans have changed a little," Roth replied. "Besides, I couldn't leave without asking about Jennifer. Did I hear her in the kitchen just now?"

"Oh, yes. She's in there alright. She says she feels better and doesn't want to stay in bed any longer, so I let her help a little. I think she feels better doing something instead of lying about, you know."

"Well, that's good news for me, and frankly no less good news for my stomach if she's up to cooking. I thought I'd get something to eat."

"It's a little early, but Jenny will probably have things ready soon. How does baked chicken and vegetables sound to you?"

"Sounds good."

Darwin smiled and nodded. "Something to drink in the meantime?" he asked.

"Cider would be nice," Roth answered.

Darwin went back to the kitchen and brought out a large cup of cider. Roth sipped it while he waited. Jennifer came out twenty minutes later with his plate. She smiled at Roth quite boldly, compared to her earlier shyness, as she placed it on his table. "Here you are, Master Roth. I hope you like it."

Then she pretended to whisper, "I put a two extra pieces on there for you, and I'll bring your biscuits in a minute." She smiled again and hurried back to the kitchen before Roth could say anything.

She certainly seemed to be feeling better, he thought, though he noticed the bump on her head was still blue and swollen. Soon she came back with his biscuits and a refill of sweet cider. Then she sat down across from him with both elbows on the table and her chin resting in her palms watching him eat. Roth recognized the look on her face immediately. He just smiled and ate, and she smiled back.

"This is mighty good," he complimented with a mouth full of chicken and peas. "I think you'll make some lucky young fellow a fine wife someday. I wager a lovely young lady like yourself can't keep the fellows away." Roth glanced up at her to see her reaction.

"No," she said smiling, almost flirtatiously. "All the boys I know are so foolish and silly. They're no fun at all. They just spend their time trying to show off and impress me. I think they're just plain silly." She continued watching him eat.

Roth was certain now that she had become infatuated with him. Perhaps she thought he had rescued her last night. There was no telling what Darwin had told her. He didn't need this to deal with. She was a nice girl, but he didn't think Darwin would approve. He had other priorities right now, so he pretended not to notice.

"I'm glad to see you're feeling better. That was a nasty bump you got last night."

"I'm feeling a bit better today. I wanted to thank you for scaring away that awful man last night." A trace of her

shyness returned.

"Well, that's about all I'm good for, scaring people away," Roth teased. She giggled and her shyness disappeared again.

"This is really good," Roth said again. That seemed to please her very much. Her lips spread into a huge grin.

He decided he had to do something about this before it got out of hand. "I don't want you to think I'm not enjoying your company, but won't your father miss you in the kitchen?" he asked her.

"Oh." She seemed to wake up from a dream. "Yes, I best get back to work." She smiled again and excused herself, noticing her father watching from the bar. She hurried back to the kitchen.

Roth soon lost himself in other thoughts as he ate. After all, he had a lot to think about. As he was finishing, Darwin came over and asked if he would like some dessert.

Roth took the opportunity to quietly relay his concern for Jennifer. He told Darwin that she was obviously infatuated with him for some reason, and he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"I'm glad to see you have no designs on Jenny," Darwin said rather seriously. "You're a fine fellow, I'm sure, but I had not thought of you as a son-in-law. I noticed her looking at you and I was beginning to worry. I will do what I can to discourage her."

"Thank you," Roth said. "She's a very sweet girl, and I really would like not to hurt her feelings."

Darwin left it at that and returned to his work. When Roth finished eating, Dyaganos still had not arrived, so he went upstairs to check his room. Everything was in order. The bed was made, and there was a flower on the pillow. Roth frowned. What would he do?

Roth went down the stairs again just as Dyaganos walked into the Hedgehog's Fancy wearing a different robe, though it was quite similar to the other one he'd covered in mud and moss. Roth noticed his sandals appeared to be new too. The old man looked much better than when Roth last saw him.

"Ah, there you are, my good fellow," Dyaganos said when he saw Roth coming down the stairs. "Here are those herbs you wanted. I wondered why you hadn't been by to pick them up this morning, so I thought I'd bring them to you before you left town. I'm glad I caught you." He handed Roth a small cloth bag and winked.

"Oh, well thank you," Roth replied, playing along, not quite sure what to do.

Then Dyaganos frowned. "Oh my, I just realized, I forgot the Wigwag roots. My wits must be failing me. I hate to trouble you, but would you mind coming with me to get them? I really do have some other things I must be busy with this afternoon and I'm afraid I don't have time to run back here with it."

Roth realized now what the old man wanted him to do and replied, "Certainly, I have plenty of time. Won't you lead the way." He gestured toward the door. They both went outside and started for the apothecary.

"You catch on fast, my friend. My judgment of you has proven most accurate," Dyaganos said as they walked.

Roth noticed the old man was still a bit ginger in his stride, as if his bunions were bothering him. "In contrast to your opinion of me," Roth told Dyaganos as they crossed the street, "I must admit, I am having a great deal of trouble deciding just what to make of you."

"I hope what I have to tell you will help you form a more firm opinion of me," Dyaganos admitted. "I think you will be pleased." His tone sounded more hopeful than confident.

They entered the shop by the front door for once, and Dyaganos wasted no time. He locked the door and led Roth directly to the study. Roth saw where a wedge of wood now served as a lock for the back door.

Dyaganos had the curtain open, and the sunlight made the room appear a bit friendlier, though not as cozy as it looked by the firelight last night. Roth realized it was cleaner than he'd imagined. The books were all back in place and the desk was straightened.

The old man sat down in his big red chair. Roth stood next to the mantle and saw the large red stone was still missing. In fact, the glass bell it had been under was nowhere to be seen.

"Please have a seat my friend. I think you're going to need it," Dyaganos told him, but Roth had other plans. He walked over to the desk and looked at the floor behind it. There it was, just as before — two blackened footprints with a black ring around it, burned into the wooden floor.

"What is this?" Roth almost demanded.

"Be patient, please. You're so impatient. I'm going to tell you that and much more, if you will please sit down."

Roth walked back to the bench and sat.

"Now, I have two questions for you. Why were you in my shop this morning, and why did you break in my back door?"

Roth expected that was coming. "When I came over this morning as we agreed, you were not in. The place was locked. I wondered if perhaps that thief came back and did you in. He was apparently over at the tavern last night to steal some food and knocked Jennifer out."

"Little Jenny?" Dyaganos asked, sitting up quickly. "Is she hurt?"

"Not really. She has a nasty bump on the head, but she's already back in the kitchen. Incidentally, she's making eyes at me and I don't know quite what to do about it."

"I'm glad to know she's alright. I think of her as something of a granddaughter, you know."

"Well, as I was saying, that thief showed up, and knowing that, I figured he might be up to no good over here too. There was no telling what he might do. So, I decided I best check on you. I'm sorry about the back door. It was the only way I could get in without attracting attention. You said you didn't want anyone to see us together."

"Well, that seems logical enough. I appreciate your concern."

"To be frank with you, I was concerned that thief might have taken your red stone. It was gone when I came in."

"Yes, yes. Well, I had it with me. Since we're on that topic," Dyaganos said as he reached down the neck of his robe and pulled the red gem out by its string so Roth could see it, "my great red stone, you see, has much to do with what I want to talk to you about. First, let's start with the footprints over there behind my desk."

Half an hour later they were still at it, Dyaganos mostly talking, and Roth mostly listening, as he was almost too dumbstruck to do otherwise. Roth learned about the old man's close call with the Zadi, and the stone's power. Dyaganos reminded Roth of all they had talked about earlier, about Veldegarr, and Roth's story, and Roth's obvious desire to find his grandfather. Roth listened patiently to all this with few questions. When Dyaganos finally felt he had laid the groundwork well enough, he was ready to spring the rest of his plan on Roth.

"So, how am I doing?" he asked Roth. "What's your opinion of me now?"

Roth just looked at him. Finally he said, "You're not so bad, I suppose. You have been very helpful. This is the first time in six years I have really had any leads or information about my grandfather. The luck of running into someone who may have the stone used by the Red Dragon to enchant my grandmother is a real link to my past. I don't quite know where to go from here, though. I guess I'll just keep looking." Then he added, "I don't suppose you would part with the stone, would you?"

"I'm afraid not, at least not willingly. Besides, you wouldn't know how to use it, and even I am only beginning to learn. I've been studying magic for twenty-seven years, and I have a lot yet to learn."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to use it for magic. I'd just use it as best I could to find out information about my grandfather. I could..."

Roth paused a moment as the figures went through his mind. "Wait a minute. You said you'd been studying magic for only twenty-seven years? You must have started quite late in life. What did you do before that?"

"I'm afraid I don't follow you. That's all I've ever done. I completed my herbal apprenticeship when I was twenty and struck out on my own. I've been dabbling in magic ever since, for the past twenty-seven years. Twenty and twenty-seven is forty-seven."

"Oh, come now, you don't expect me to believe that. You're at least sixty-five, if you're a day."

Dyaganos laughed. "Ah, well, you know, it's all part of the business. One must look the part. My bald head is natural, mind you, but the hair, well, let's say I have some herbs and potions that keep it grayer than it really is. My beard has been grayer than my hair for years, so I keep the hair looking gray to go along with it. I do have a bit of theatrical flair. You won't fault me for that, will you?"

Roth was quite skeptical of this to say the least. "Well, what about yesterday, when you were chasing that thief? You only ran fifty feet, and you were so out of breath I thought you were going to pass out."

"My dear fellow, I thank you for the compliment. My acting is better than I thought. As I said, I must keep up the image. You can't be a tailor and walk around in rags. You wouldn't have any business. You can't be a horse trader and ride an old nag. People would think you were a horrible judge of horses. A wise old herbalist should certainly look like one. Don't you agree?"

"Alright, I see your point," Roth told him. "That doesn't solve my problem though. If you won't part with the stone, then I suppose I will just have to keep searching. At least I now know Veldegarr has silver hair. That is something to go on."

"Would you like to have the stone with you?" Dyaganos offered.

"Well certainly, but you said 'no.'"

"Not exactly. I said I wouldn't part with it. However, if I were to come along with you, you could have your wish."

"Come along with me?" Roth repeated. "Where?"

"Oh, everywhere. You know, traveling companions, you and I. Ad-ven-tur-ing," the old man answered, exaggerating the word to make it sound exciting.

"Hah. I don't think so. I'm really more of a fighter than an adventurer. You're too old to be wandering around with me when I..."

"Well, that's interesting," Dyaganos jumped in, cutting him off. "Last night you claimed to be an adventurer, but no matter. I don't care whether you can decide what it is you do. However, it is imperative that you decide what it is you want. You do want to find your grandfather, don't you? You've been wandering around aimlessly for six years now, fighting, or adventuring, or whatever it is you claim to do, but you haven't really been looking. You were lucky yesterday. Something important just jumped out at you. You found me, or rather, I found you. How can you ever really hope to find what you're looking for unless you truly look for it? Together we can do it, you and I. You're a fighter, and smart as a whip. As for myself, well, I have, let's say, wisdom, and I know herbs and medicine. I know a little magic, and with this stone, there's no telling what I can do. I would never go on such a quest without someone like you, and you would have a far better chance with help from someone like me."

The old man got up and started pacing. "Together, we can find what we're after. Everybody needs a friend. It was fate that brought us together, don't you see? Without you, I would never have realized the power of this stone. Now we can use the stone in our quest."

Dyaganos stopped right in front of Roth and looked him in the eye. "You and I. What do you say?"

Roth just stared at him for a moment. "You said we could find what we were after. I want to find my grandfather, but why would you want to find my grandfather? What's in it for you?"

"That's what I want too, sort of. If we find your grandfather, then maybe I can learn the spell he used on the dragon. Do you know how special a spell like that must be? Think of it, a spell that someone who knows nothing about magic can use — a spell that can defeat a great Red Dragon, single-handedly. A spell so powerful it would make this stone look like a worthless piece of glass. That's my interest," the old man confessed.

He started pacing again. "I want to improve my magic. I'm forty-seven years old. If I don't take this chance now, I'll spend the rest of my miserable life wandering around looking for roots and leaves, and dabbling here in my study all alone. This is the adventure of a lifetime for someone who wants to learn magic."

He stopped again in front of Roth, who was still seated on the bench. "So, there. That's it. All my Mingo cards are on the table. I can't do it by myself, and neither can you. You know I'm not a bad sort. Maybe a little foolish, but the simple, slow pace of life in this little village has made me a little lazy. I'll get better. On the road, I'll have to be smarter, now won't I?"

He looked Roth squarely in the eye once more. "How about it?" He held out his hand, offering a handshake to seal their deal. Dyaganos hoped Roth would take it. It meant everything to him.

Chapter Seven



Trailing the Stone

The Red Boar in Tanner's Crossroad contained the roughest looking collection of cutthroats, thieves and general scum of society that he'd seen in a long time. He really didn't fit in here, but he wasn't worried about it, and he certainly wasn't afraid of them. The ale was terrible, and the smell of sweat was almost more than he could stand. Still, he took every opportunity to tell his story. Sometimes, like tonight, he would even resort to hinting at a reward for information. With a bunch of backstabbing slime warts like these, the smell of money was all they needed to jog their memories, or imaginations, as was often the case. That wasn't a problem, since he could easily tell who was lying, and who was being honest, if they even knew the meaning of the word.

He had eyed everyone in the place, but no one had tried to catch his. It had been an hour since he bought everyone a round and got their attention long enough to tell his story. Often his name was recognized, and that alone was enough to get people's attention. In here though, the only thing that caught anyone's attention was money, or women.

He decided his next move should be to go outside, where he could be caught alone. Sometimes they preferred anonymity to a crowded room. Apparently no one here was brave enough to say anything in front of this crowd.

The evening air was cool, but very pleasant. The warm autumn sun had been down for two hours, and the stars were out in force. He pulled back the hood of his robe for a better look at their twinkling light. No clouds tonight.

He strolled down the street several yards and stopped in front of a closed tailor's shop. He saw no one else on the street, except a drunk on the other side, propped up against the side of a building singing to himself. Then he heard a noise behind him. He turned around to see someone two dozen feet away down an alley.

"Psst. Psst." A hand with one finger crooked motioned to him. He casually walked down the dark alley toward the shadowy figure, which glanced around nervously.

"You say you got a reward for information about this dragon story?" a raspy voice asked from beneath a hood.

"That's what I said. It depends on the quality and quantity of the information. Good information gets you silver. Bad information gets you more trouble than you'll likely ever see, unless you're in the habit of irritating Red Dragons. In that case, I shall defer to the Red Dragon's temper. Mine is not quite as bad."

"How much?"

"That depends."

"You want the information or not?"

"That, my friend, is totally up to you. You have information. I have money. Which would you rather have?"

"Alright, tell me if this interests you. About six months ago, I obtained a large red gem from a wealthy merchant. He'd been going around bragging about it, how it was supposed to have dragon magic or something. Seems the man he bought it from told him a wild story about how it was found in the wreckage of a coach that its previous owner was paid to clean up and haul away. He told how a dragon came into town and smashed the coach, and said how people had been talking all that day about how this dragon had some sort of magic red ruby he used to turn somebody into gold. Am I getting warm?" he asked, not about to waste his time if the stranger wasn't interested in the rest of his tale.

"That fits nicely with the story I told in the tavern. I'm listening."

"Well, the fellow claims this man found this big red shiny stone under the wreckage, with a big gold chain, but the man sold the chain off it a few years earlier. So then this man needed some more money, and agreed to sell the stone. This stupid merchant had more money than he had sense, I guess, and bought the stone. I took the liberty of relieving him of it one night."

"So...?"

"So, how much is it worth to you?"

"What, the stone or the information?"

"The information, of course. I so..., I mean, which would you prefer?"

"I'm buying information, not jewelry."

"Which is worth more?"

"The stone is worth nothing to me. Information is."

"I thought that old moneygrubbing money changer got took for that fake stone. Well, I took that old magi..., I mean, I thought the thing might be worthless."

"I didn't say it was worthless. I said it's worth nothing to me. Do you have the stone?"

"What if I do?"

"Then tell me who you got it from. You can keep the stone."

"What if I don't have the stone?"

"Then tell me who had it, and tell me who has it now."

"What's it worth to you?"

"Two silver pieces."

"How much ale do you think I drank in there? I'm not drunk or crazy. Two gold pieces."

"Five silver. Take it or leave it."

"Fifteen."

"Obviously you value this information more than I. You can keep the information and I'll keep my money. Good evening."

He started to walk away when the raspy voice called, "Wait. Wait. Have it your way. What difference is it to me anyway? I already got my money for that stupid red stone. Show me the money."

"I'm not crazy either. The information first."

"Look, I'm not out here in this cool night air for my health."

"The price just fell to two silver pieces. My time is valuable, and you're now paying for it. The information."

"It's five silver or nothing."

"Then it's nothing." He reached out and grabbed a fist full of the thief's coat with one hand. Then he picked him off the ground as if he weighed nothing, pulling the hood away from his face with the other hand so he could see whom he was dealing with. "Now, I'll swap you your life for the information. Which would you rather keep?"

"Alright, alright," the thief angrily agreed, kicking his legs about, but getting nowhere. "I took it from a man called Sire Gaileywood. He's a crooked money changer about three day's ride west of here. The town is called Wiley's Keep. I sold it to some magician. I can't remember his name. It was Dygano, or Drygano, or, or, Dyagony, or something like that. He's got a medicine shop in Chelting. It's a small village, four days ride northwest of Wiley's Keep."

"When were you in Chelting?"

"Four, maybe five months ago. I don't remember exactly."

"Good enough." He slowly put the man down. "Your life is yours. Take good care of it. If I ever see your slimy face again, you better have a Red Dragon for a pet."

The thief turned and ran down the alley, knocking over a barrel, and quickly disappeared into the darkness.

He thought he knew that name. It sounded familiar, and he had always been good with names. It only took a minute until he put it together. "Dyaganos. Yes, that's it, Dyaganos."

*

It took three days for Dyaganos to get his affairs in order. He sold the building to Wattley, who had been eyeing it as a storehouse for some time. He used some of the money to buy two horses and tack, supplies and some

things for the trail he hadn't needed for many, many years. He was excited about the adventure he was about to undertake. He'd have been lying if he said he wasn't a bit nervous too, but Roth would be along. He knew Roth would be good protection. His stone would work pretty well too, as soon as he learned to get better control of it.

He simply couldn't carry all his books. The best ones he packed for travel. The rest he packed in a large chest, which Darvin agreed to store for him. He hoped to be back for them someday. Most of the herbs and medicines were sold to a young man Dyaganos knew, who had apprenticed and was ready to start his own shop. The village still needed an apothecary, and a beginner was better than no one at all.

Chelting buzzed with the news that old Dyaganos was leaving. The second most common piece of gossip, according to Darvin, was news that a foul-smelling man had been caught stealing a chicken, and was now running around in the forest with a pitchfork insignia on his buttocks.

Roth purchased a packhorse from Wattley, a beautiful dark bay gelding, with flaxen mane and tail, white socks and a white blaze, which he named Sunset. He stocked up on supplies, and sharpened his sword, and ate as much of Jenny's good cooking as he could stuff down. He exercised Graymist every day and worked with Sunset to get familiar with him.

Roth could hardly avoid Jennifer, who was upset that he was leaving. She was even more upset that sweet old Dyaganos was leaving. She'd known him ever since she could remember, and thought of him as a grandfather since she'd never known her real grandparents. It was almost more than she could bear. Dyaganos gave Darvin some money to put in Jenny's dowry. He wasn't sure he'd be back here for her wedding, whenever that day might come. It was the least he could do. He wished he could do more.

The evening before they were to leave, Roth and Dyaganos were in the old man's study, as they had been every evening since their agreement. It really looked bare now. All the books were packed away, and the room wasn't the same without them, but it was a private place where they could talk and plan. They had to have some idea of what they would do first. They discussed all sorts of options, and finally agreed to head north.

"I've heard of a place north of here where they have jousting matches and a festival every year. It's called Bane's Meadow. It may even be where the Red Dragon in your story crossed paths with your grandfather," Dyaganos suggested. "That's as good a place as any to start, don't you think?"

"Well, when do they have this festival?" Roth asked.

"Oh, about this time, in the autumn. I think it won't be for another two or three weeks though. We've got plenty of time to get there, providing the weather stays good."

Dyaganos broke out some wine for them in celebration of their new adventure. The old man said he made it himself. It was certainly very good, if a bit heavy. Apparently there were advantages to being familiar with the green growing things one can find in the forest.

"This isn't bad," Roth said.

"How about a toast, to us?" Dyaganos proposed. "May a Silver Dragon befriend us, and his aura shield us."

"Here, here," Roth chimed in as they clicked their mugs. "We should be so lucky."

Dyaganos took a sip and said, "I'm glad you like the wine. It's made from dragonberries. They're very rare, you know. They're a deep wine red color. When they're ripe, the leaves split from their tip to about half way down to the stem. The edges of the leaves are scalloped and veined, and when the leaf spreads, it looks for all the world like dragon's wings. That's where they got their name."

"An interesting story," Roth commented as he took another sip.

"Legend has it they only grow from dragon droppings," the old man added.

Roth's mouthful of wine spewed everywhere, and he nearly choked. Dyaganos got a hearty laugh out of it.

"Heavens, man, it's only a legend. Do you think I'd drink it if I thought it were true?" Dyaganos comforted him, knowing full well that it was not a legend at all. He specialized in herbs and green growing things. It was his business to know.

Shortly, a knock came at the front of the shop. "Who could that be?" Dyaganos wondered aloud.

"Maybe it's that Silver Dragon that's supposed to befriend us," Roth teased.

Dyaganos went to the front door, and came back with Jennifer. Her face held a cheerful smile, but her eyes gave her away.

"Miss Jennifer," Roth greeted her and stood up. "How nice of you to brighten our evening. Please, sit."

She sat down on the bench next to him and pulled a small yellow pouch from the pocket of her apron. Dyaganos took his usual place in the big red chair, which had not yet been picked up by its new owner. She reached

into the bag and pulled something out. Cupping both hands together, she held them up to the light from the fireplace. In her hands were two identical miniature sculptures of a dragon in flight. The tiny trinkets were silver, about an inch and a half long, and each had a chain.

"There's one for each of you." She got up and slipped one over the old man's neck and then turned to do the same for Roth. Though she was smiling, Roth could see the gleam of tears on her cheeks.

"They're for good luck, you know. I wouldn't want anything to happen to either of you."

Roth didn't quite know what to say. Dyaganos stood up and gave Jennifer a hug.

"This is very nice, Jenny. I will treasure it." He patted her on the shoulders. "There now, don't cry dear. Before you know it, I will be back, and I'll tell you all about our adventure. I'll bring you back the most wonderful treasure you've ever seen. I promise."

She was sobbing quietly now. Finally she sat back down next to Roth. He put one arm around her shoulders. She turned and put her face on his shoulder and sobbed even more.

"My goodness, Miss Jennifer. There's no need to cry." Roth looked over at Dyaganos and mouthed silently, "Now what do I do?"

The old man just made a face and shrugged his shoulders, obviously wondering the same thing.

"Thank you for this wonderful gift, Jennifer. I will think of you every time I see it. We were just talking about how nice it would be to have a Silver Dragon befriend us in our travels, and here you come in with these precious trinkets. It appears our wish has already been granted."

She looked up at Roth with her big green tearful eyes and smiled. Roth realized he had finally said something right.

*

The next morning they packed their horses, then rode to the Hedgehog's Fancy where many of the villagers came to say good-bye to Dyaganos. Roth sat astride Graymist, his chain mail gleaming in the morning sun. Jennifer looked as if she had never seen anything so wonderful in her life. Roth leaned over to quietly say his good-bye to her and handed her a small gold ring with a green gem. He'd had it for some time. It had been part of his payment for services rendered in one of his adventures, and it didn't fit him. Besides, he thought it would go nicely with Jennifer's eyes.

"A little something for your dowry," Roth told her as he smiled a big reassuring smile. She smiled as best she could with tears again in her eyes. He shook Darwin's hand and said, "You watch after this little lady, now." "Oh, I will, and you take care of old Dyaganos. He's going to need it," Darwin teased. "Come on old man, let's slay some ogres!" he called to Dyaganos in jest. "Oh, after you," came the reply. Then they turned their mounts and rode out, waving to the gathered crowd as they went.

Chapter Eight



Wiley's Keep

The clerk looked up when he heard the office door opening. In stepped a tall man wearing a plain gray robe with its hood pulled over his head.

"What can I do for you, my good man?" grunted the obese clerk from behind the desk.

"I'm looking for Sire Gaileywood," said the man as he stopped in front of the desk. The glaring sunlight from the open doorway cast a deep shadow inside the hood, making it impossible to see the man's face against the light.

"If you'll wait here I'll see if he's busy. Whom shall I say is wishing to speak with him?" he asked.

"Just tell him it has to do with some jewelry."

"Some jewelry. I see. Perhaps you're looking for the wrong person, my friend. The best jeweler in town is Master Humbolt. He's four blocks south on Tinkers Road. This is..."

"I know where I am, and I know who I wish to speak with," the man said bluntly.

"Yes, well, then just wait here please."

The clerk disappeared through a door in the back of the office. There were voices. Then the clerk and another man came out. The other man wore fine clothes, appearing well-to-do.

"I am Sire Gaileywood. I don't believe I caught your name," he said with a tentative smile, and offered his hand.

The stranger kept his hands in his robe sleeves, and said quite bluntly, "I think we should speak in private, Sire Gaileywood."

Gaileywood wasn't smiling now. He withdrew his hand. "What is so important that I should speak privately with a man whose name I don't know, and whose business I don't know?"

"If you wish your employees to know your private affairs, we can talk here," was the reply.

"You said something about jewelry. If you're selling jewelry, I'm not interested," Gaileywood grunted.

"I bring you information about some missing jewelry."

Gaileywood's face changed, and he turned to the clerk. "I'll be busy with.., with.. this fellow for awhile. See that we're not disturbed, Jenkins."

"Certainly, Sire," Jenkins replied, realizing something unusual was going on.

"Come with me." Gaileywood motioned for the stranger to follow him. They went down a hallway, and into the room at the end. Gaileywood closed the door behind them, and motioned for the stranger to have a seat. Then Gaileywood took his seat behind the desk and eyed the stranger across a large open ledger in front of him. The shelves around the room contained many more such ledgers, and stacks of parchments. Several wooden boxes were stacked along one wall. Otherwise, the room was quite plain. A small high window with metal bars let light into the room. Gaileywood looked at the stranger and said nothing. After half a minute of silence, Gaileywood spoke.

"You say you have information about some missing jewelry."

The stranger pulled his hood back now and said, "I understand a large red stone was stolen from you several months ago. Am I correct?"

"My great red ruby. Yes." Gaileywood pulled closer to the desk and leaned forward. "Do you know where it

is?"

"Perhaps. I have some information on its whereabouts, which may or may not be accurate. That's not why I'm here though."

"What do you mean? You said you had information about it. That's all I want to know. Where is it?"

"Perhaps you would like to know who stole it?"

Gaileywood's eyes squinted, and he gritted his teeth. "If I find the no good scoundrel that stole my great red ruby I'll., why, I'll.," he yelled, and pounded the desk with his fist.

"What you do with the thief is none of my concern," the stranger said calmly. He had not so much as batted an eye at Gaileywood's outburst. "I propose a trade. Do you wish to know the thief who stole it and his whereabouts?"

"Well, of course I do. I'll cut his fingers off one at a time until he tells me where it is."

"As I said, that is none of my concern," he said coldly. "Are you interested in a trade?"

"What sort of trade do you have in mind?" Gaileywood asked, thoughts of revenge and mayhem running through his mind as he spoke.

"I simply wish to know where you yourself got the stone. In return, I will tell you who stole it from you."

Gaileywood smiled and sat back in his chair. "Well, your bargain sounds most reasonable."

He had been afraid this information was going to cost money, big money. He didn't like parting with his money. This stranger though was being quite unselfish, or stupid.

"Then you don't wish to also tell me where my great red gem is?" he asked once more.

"As I said, I don't necessarily know. You would do better getting the information straight from the horse's mouth, would you not? When you find the thief, you can ask him. Perhaps you can be more persuasive than I."

That did make good sense, Gaileywood admitted to himself. He could be most persuasive when necessary. "So, where might I find this worthless scoundrel, my friend?"

"I would not consider him worthless. He does have information you want," the tall silver-haired stranger noted without expression. "Now, as to our agreement, where did you obtain the stone for yourself?"

Gaileywood grinned too. "Perhaps you could first tell me where this thief is."

"I see my forthrightness in coming here is not appreciated." The stranger pulled his hood back over his head as if to go.

"Now there, my friend. Don't take it personally. As you can see, bargaining is my business. It is my nature to get the best bargain I can. You understand, of course. I can see you are trustworthy, so I shall tell you where I got the stone. I bought it right here in town, from Master Humbolt. He's an honest man, I assure you."

Gaileywood smiled, waiting for the stranger's half of the bargain.

What Gaileywood had said didn't exactly match the information given to him by the thief, the stranger thought to himself. Of course, the thief would only know what he'd heard.

"You may find your thief in Tanner's Crossroad. At least that's where he was last night."

"Yes, I know the place," Gaileywood said before a look of puzzlement crossed his face. "So how could you know where he was last night? Tanner's Crossroad is five days from here."

"That's my business," the stranger said with a grin. "He said he stole the gem from you, several months ago I gather. He called you a moneygrubbing old money changer, I believe. I found him in a tavern full of cutthroats called the Red Boar. I asked around and was told his name is Toomey. He has a big scar across his chin, black hair, one good eye, and a slight limp. You shouldn't have any trouble finding him. It wasn't hard to find out who he was. Not even his fellow thieves care to have him around. He apparently visits the Red Boar quite often. That's about the only place they'll tolerate him."

The stranger stood up and asked, "Are you satisfied with our bargain?"

Gaileywood stood and walked toward the stranger. "I'm not sure I believe you. I don't see how you could know where this Toomey was last night, being that far away. If I find out you're lying to me, I will make sure you regret it," he said with a nasty grin.

The stranger smiled back. "I have what I came for. I'll be on my way. Do not worry. You will get what's coming to you soon enough." He turned and let himself out the door.

Behind him he heard Gaileywood yell to the clerk, "Jenkins, get Worley and two of his men in here, now!" Jenkins preceded the stranger out the front door in a dead run.

The stranger wondered if he'd made a mistake telling what he knew. Assuming Gaileywood's henchmen could find Toomey and learn from him that Dyaganos now had the stone, there was no chance they could reach Chelting

before he could. It would take them many days. Tanner's Crossroad was to the east, in Kalaron, and they would have to backtrack through Wiley's Keep again to get to Chelting. The old magician would be safe for at least three weeks.

On the short walk to the jeweler's establishment he was surrounded by a bustling crowd of merchants haggling prices, and workmen carrying boxes and sacks and baskets in every direction. Carts and carriages, horses and mules zigzagged around one another like bees in a hive. The great river harbor on the edge of town made Wiley's Keep an ideal trade center. He felt this might prove to be a good place to gather information. It could even provide some opportunities to spread his story.

Master Humbolt's establishment was on a main road. A fine carriage was parked directly in front of the jeweler's shop. As he reached the establishment's front door he could see inside to a parlor with fine furniture, as if the man lived here. There was even a doorman standing guard inside the door.

When he entered, the doorman stepped in front of him and said smugly, "May I help you?" His tone was not one of sincerity.

"I wish to speak with Master Humbolt." He started to step around the doorman, who immediately moved to block his path.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. He's quite busy. Perhaps the jeweler across the street could better serve you. He would likely have something more in your price range," the doorman noted, making no effort to hide his sarcasm.

A hand came out of the gray robe's sleeve and slowly waved in front of the doorman's face, fingers wiggling. "Master Humbolt will see me now," was all he said.

"Certainly, Master Humbolt will see you now," came a dull, impersonal reply.

The doorman led him back through some richly decorated curtains and down a short wide hallway with six doors on each side. Most were open, revealing identical cubicles behind each door. They were lushly decorated, like the front parlor. Each contained a small table and three chairs, all made of highly polished fine wood. The walls were hung with tapestries and silver candleholders. The back wall of each had a tiny barred window that let in daylight. This was certainly a very high-class establishment for only the most prosperous of clients.

They stopped at the end of the hall in front of a heavy door made of fine polished wood like the furniture in the cubicles. The wood framing was inlaid with panels of marble.

The doorman knocked and said quite unenthusiastically, "Master Humbolt, someone is here to see you."

"I cannot be disturbed right now, I told you, Woodley. No visitors," came an irritated reply.

The doorman opened the door and bowed to the stranger, motioning him into the room. Master Humbolt jerked upright behind his desk.

"Woodley, what's the meaning of this?" But the doorman had already shut the door and left. "Woodley, take this man out of here. Woodley."

Failing this he looked at the robed stranger and frowned furiously. "I'm terribly busy with a client. You must leave at once."

"Are you questioning the judgment of your own employees?" asked the stranger. "Please, I mean you no harm." He reached up and pulled back his hood. "I merely wish to speak with you about a great red stone."

Humbolt's first fears, that he was about to be robbed, were allayed somewhat by his visitor's calm demeanor. "I don't have time for this. I have a very important client waiting."

"Then perhaps I can wait here while you finish with your client. I have no intention of interfering with your livelihood. Please continue what you were doing. I'll just have a seat. I'm in no hurry."

"You cannot wait here. This is my private office."

"Then it is the ideal place for us to discuss business. It is quite nice. I'm sure I will be very comfortable." He took a seat on a large padded couch, and calmly looked up at Humbolt, who was beside himself with indignation.

"You'll have to leave. I'll have you..."

The stranger waved a hand and said, "You will go about your business."

Humbolt immediately ignored the man on the couch. He left the office, went down the hall and entered one of the closed cubicles. In a few minutes, he and a finely dressed lady came out of the cubicle, laughing and talking pleasantly. They said good-bye, and the doorman showed the lady through the curtains at the end of the hall.

Humbolt returned to his office, closing the door behind him and took a seat at his desk. He turned to the stranger and said, "Please excuse the interruption. Now, what was it we were discussing?"

"Yes, Master Humbolt. I was saying we needed to talk about a great red stone."

"Oh, heavens, I'm afraid you'll have to discuss that with the man who bought it. That is if we are discussing the same gem. Oh, silly of me, of course we are. There could only be one of those. Could you describe it for me, just to be sure."

"I'm sure we are discussing the same item."

"Then I'm afraid I cannot help you. I no longer have that particular item."

"Where did it go?"

"It was sold some months ago."

"Sold to whom?"

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to discuss such things. I am an honest man, and I keep business between my customers and myself quite private. If I were to do otherwise, I would have no business. You can understand that, can you not?"

"Oh, I do. Then suppose I told you that Sire Gaileywood referred me to you. Would that make any difference?"

"Oh, it might if I were sure he spoke to you of his own free will."

"Well, that's not important. What is important is where you got the stone."

"Why would you want to know such a thing, and why would I want to tell you?"

"Oh, let us say I am looking for someone, and the origin of the stone would be helpful in finding him. I have no interest in the stone itself. If I did, searching for previous owners wouldn't help me, now would it?"

Humbolt thought for a moment. "I suppose not," he answered. "What does this stone have to do with it?"

"I'm glad you asked that question. Could you recommend a good tavern for tonight?"

"Tavern? Why? I'm not one to go roaming about in taverns."

"Oh, certainly, but perhaps you've heard of one that is reputable, and has good food that you could recommend to me. I will be happy to answer all your questions tonight."

"Oh, well, I suppose the Goose and Vineyard is the finest in this town. Why do you ask?"

"Dress appropriately, and meet me there tonight just after dark. I'll be wearing a silver tunic." He stood up and pulled the hood over his head. "I'll see you tonight then?"

"Uh, certainly, right after dark."

The robed stranger left quickly. Humbolt stood there for a moment with a puzzled look on his face.

"Why did I just make an appointment with a man I don't know, at a tavern I don't want to go to, for answers to questions I don't remember asking?"

He puzzled over this the remainder of the day, and at dark that evening he was seated across from a man in a silver tunic at the Goose and Vineyard.

Chapter Nine



Rock Climbing

Roth and Dyaganos had been on the road for three days. The terrain had not changed from the rolling hills, rocky outcroppings and occasional thin woods of Dunn Vassar where they started. Until they reached the denser forests and steeper hills of the Cedarbough Rise the scenery would remain the same.

In those three days travel they learned much about each other. Dyaganos was quite talkative at first, but finally the initial excitement wore off. He quit chattering on so much and took more notice of his surroundings, watching for plants and trees that either were herbs or grew where such plants could be found. Several times they stopped while the old man trotted into the brush. Usually he emerged with some kind of plant, or root, or leaves, or a colorful flower, which he usually stuffed into one of his many bags. Sometimes he would just stand there and eat it, offering some to Roth, who usually declined.

Roth wished the old man wouldn't go prancing off on these forays into the underbrush. Roth had traveled enough to know it was not a good idea. He told Dyaganos this on many occasions, but the old man was quite sure of himself. "You're not my mother," he usually said, or else he reminded Roth he was old enough to be his father. He was good-natured about it, but made it clear he could take care of himself. Roth, on the other hand, was not so sure.

This day had started nicely enough, but about noon the skies darkened, and soon a storm hit that quickly drove them to shelter. They found a large overhang on one of the immense rock outcroppings so prevalent in the region. It was on the downwind side and protected them and the horses from the driving rain. The lightning was fearful, and the thunder was deafening. It soon became evident the storm was not going to subside, so they made camp and settled in for the night.

"This storm is one only an ogre would enjoy," Roth noted as they unpacked the horses. He almost had to yell to be heard over the noise of the storm.

The ground sloped downhill away from them, so the torrents of rain crashing from the rock's overhang ran away into the adjacent woods. It was almost like being behind a waterfall. There were even dry limbs and a dead tree sheltered by the overhang.

"We were lucky to find such a good spot," Dyaganos commented as they gathered wood to build a fire. "Maybe the tiny silver dragons Jennifer gave us are working."

Soon they were cozy, backed up against the comforting solidity of the rock, with a blazing fire in front of them.

"Too bad we don't have any meat to go with this fire," Dyaganos wished aloud.

"Ah hah, so you admit your strange leaves and bitter roots aren't all they're cracked up to be," Roth teased him.

Dyaganos just rolled his eyes at the warrior.

"A hot meal would be nice, I'll admit, but I'm not going looking in this weather. If you'll keep watch, I think I'll get a few winks," Roth said, then turned over and curled up on his bedroll with his blanket as a pillow.

Dyaganos sat there watching the sky and the lightning. It was an amazing light show. He thought if only a magician could do that, he could scare the wits out of just about anyone. He occupied himself by studying one of his spellbooks. After some time his mind drifted off, imagining how they would find Roth's grandfather. Maybe he

could get that amazing spell or whatever the magic was Dazman used on the Red Dragon. That would be something.

After about two hours the lightning subsided, but the rain set in even heavier than before. The rain didn't let up until late afternoon, when the clouds began moving out. The relative quiet jostled Roth from his slumber.

"I see you've come back from the land of dreams," the old man said.

"That was some good sleep," Roth mumbled through a yawn while stretching and sitting up. "Nothing like a storm to put you under, huh?"

"I wouldn't know. I had to stand watch, remember?" Dyaganos replied.

Eventually a low sun peeked out on the western horizon as the clouds dissipated. Raindrops sparkled on everything, and the orange sun and purple sky reflected in the pools and puddles left behind by the storm's deluge.

"Well, perhaps I can make it up to you. I'll see if I can find some meat like you wanted to go with that fire. The ground is wet so I can probably sneak up on something easily, provided I can find something at all. I best get going before the light gets too weak."

Roth strung and loaded his crossbow, and gave it to Dyaganos. "You know how to use this?" he asked him.

"I'm not such a good aim, but I can shoot it."

"Alright, but just don't shoot me with it."

Roth took his longbow and quiver, and his great sword, and pulled his cloak over his shoulders against the cool air and water dripping from the trees. Then he headed into the wooded area that started several dozen yards down the hill in front of them. Dyaganos watched him disappear into the trees. Then he put more wood on the fire in anticipation of a hot meal.

While he waited, he walked around the immediate area to see if there were any interesting herbs he could spot here. He found nothing of interest until he discovered some wild Pigroot. He began digging in the wet dirt, and found seven good-sized ones.

"These," he said aloud, "will be good for dinner, whether Roth finds meat or not."

He put them in the sack he brought for just such a purpose and turned to head back to camp when he heard a rustling in the brush. "That you, Roth?"

There was no answer. Then he heard a grunt and immediately knew two things — it was not Roth, and he was in big trouble. He struck out in a dead run for the camp, hoping against hope he could get to the crossbow in time.

Wild boar love Pigroot. That's where it got its name. They don't need an excuse to attack either, so an intruder rooting in a patch of Pigroot already claimed by another was more than sufficient cause for immediate challenge. Luckily, Dyaganos reached the edge of the camp by the time the boar broke through the brush where he had been digging. Without breaking stride the boar turned and headed straight for him.

Dyaganos reached the crossbow sitting on top of their pile of bundles and grabbed it. His heart pounded as if it would explode. He knelt on one knee and aimed at the charging beast, only now realizing how big it was. When it came within thirty feet, he fired. The bolt caught the boar's left shoulder and spun it around from the force, but it turned and kept coming. Dyaganos let out a yell, dropped the crossbow, and ran back toward the rock. He jumped for a foothold and grabbed at a crack in the rock over his head, pulling his knees up high just as the boar came by. The boar missed the old man's legs, but Dyaganos slipped, and yelled again. The boar turned and came back, grunting wildly. Dyaganos scrambled up again, trying to get a good foothold, but his wet sandals were slipping. Once again the boar whizzed by as he pulled his feet up. It missed again. He knew if he couldn't find a foothold, he was a dead man. There was nowhere else to go.

The horses were tied, and were nervously jumping about, wild-eyed, trying to see what was going on, except for Graymist who just fidgeted nervously because of the other three horses. The boar turned and came back. Then it squealed and jerked to one side, stumbling to its knees. The old man looked back to see Roth some fifty feet away with his bow drawn and ready again. The boar turned its attention to Roth now and charged, still grunting wildly. Dyaganos ran to try to load the crossbow, but he was shaking so violently he couldn't get it strung. Roth let fly another arrow. The boar squealed again and rolled over, but again it was on its feet, charging Roth for a second time. He drew another arrow and let go with the boar no more than ten feet from him this time. The boar stumbled to its knees again, kicking with its back legs, and then rolled over kicking on its side. Roth ran up and finished it with his sword.

The old man dropped to his knees in relief, shaking all over. Roth was shaking a bit too. He ran over to check on Dyaganos.

"Are you alright?"

"Oh, I've been better, my friend. Nothing's hurt though, except my nerves, and I think maybe a skinned knee and elbows where I tried to make like a goat and climb that rock. I'll be alright. I just need to regain my composure. Give me a minute to let my heart climb down into my chest, alright?"

Roth began to laugh. It helped relieve the tension.

"I was just coming back empty-handed. It was getting too dark to hunt when I heard you yell. I thought an ogre was after you."

"It may as well have been for all the good I was doing."

"Oh, to the contrary, I see you got him with the crossbow. Good shooting."

"Don't tease me. It didn't do anything but make him madder."

"Don't feel so bad. I've never brought one down with a single shot either. These boar take teamwork. We did it, you and I. Now, let's get some supper."

Dyaganos remembered the Pigroot now and pulled them out for Roth. "There, you see," Dyaganos teased, "you came back empty-handed, but old Dyaganos not only found the vegetables, he brought you the meat too. All you had to do was kill it."

"That's you all over, boar bait!" Roth exclaimed, pointing at Dyaganos. Then he made tusks with his fingers, grunted and charged the old man in jest. They both had a hearty laugh. They also had a hearty, but late supper. They cut a hind quarter and built a crude spit from saplings before they could cook it. For supper they fried some sliced meat since it would cook faster, and let the hind quarter roast on the spit. After supper, Roth sat up for half the night turning the meat over the fire. He built another fire for heat, and let the cook fire burn down to mostly coals to keep the meat slow cooking overnight. Then he went to sleep too, but woke several times to check the fire.

The night went quietly, and dawn broke bright and sunny. They had more of the pig for breakfast. Then they cut up as much of the roast quarter as they could take. Dyaganos salted pieces of it and wrapped them inside some large leaves for the trail. They finished packing the horses and set out north again. Dyaganos figured they had another day to the next village, and another six days to Bane's Meadow. It looked like they'd make it in plenty of time for the festival.

Other than another light morning shower, the day was pleasant and passed uneventfully. They dined on roast pig until they thought they would pop. Dyaganos even found some berries that served as a supper dessert. The whole day Roth talked about weapons as they rode, and gave pointers on shooting the crossbow, figuring Dyaganos would eventually need it again. For his part, Dyaganos shared what he knew of plants and herbs that he'd learned from many years of preparing his medicinal compounds.

It was a strange mix, these two. A young but seasoned warrior and an old medicine man that dabbled in magic. One would think they had absolutely nothing in common, and yet it seemed they complemented each other like wine and song. One dreamed of finding his grandfather and grandmother, and the other dreamed of learning some great magic.

Roth thought of the old man as eccentric. Yet, he was rather glad to have company on the trail. It was certainly different traveling with someone other than another fighter. Despite of the old man's lack of travel experience, he did know the outdoors. He knew plants too, and did occasionally find some wild onions or greens or other vegetables to add to their meals instead of having to dig into their supplies.

They camped that night on a rise that gave them an excellent view of the sunset. As the last faint pastels faded to darkness in the Western sky, a bright white moon, just one night past full, rose in the East. Before the moon could wash away the stars, Dyaganos began telling stories about patterns of stars he called constellations. This fascinated Roth, and he listened intently. Roth had heard of such things, but never took time to study these pictures in the sky. He knew the north star, and the morning star and all about the moon's phases, but these strange creatures drawn in the sky by stars was something else altogether. Roth was beginning to see how much knowledge the old man had picked up from his many years of studying books. It was more than Roth had originally given him credit for.

Roth listened as he gazed up at the twinkling lights, trying to follow the patterns Dyaganos drew with his finger in the firelight. Sometimes Roth could almost see the creatures Dyaganos drew over the stars, and sometimes he just couldn't see the connection, but he listened anyway. Besides, he had always enjoyed the stars. This was an interesting new way to look at them. Eventually though, as the moon rose higher, it made the stars harder to see. Finally Roth's eyelids became heavy and he went to sleep, dreaming of riding a great Silver Dragon across the sky, snatching stars

with his hands, one by one, and putting them into his saddlebags.

As they packed the horses at daybreak, Dyaganos pointed out what looked to be a village in the distance, situated on a high point of land. The morning sun caught it just right and made it easier to see. They could tell that the village bordered the change in terrain leading into the Cedarbough Rise.

"I think that's the village called Snowthistle. From there we climb the hills to the plateau, and then to Bane's Meadow and the festival," Dyaganos noted.

"Well, if the village is big enough for us to see from here, we'll surely find a room and bath," Roth replied. "I could really use a hot bath. I've never been that fond of cold water for washing."

"I'm sure the cold water has never been fond of you either," Dyaganos joked.

Soon they were off, expecting to be in Snowthistle before nightfall.

Chapter Ten



The Goose and Vineyard

The Goose and Vineyard was a far cry from the Red Boar. It was a very reputable place, widely known for its good food, fine wine and hearty ale. The quality of the food was reflected in the prices, and the prices dictated the clientele. One could even find ladies here. Their finery indicated their station in the community and the depth of their purses. The gentlemen accompanying them were of equal breeding and financial stature.

Humbolt wore a white-laced shirt of silk, with ruffled sleeves, a fine wool jacket with matching knee breeches of dark green, and rich golden yellow stockings. He sat looking across at the man in the silver tunic with silver hair with utter puzzlement, but the man simply smiled back.

"I'm so glad you could make it tonight, Master Humbolt. You have made an excellent choice for our dinner. This tavern is everything I heard it would be. If the food is half as good as the surroundings, I'm sure we'll have a marvelous time."

Humbolt tried not to stare at his host, or was this man his guest and he the host? He wasn't quite sure.

"Uh, yes indeed, my friend, the food is quite excellent. I would be most embarrassed if it were not, having recommended this place for tonight," Humbolt replied, though he wasn't at all sure why he was here. He certainly didn't want to look stupid. He must be here for some very good reason, since it wasn't often he went out on the town. He was very much a solitary man. He preferred the quiet of a good book and the comfort of his townhouse to the somewhat noisy atmosphere of chatter, laughter and music in such a place as this. So, why was he here?

"I'm afraid I don't know anyone here," Humbolt's guest lamented. "If you see anyone you know, I would appreciate being introduced. It's such a burden not knowing people in a public atmosphere like this."

"Why certainly," Humbolt replied. "Let's see, the gentleman over there with the red hair, the short one, that's Sire Moultree. He is vice mayor here. The balding gentleman in the dark blue is his assistant. Oh, and the lady there, the blonde one with the yellow dress, that's the vice mayor's..., uh, lady friend."

"Are any of these close friends of yours?" the stranger asked.

"Well, no, just customers and business acquaintances," Humbolt admitted. "Oh, but now there's a good friend of mine, there in the burgundy. That's my good friend Master Phinkley and his wife, Maria."

"Wonderful. Why don't you invite them over to join us?"

Humbolt started to, but suddenly realized he didn't know this man's name. How would he introduce them? Of greater concern, he still wondered why he was here in the first place. He was beginning to fear old age was getting the best of him. He simply couldn't seem to remember anything.

"It would be nice to have some of your close friends join us," the stranger prodded. "Our meal would be so much more enjoyable with a lady present."

"Oh, well, yes it would I suppose," Humbolt agreed. He got up and excused himself to invite his friends to his table. Humbolt came back shortly with his friends in tow. His companion stood up to greet Humbolt's new guests.

"Allow me to introduce my good friends, Master Phinkley and his most lovely wife, Maria," Humbolt said as he motioned to his dinner companion. "This is, uh..."

"Counselor Zeebak, emissary to the House of Dazman, Holder of the Silver Staff of Glenngolden," the

stranger jumped in, bowing elegantly and gently kissing the lady's hand. "I am honored by your presence."

"Indeed, the honor is ours," Phinkley bowed, most impressed with the sound of this man's title.

"Oh, indeed," was all Maria could say as she curtsied, afraid she would embarrass her friend Humbolt by not knowing the proper protocol for this royal guest of his. She was quite taken by his unusual silver tunic and silvery hair. By his dress he was obviously a foreigner and had traveled some distance.

"Yes, well, Counselor Zeebak is here to, uh...," Humbolt sputtered.

"Here in town on official business with Master Humbolt," Counselor Zeebak filled in. "Please, let us not talk business tonight. This is such a wonderful evening, and we have the company of such a lovely lady. We should not speak of business, we should enjoy ourselves."

Master Phinkley also took notice of how striking, and rather different, the Counselor's silver tunic was. He did indeed look very royal, and somewhat exotic with his matching silver hair, as if from another land altogether.

"Master Humbolt has been gracious enough to entertain me tonight on rather short notice. I wonder if I might impose upon you fine folks to join us for dinner." He turned to Humbolt. "I'm sure having some good friends with you would make for a most enjoyable evening."

"Most certainly," Humbolt replied. Now that the introductions were over with, he was actually very glad to have someone to talk to whom he knew. It was better than sitting here wondering why he was even here in the first place. "Please, join us."

"Perhaps you would honor me by sitting next to me," the Counselor said as he took Maria's hand and escorted her to the seat beside his. She was quite flattered by this. Phinkley was not above taking advantage of any royal connections that he could manage either.

Once they were settled, they ordered the first course of the meal. Their conversation quickly got around to Counselor Zeebak, as they were all quite curious about him, especially Humbolt. Though he good-naturedly avoided their inquiries for awhile, Zeebak was finally forced to relent in order to keep their curiosity from becoming too much of an issue.

"If you insist, I must preface by saying I do not like to discuss business on my social time. It is difficult for me to avoid talking about business when I am forced to talk about myself. If you must know, my work is that of finding and studying antiquities. I have to admit it is a very interesting business. Thus my visit to Master Humbolt's, you see. Of course, it is official business for the royal house, and I cannot discuss it. Needless to say, Master Humbolt cannot discuss it either. That leaves little about me to speak of other than personal things. I can think of nothing I enjoy more than fine wine, and beautiful roses. Since Maria has already mentioned her penchant for growing roses, I must learn more, as I have no time to enjoy such a wonderful pastime because I must travel about so extensively."

Thus, the Counselor turned the conversation away from himself, and spent most of his time making small talk with Maria, who was visibly pleased with this royal attention.

About halfway through their meal, Sire Gaileywood came in. He soon spotted Humbolt sitting with the man who had told him about his stolen gem. He was very curious why this man was having dinner with old Humbolt and Phinkley. The silver-haired stranger certainly had not seemed the socializing type, and he knew Humbolt loathed being in a crowd. Gaileywood wasted no time walking to their table, deciding this curiosity was certainly worth investigating on the pretense of speaking to Humbolt.

"Master Humbolt, how are you?" he asked. "I am surprised to see you are out enjoying yourself this evening."

The Counselor didn't see Gaileywood until he had already spoken to Humbolt. He frowned slightly when he realized who was speaking. Gaileywood could ruin everything. It would be easy enough to prevent if he got in a word quickly enough.

"Why, Sire Gaileywood, good to see you. You already know Master Phinkley and his wife Maria."

"How do you do?" Gaileywood greeted the pair.

"And this is Counselor Zeebak."

"Yes, didn't we meet to...," Gaileywood started.

The Counselor quickly fanned his fingers and made a slight gesture with his hand. "I'm afraid I've not had the pleasure," he said, interrupting Gaileywood.

"Yes, I'm afraid I've not had the pleasure," Gaileywood said, changing his mind as his face quickly changed to a look of puzzlement.

"Was there something I could do for you?" Humbolt asked Gaileywood.

"Oh, no, nothing. I just wanted to say hello," Gaileywood replied. Actually there was something he had wanted

to say, but for the life of him he couldn't remember what it was. "Please excuse me, I must be getting back to what I was doing."

"Now, where were we?" the Counselor asked, quickly taking their attention away from Gaileywood as the man wandered away scratching his head. "Ah, yes, those lovely red roses of yours," he said, steering the conversation back to Maria's rose garden, much to her pleasure. He kept an eye on Gaileywood, who spoke briefly to two other couples before leaving without eating at all.

The Counselor deftly kept the topic of conversation mostly away from himself for the next hour while they finished their supper. He did finally tell them he was from Senguri Province when they pressed him on the matter. He warned them he could say no more about it, as it was official business and might jeopardize his mission. Senguri was far enough away that they knew little about the country. Of course, the notion that his trip was secretive in nature was the perfect ploy. It made their meeting with him seem even more exciting and fascinating. To the Counselor's relief they pressed him no further for information.

After their meal, the Counselor decided it was time to tell his story. It was the real reason he wanted to be out with Humbolt this evening anyway. He skillfully primed his dinner companions and then began his tale, mostly talking to Maria.

He'd not gotten far when Maria said excitedly, "Oh, this does sound exciting. Lady Kinsley really must hear this story. She just loves tales of dragons and such. I'm sure she would love to hear about Sir Dazman and the dragon. Would you mind terribly if I invite my friend to join us?" she begged.

"Why, of course not. I would be honored. Please invite anyone you wish," the Counselor replied. This was, of course, just exactly what he wanted.

Maria scurried to the other end of the room where she'd seen her friend, and soon returned with Lady Kinsley, her husband, and their daughter. This activity attracted attention, and a couple of quiet inquiries. Soon the curious were gathering around the table as the Counselor worked further and further into his story.

"The Red Dragon, Gryphondon, came out of the tavern, following the young lady, Mirianna. 'What a wonderful prize. How fond I am of lovely young maidens' he said to himself with an evil smile. 'I shall not only entice this cursed Dazman to come after me, I shall have fun doing it.' With that he approached the maiden, who was about to enter the coach, and he cast an enchantment on her with his giant red ruby, turning her into a golden statue of great beauty. Then he turned into a dragon right before the astonished townspeople, who fled in utter terror. He snatched up the statue, and flew off with it, smashing the coach as he left."

The ladies eyes were as big as saucers by now, and the Counselor was making the best of the opportunity.

"Dazman had heard all the commotion and screams outside, and ran out to see what the trouble was. He saw a man suddenly turn into a great Red Dragon. It was the largest dragon he'd ever seen. The dragon carried off a golden statue that looked for all the world like Mirianna. Of course, Dazman's reputation and fame preceded him wherever he went. Once everyone regained their wits, they were after Dazman to slay this evil dragon. 'Dazman, Dazman, slay the evil monster. Slay him, slay him' they cried. Dazman, being the great warrior he was, had already decided to take on this great red monster. After all, he had to save the fair maiden from the clutches and unimaginable horror of this vile dragon."

After some time, the Counselor finished his story. A great round of applause rose up in the tavern. Eventually the mesmerized crowd broke up, but the tavern was still buzzing with talk even as he and Humbolt left. The night air was cool and clear, and the stars were out in force.

"I did enjoy this evening, Master Humbolt. It was a most pleasant affair. I am certainly grateful that you invited me. This evening would have been far less enjoyable all alone in my room at the Gentry House."

"Quite, my friend. Your story about the dragon was very popular with the guests. By the way, that story, you know, reminds me of something. It seems you had asked me about a great red stone I once had in the shop. What was it you wanted to know?"

"Yes, that. I was beginning to wonder if you would ever get around to it. Is there somewhere we could talk in private?"

"We could sit in my carriage. Better yet, we could talk while I give you a ride back to your room," Humbolt replied.

"Excellent."

They climbed into the jeweler's carriage, and Humbolt gave the driver his instructions. "To the Gentry House Commons, James."

The carriage jerked as the horses took up their trot.

"Now, Master Humbolt, as I was saying, I wanted to know where you purchased the stone. You see, it is my current assignment to track down the source of that red stone. As you heard from my story, it could have great significance for my noble employer."

"Well, normally I do not divulge such information, you know, but I suppose in this case it would be alright. Of course, you did not hear this from me, you understand."

"Quite," the Counselor replied.

"Well," Humbolt began, "over a year ago, a rather common looking fellow appeared at my shop, wanting to see me. Of course, Woodley would not let him in. Then the man showed him a giant red gem, and Woodley brought him to me. The man swore he had found it many years ago. He told me this wild story about a Red Dragon and a smashed carriage, very much like your story. Obviously I was skeptical, thinking the man stole it. He wanted to sell it, but I don't deal in stolen merchandise, you know. I am an honest jeweler."

"Quite so," the Counselor commented. "That is why I have come to you. I knew I could trust you to do the right thing."

"Yes, well, as I was saying, I told him that I would only accept it on consignment. I wanted time to check out his story, and delay selling it until I was either sure it was not stolen, or perhaps I would find out who the real owner was. Well, he signed an agreement of consignment, and I got busy spreading the word about this giant red gem. I thought surely word of a grand stone like this one would get a response very quickly. The man who brought it to me came back after six months to check on it. I showed it to him and said I was having trouble selling it because it was so huge, and likewise very expensive. Our agreement gave me one year to sell it, so I kept it. After eight months I had heard nothing. None of my contacts had any information. No one complained about it being stolen, and no one claimed ownership."

"So you sold it to Sire Gaileywood," the Counselor noted.

"Oh, you didn't hear that from me," Humbolt insisted, "but, well, yes, Gaileywood does have it now, since you already seem to know that. He saw it one day when he brought me a shipment of jewelry. I told him the story about the dragon. He laughed, but then offered me a tidy sum for it. Since I still had no indication it was stolen, I had to assume the man was telling the truth, and I sold it to Sire Gaileywood. The next time the man came by to check on his stone, I paid him for it. In fact I gave him fifty gold pieces more than our agreement called for. He was exceptionally pleased with the bargain."

"Could you tell me this man's name and where he was from?" the Counselor asked.

"Well, I don't remember his name exactly. I'll have to look up the agreement and check. I do remember he said he was from Bane's Meadow, or maybe near there in the countryside. Perhaps you could stop by my shop tomorrow. I will be glad to look up his name for you."

"I see we are about to reach my destination. I thank you for the fine evening, and the information, Master Humbolt. I will come by your shop in the morning for the man's name. My employer will be most grateful for your help," the Counselor said as he exited the carriage, which had stopped in front of the Gentry House.

"I shall see you in the morning then?" he asked Humbolt.

"Yes, in the morning," Humbolt replied with a smile. The carriage pulled away, and the Counselor walked toward the building. Then when the carriage was out of sight, he turned and walked across the lawn of the commons, and crossed the road into the woods.

Chapter Eleven



Highwaymen

Roth and Dyaganos found everything they needed in the little village of Snowthistle, named for the white flowers that grow so profusely in the area each spring. They restocked supplies, and had a good night's sleep and two properly cooked meals. While at the general goods store, which also served as an apothecary, Dyaganos traded a few of the herbs he'd collected along the trail for some others he needed. He also inquired about the festival, as he was not so confident about exactly when it was held. He was assured they should arrive in time for the festivities. He had not been wrong in his timing.

For the first two days back on the trail, things went smoothly. The third day, however, turned out quite differently. It was late afternoon as they were traveled through a heavily wooded area that stretched for at least two miles along the road. They had just crossed a bridge over a small stream when Graymist suddenly became nervous and fidgety.

"What's the matter boy?" Roth asked his steed. "What do you smell?"

Graymist jerked his head up and down and snorted, prancing sideways and backwards. His ears went straight up, flicking this way and that.

"What's wrong?" Dyaganos asked as he pulled up to Roth.

"Graymist doesn't like something up ahead. That usually means trouble. Maybe you better turn back. Take the horses off the road back at that bridge and follow the stream east until you're out of sight of the road. I'll meet you there, now go."

"Won't you need my help?" the old man asked.

"Right now I need you to take the horses and supplies and go. Now do it!" Roth ordered.

Dyaganos turned with a frown and led the packhorses back down the road at a gallop and off into the woods by the stream as instructed. Roth drew his bastard sword and pushed Graymist slowly forward up the road, watching every leaf to see if it moved. Graymist snorted, and pranced and shook his head the whole time.

When they had traveled about a hundred feet up the road, three men jumped out of the brush onto the road another forty feet ahead and rushed the duo. Graymist went into a charge and Roth took the first man. Though wielding a long sword, he was no match for Roth's heavier blade and the speed advantage of the horse. Roth ran him through like a dagger through a yam. Graymist would have trampled the other two had they not jumped out of the way.

Graymist turned for another charge. One of the two remaining attackers wielded a sword while the other had a mace. Roth directed Graymist's charge between the two highwaymen, dividing their attack. He struck at one with his sword while dodging the other's mace blow with a twist of his body. His dodge caused him to miss with his sword, but he managed to shove the one with the mace to the ground with his boot. The man with the sword swung again, but Roth's armor deflected the blade. Roth spun Graymist around to face the man with the mace, who had regained his feet. Graymist's spin knocked the swordsman down, and nearly trampled him with his great hooves. Roth turned his attack to the mace, striking the man across the shoulder, making a nasty gash. The man dropped the mace and stumbled away, falling down by the roadside.

Again Roth turned Graymist toward the man with the sword, who was alone now. Then the man yelled something toward the woods, and Roth heard the sound of arrows in flight. One glanced off his chain mail, but the other caught him in the thigh. He yelped in pain.

Realizing the man was not alone, Roth charged him, attempting to trample him with Graymist. He heard more arrows fly as he charged, but they missed. The man ran, trying to dodge the charging steed. With his guard down, Roth easily struck him with his sword, and left him mortally wounded. Graymist continued down the road about two hundred feet, turning into the edge of the trees. They stopped and turned to see if anyone came out of the woods. Roth kept watch as he sheathed his sword. Then he gritted his teeth, grabbed the arrow's shaft and snapped it in two so he wouldn't keep hitting it. He didn't want to drive the point any further in.

He placed an arrow in his longbow and watched for a minute or two, waiting for someone to come out of the trees ahead. Suddenly, Dyaganos appeared out of nowhere, standing in the middle of the road next to one of the slain highwaymen.

"Roth, where are you?" he cried out, looking all around.

Before Roth could act, two men ran out of the woods with daggers, their bows slung across their backs. Dyaganos was so startled he didn't know which way to run first.

"You old fool," Roth muttered. "Where did you come from?"

He dropped his longbow and arrow and knelt Graymist into action, charging back down the road toward the three. Roth pulled his sword as they went.

The men grabbed Dyaganos and dragged him toward the trees as Roth and Graymist approached. The men heard the horse coming and turned to see Graymist charging directly into them. They let go of Dyaganos, one dodging left, and the other dodging right. Dyaganos grabbed a handful of cloth on the nearest man and tackled him. Roth went after the other one, cutting him down. Then he turned to the one Dyaganos had tackled. They both were already on their feet, and the highwayman was chasing Dyaganos with his dagger. When the thief saw Graymist coming, he stopped and threw down his dagger, then put up his hands in a gesture of surrender. Not having any means or time to deal with prisoners, Roth kicked him in the chin with his boot, knocking him out cold. When Dyaganos looked back and saw this, he turned and came back on the run.

"You crazy old fool," Roth shouted at Dyaganos. "They would have killed you." Then before the old man could say anything in his defense Roth yelled, "Where are our horses?"

"The horses are fine. Don't worry. I was just trying to help."

"Well, you nearly got yourself killed trying to help. I thought you were kidding me about that magic. You really can pop from one place to another, can't you?" It was a rhetorical question, but Dyaganos answered anyway.

"Of course I can. I told you about that back in Chelting. You didn't believe me?" Dyaganos responded.

Roth ignored the question. "We better get the horses and get out of here, now. They might have more friends coming. It's best we get the horses and let's be on with it before anyone else shows up."

Dyaganos said, "Right. Wait here and I'll be back in a flash."

It wasn't much of an exaggeration either. He reached into his robe and pulled out the red stone. He cupped it in one hand, mumbled something, and simply vanished. Graymist jerked back like he'd been struck, and Roth was left sitting there open-mouthed and speechless, but only for a moment.

"I wish he wouldn't do that!" Roth yelled aloud. "That crazy old man is going to be the death of me yet."

He then remembered his longbow and rode back to find it. In less than a minute, Roth heard horses in the brush, and Dyaganos came riding out of the trees near the bridge about one hundred fifty feet down the road, leading the packhorses.

When he reached Roth, he could see from his new vantage point at horseback level that Roth had been injured.

"I see you took an arrow in the leg," Dyaganos said with concern on his face.

"Yeah, it hurts too, but right now it's best we get out of here. Hop down and get my bow for me, will you?"

Dyaganos dismounted and picked up the longbow and arrow, which Roth quickly put away as Dyaganos climbed back up.

"We'll stop and pick up those weapons, and then let's get out of here."

They rode in the direction they were originally headed, and stopped long enough for Dyaganos to gather up the weapons dropped by the dead men. Roth had Dyaganos search them. He found two daggers and several handfuls of gold and silver coins. They could see that one of the men Roth struck with his sword had managed to scramble off into the trees, leaving a trail of blood.

"If they have friends, it could mean trouble if he makes it far enough to get to them. We better not wait around to find out."

Dyaganos stuffed the weapons among the rope bindings on one of the packhorses and tucked the money in his robes. Then he pulled out his vial of foul smelling potion he had used on the thief back in Chelting and liberally sprinkled the remaining robber that Roth had kicked into unconsciousness. Even this failed to shock the robber into consciousness. He mounted his horse and they left at full gallop. They kept up this pace for about five minutes, until Roth could take the pain no longer. He slowed Graymist, and Dyaganos could see Roth's leg was bleeding much more than before.

"We have to take care of that wound and get that arrow out before you make it worse," the old man cautioned Roth.

"First, we have to get far enough away so anyone following us won't catch up to us. We can't chance that. I'll go as far as I can first."

"Alright, Roth, I'm with you," Dyaganos replied.

He followed Graymist at a walk until it started to get dark. They were into steeper hills now, and the late sun cast cool shadows in the bottoms between them where they had to cross small creeks and streams at the base of almost every hill. Some were deeper than others, but none were more than knee deep on the horses. They finally turned off the road, then followed along a shallow, narrow stream and rounded a bend. They found a good place to camp along the bank, a spot about one hundred yards upstream not visible from the road.

Dyaganos helped Roth get down from Graymist, and sat him down against a large log. Then he began unpacking the horses. Roth managed to get up and hobble around enough to gather some wood to build a small fire. Dyaganos lit it when he finished with the horses, and then turned his attention to Roth's injury. He took out his bags of powders and poultices, and heated some water over the fire in a pot.

"I've got to get the arrow out before a fever sets in," the old man told Roth. This was hardly news to Roth, who had been through this before. He poured some powders on the wound, dampening it with warm water to make a pack while he waited for the water to boil. When the water finally boiled he took a dagger and put the blade in the boiling water for several minutes. Then he let it cool, and gave Roth a small stick to bite on.

"Do you feel your leg getting numb?" Dyaganos asked him.

"By the stars, I think I do, now that you mention it. It doesn't hurt as much as it did."

"Well, that's about to change," Dyaganos warned him. "Are you ready for this?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Roth mumbled with the stick in his teeth. "Get it over with."

He leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and then felt a sharp pain in his leg like someone was running a hot knife through it. Stars danced before his eyes for a moment before everything went black.

*

Roth wakened slowly. He could hear the sound of the stream nearby, and birds calling, and something boiling in a pot. He slowly opened his eyes. Everything was horribly blurred. Vague fuzzy shapes of light and dark were all he could make out. He could tell the sun was bright, but he felt no warmth from it. His thigh throbbed and burned like it was too close to hot coals. He started to sit up, but his eyes filled with stars and his head immediately hit the rolled up blanket Dyaganos had given him for a pillow.

"Cursed thieves," Roth muttered, woozy and hurting. "Those buffoons won't be bothering us anymore, will they?" he asked Dyaganos, who didn't respond.

"Dyaganos?" Roth called out. "You there?" No one answered. He tried to lift his head again to look around, but the world spun completely topsy-turvy. Then he heard quick footsteps. He felt around for his sword, but found only his silver-handled dagger in his belt, so he took hold of it.

"Well, my brave companion, I see you are awake this morning."

Roth recognized the old man's voice coming from the direction of the footsteps.

"So, how are you feeling?" Dyaganos asked, sitting down beside Roth and getting out a tin cup for some water.

"I feel like those thieves got the better of me, instead of the other way around," he moaned.

"Oh, those devils won't be feeling anything. You left them for the ravens. Now all we have to do is get you back on your feet."

"The last time I took an arrow, it wasn't this bad," Roth complained. "I can't even sit up."

"Well, that's not from the arrow exactly. The reason you feel so bad is the poultice I used to pack your leg. It makes you feel like..."

"You mean I feel like warmed-over death from your medicine?" Roth broke in, again trying to sit up, but 'up' immediately became 'down' once more. "Ooh, what kind of half-baked apprentice are you?" he groaned.

"Now, look, it's for your own good. It will wear off before the day is out. It's better than lying about for days waiting for you to get well enough to travel. Besides, you can't afford a fever out here in the middle of the forest. If you don't want to take care of yourself, then I'll take care of you, because I need your help out here."

"Ah, hah! You admit to being a helpless old root digger, do you?" Roth poked, trying to get a rise out of the old man to get back at him for making him feel so horrible. It was the best he could manage in his condition.

"I'll take that as a compliment. Once you're up and about, you'll thank me for this. Now, drink this water."

"What's that I smell cooking? Some kind of fowl?"

"Oh, you like my cooking, do you? That means your appetite must be alright. That's a good sign."

"Yes, well, I can't complain about your cooking, as long as you don't get carried away with some of those strange plants you manage to drag up."

"Speaking of plants, that's where I was when you called. I found some wild vegetables to go with our frog's legs. You do like frog's legs don't you?" the old root digger asked.

"Well, I can't say I've ever had any, but I've heard of folks eating them. Smells like chicken, or maybe wild hare."

"It tastes about the same too. You'll like it fine."

Roth's vision became slowly better, and he could focus well enough to see that the horses were there, and the camp seemed to be in order. Then he saw his chain mail hanging nearby over a large fallen tree branch. He looked to be sure he still had clothes. He saw that his breeches were torn open at the thigh, and a large bandage was wrapped around the wound. There wasn't nearly as much blood on it as he had expected to see.

"How did you get my armor off all by yourself?" Roth asked. He couldn't imagine how the old man had accomplished that feat alone.

"That was just about the hardest thing I ever did. I just kept tugging and rolling you like an old log until I skinned it off you. I hope I never have to do that again," Dyaganos admitted. "I'd sooner skin a bear one handed."

"Speaking of how you did something, I wish you wouldn't pop about with that magic gemstone. I don't think I'll ever get used to seeing you appear and disappear like that. By the way, I noticed it doesn't make as much smoke and noise as you claimed it did back in Chelting. Do you think it's wearing out its magic?" Roth asked.

"You wonder too much about things that make no difference," Dyaganos answered, "though the answer is no, it's not loosing its power. It doesn't actually have the power to let me do magic. The magic is mine. The stone is only making it work better. If I gave you the stone, the most you could do is see your reflection in it. It doesn't give you powers you don't already have. It just makes what you have work better."

Dyaganos turned to his cooking, stirring some wild onions and more meaty roots into the pot. "Frankly, I'm glad it doesn't make smoke anymore, as you put it. The first time I used it, I cursed near burned my feet off with it. I think the stone's power had not been used in so long it built up, all corked up inside. So, when I used it, it was too powerful. As long as I use it occasionally, I can control it, or at least, I'm getting better at it. I was able to place-shift right to the road where I left you, but you had moved. I was coming to help. I figured I could pop in, divert the thieves' attention long enough to give you an advantage, and then pop out again. It was supposed to confuse them, and maybe even scare them. It didn't exactly work out that way."

"Well, the idea was a good one, but you should have checked things from a distance first."

"I didn't think I'd have time, and besides, I wasn't even sure I would be where I intended. It's all rather new to me at this point."

"So, how long before we can be on our way?" Roth asked.

"I think you might be able to safely ride in two days. Unless the going is too slow, we still could make it. If we don't get there before the festival starts, surely we'll be there before it's over."

"Then let's hope nothing else happens to delay us," Roth said.

He hoped against hope they would find someone there who had heard of his grandfather. He knew the odds of this place being the one in the story were so slim as to be laughable, but that wasn't the worst of it. Lately he'd done some figuring, and realized that his grandfather would now have to be older than ninety. The odds of him living so long were as hopeless as the odds that Bane's Meadow was where the story had happened. Roth said nothing about

it to Dyaganos. How could he? They had struck out on this wild goose chase before he considered how old Sir Dazman would be. Their quest had only begun, and he could not bring himself to dash all reasonable hope just yet. He just couldn't.

Dyaganos ignored Roth's frown, thinking it was just an indication of how badly Roth must feel. He knew the affects of his poultice would wear off soon enough, at least before the stew would be ready to eat.

"I hope you're hungry," Dyaganos said. "I think we'll have more stew than I intended to make."

"I'm so hungry, I'd even eat frog's leg stew if we had any," Roth teased.

"Ah, then you're in luck, my friend. That is today's special. Now, let me give you a hand to sit up a little."

The stars in his eyes were fewer now, and once he sat upright he began to feel much less unsteady. By the time the stew was ready, he was feeling better. In short order Roth managed to devour a large serving of the wizard's brew Dyaganos concocted.

Roth rested the remainder of the morning. He decided if they were going to be here a day or two, he'd try to get in some fishing. He had a net, and with the old man's help, they might even have some trout for dinner. He'd much prefer fried trout to frog's leg stew any day. So later he instructed Dyaganos on how to rig up his fishing net with some poles and a rope, and stretch it across the narrow stream. Every fifteen minutes or so they would pull the rope to raise the net. They managed to catch six large fish and eight smaller ones, plus three very large crayfish, an eel, and a turtle. They would certainly have something good tonight, and some smoked fish for the trail.

Dyaganos made him drink a lot of water, and that caused problems having to get up and hobble to the brush to relieve himself. He wasn't supposed to be on the bad leg. He became dizzy when he stood up, which Dyaganos wouldn't let him, or rather, wouldn't help him do, unless he had to go. By late afternoon the dizziness was just about gone, and he really felt much better. That didn't stop the pain in his leg, but that too was not as bad. In fact, it felt amazingly good considering what he'd been through. Dyaganos checked the wound about every three hours. He packed it again with a fresh poultice before dark. They even had time to cobble together a crude lean-to, shingled with huge oval leaves, over a foot in diameter, which Dyaganos cut from a towering water plant near the stream bank.

The horses were hobbled and allowed to graze nearby all day. Graymist was given some feed from their supplies, since he was a much larger animal and needed the extra nutrition.

Roth cleaned the extra fish and eel, and sliced them into steaks that Dyaganos slowly cooked over a fire. These were for the road. Roth knew nothing about turtle, so Dyaganos cleaned it and prepared a thick soup, with chunks of turtle meat. It was certainly a very busy day, and everything had gone well.

Supper began with the boiled crayfish. Then they stuffed themselves on fried fish flavored with a little onion. Soon it was dark, and they were still cooking and drying the fish. While they sat up to finish that chore Dyaganos showed Roth more about his constellations, even though the trees here severely limited their view of the sky. Finally the fish were done and they went to sleep.

They left the fishing net out over night, and the next morning they had more fish. Roth prepared them while Dyaganos made a rack woven from small flexible green limbs. They put the fish on it to dry over the fire. Roth was up on his feet now, but Dyaganos warned him not to flex his leg.

After a lunch of fish, Roth took out the weapons they had confiscated and examined them. They weren't of the highest quality, but Dyaganos needed something to use as a weapon. It was certainly better than nothing. They could most likely sell the rest in Bane's Meadow.

Roth gave Dyaganos the bow and the old man promptly put an arrow into a rotten log only a foot from the knot Roth had designated as the target.

"Most impressive," Roth said, obviously surprised by his friend's ability.

"I suppose I never mentioned that I used to be pretty good with a bow. Once I settled in Chelting, Jenny's cooking and her mother's cooking before her pretty much spoiled me. I haven't been rabbit hunting in a long time. It's nice to know I haven't totally forgotten how to use one of these."

He tried it again, and hit on the other side of the knot.

"Well, you shouldn't worry about a bow. Looks like you've got one," Roth told him.

Dyaganos retrieved the arrows and put them back with the dozen or so they found with the bow. Then Roth had him try out the mace and swords to see what he felt comfortable with. The mace was too unwieldy, so he chose a short sword that he could swing well.

Roth gave him instruction, and they even went one-on-one in mock battle. Dyaganos was doing pretty well for

an old root digger, though he didn't have the strength to force Roth back, even with one bad leg and standing off balance. He did catch on quickly to the basic thrusts and blocks, and was surprisingly quick in his response. Fear of a blade can clear your mind and quicken your reactions at any age.

"Hey, you're not half bad with that thing. I bet if you're ever attacked by a man-eating dragonberry bush, you could whack it in two with one swing," he teased Dyaganos.

"Alright, let's pretend you're the dragonberry bush," Dyaganos answered back, and took a good hard swing at Roth. Roth fended off the blow easily, but he wasn't expecting it to be as hard as it was. He staggered backwards, trying not to flex his bad leg, and staggered right into the stream.

Dyaganos let out with a hearty laugh that soon had him rolling on the ground. Roth was sputtering and shivering in the cold water, and having an impossible time getting up without flexing his bad leg. By the time he managed to scramble to shore, Dyaganos had recovered enough to give him a hand.

"Well, it looks like that's one dragonberry bush that won't ever insult me again," he teased between more laughter.

"Alright, alright, you got me. Now I know if you're mad enough, you can defend yourself against the injured and lame," Roth poked back, a bit embarrassed he'd been caught off guard.

"Well, that's a start," the old man answered. "Now, let's get you into some dry clothes. I'll have to change that bandage and make a fresh poultice. Come on over by the fire."

Roth put on a dry shirt and surcoat, but wrapped up in a blanket instead of putting on good breeches. He hung up the wet breeches to dry since they already had a hole cut in them. He didn't want to cut up his other breeches to get at the wound. Dyaganos used the bandages he'd prepared earlier for this evening's bandage change. Then he boiled some more cloth for bandages and hung them to dry. When the new poultice was ready, the old man repacked the wound. It was already looking better and appeared as though it would heal fine. He just hoped Roth didn't spoil the healing by opening the wound with more foolishness like they'd just had. Sword training was off.

When Roth's clothes had dried in the sun, he put the breeches back on, and packed away the shirt as having been more or less washed. The wash hadn't done the shirt any harm.

"All kidding aside, I think you would do well to keep that sword handy," he told Dyaganos. "I think one of the belts we took off those thieves should fit you about right. Keep that sword on. Next time you pop into a fight, you'll have something with you to fight with."

"I'd rather avoid fights, but out here that may not be so easy. Once your leg is better you can show me some more. You teach me to defend myself, and I'll teach you a few parlor tricks. Fair trade?" Dyaganos asked his friend.

"Fair trade," Roth said with a smile.

They prepared things for the next day's travel, and packed what they weren't using. They still had two days ride ahead of them. Dyaganos made a splint from some saplings to keep Roth's leg straight while riding. After a supper of freshly fried fish, and some berries and wild fruits Dyaganos collected, they went to sleep early so they could get an early start in the morning.

Chapter Twelve



Harmless Deceptions

The Counselor left Humbolt's establishment the next morning with the description and name of the man who found the great red stone, one Henry of Greenwood Hollow. More importantly, he now knew where to find him. Greenwood Hollow was just outside Bane's Meadow, and Chelting happened to be right on the way. The Counselor decided he would stop in to see Dyaganos and warn him of the imminent arrival of Gaileywood's thugs. This situation was much his doing, inadvertent as it was. He just wasn't thinking at the time, and he didn't want any harm to come to the old man. The thugs would eventually find out from the thief that Dyaganos had the stone, and they would surely come for it. The old man could be seriously hurt or killed, and the Counselor could not let that wrong be on his conscience. He would have to protect Dyaganos, but it would be many days before the thugs could find the thief, then double back all the way to Chelting to find Dyaganos.

In the meantime, the Counselor had his own important agenda to attend. Now that he knew where this great red stone came from, a red stone that fit the stories he knew of Sir Dazman and the great Red Dragon, his long quest was taking shape. He would have to tell Ondra all about what he had learned. They finally had a clue, after more than thirty years of searching. It was a small clue, to be sure, just the name of a town that fit the story he knew. Still it was something, a starting point. Now they could both concentrate and coordinate their efforts in their long search for Sir Dazman.

He walked north to the outskirts of Wiley's Keep and disappeared into the woods. It was normally a week's ride to Chelting and another week and a half to Bane's Meadow and Greenwood Hollow. However, the next morning, the Counselor walked into Chelting, searching for the apothecary.

The building he remembered as being the apothecary was closed up, and the sign had been removed. When he did find the apothecary, it was on the other end of the village in another building.

As he entered the apothecary he heard someone in the back and he called out, "Dyaganos, are you busy?"

"Be with you in just a moment," was the reply.

Shortly a young man in his early twenties came through the door from another room. He was dressed in a blue robe and yellow sash, and had short black hair.

"Good day to you sir. My name is Julian. How may I help you?" he said as he walked up to the Counselor.

"I am looking for Dyaganos," he answered.

"Oh, I'm afraid old Dyaganos is no longer with us," Julian said. "Perhaps I can help you with your medicinal needs."

"No, I'm not looking for medicines," the Counselor fussed. "I'm looking for Dyaganos."

"As I said, he is no longer here."

"Is he dead?"

"Goodness, no, I don't think so. He closed up his shop and sold it to me. Are you an old friend?"

"We met only once, but I have urgent news for him. Could you direct me to him?"

"I'm afraid not. I have no idea where he is."

"Well, where does he stay?" the Counselor asked calmly, hiding his irritation.

"I really don't know, sir. I wish I could help you, but I simply don't know where he is."

"Then I'll be on my way."

The Counselor turned and left without another word, heading toward the tavern.

"What was that all about?" Jennifer asked, coming out of the back room with a basket in her hands.

"Some stranger asking about Dyaganos. He said he had urgent news for him. It looks like he's headed over to your father's place. Have you ever seen him before?" Julian said, as they looked out the front window.

"I don't think so," Jennifer replied. "I'll run over to Father's and tell him."

"That's a good idea," Julian told her.

Jennifer went out the front door, and scurried around to the back door of the tavern. She slipped into the kitchen where she found Darvin bringing in some dirty dishes from the bar.

"Father, someone was just over at Julian's asking about Dyaganos. It was an old man in a gray robe," she told him quietly, in case the stranger was in the other room. Then suddenly she stopped and looked thoughtfully off into space for a moment.

"That's funny, I just realized he's got silver hair. It's kind of odd, like Roth's. Yes, it looked just like Roth's hair."

"Yes, I know. He just came in. I was bringing in these mugs and told him I'd be right back. You say he was asking about Dyaganos?"

"That's what Julian said, something about having an urgent message for him."

"Well, I'll just check this out," Darvin said in his deep gravelly voice. He wiped his hands on his apron and headed back into the main room. Jennifer watched around the kitchen doorway.

"Good morning. What can I get for you?" Darvin asked the old man in gray. His full head of silver hair was long, but thin and wispy from age, and he was dressed neatly. The quality of his clothes said he was well-to-do, yet they were simple and unpretentious.

"Could I get some eggs and ham for breakfast?" the stranger asked.

"Certainly. What will you have to drink?"

"Perhaps apple juice if you have it, or water will be alright."

"I think we have some fresh apple cider," Darvin told him, and he headed toward the kitchen.

"Jenny, an order of eggs with ham, and a cup of cider for the gentleman," he said as he entered the kitchen, nearly running over Jennifer, whom he didn't see peeking around the door.

"Oops. Sorry. Let me get my apron back on. Did he say anything?" Jennifer asked.

"Not yet," Darvin answered. "Give me time."

Darvin busied himself with chores until the eggs were ready. Then he brought them out to the Counselor.

"There you are, nice and hot, and here's your cider." He set them on the table, and stood there for a moment.

"So, what brings you to our fair village?" he asked, trying to sound friendly instead of nosy.

"Actually I'm just passing through, but perhaps you could help me. I came through several months ago when your apothecary was down the street. I noticed it seems to be closed now. Could you tell me where the gentleman is that used to run that establishment?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, my friend," Darvin answered. "Do you have business with him?"

If his memory served him correctly, he recalled that Dyaganos and the innkeeper had seemed to talk amiably the night he'd been here in this tavern those months ago when he told his story of Sir Dazman and the Red Dragon. He felt it was probably alright to tell the innkeeper. "Yes, I have an urgent message for him."

"Well," Darvin grunted, "the old man closed up and quit. He sold out to a young apprentice named Julian. You'll find him up the street at the edge of town."

"Yes, well, I did find that place, expecting to find Dyaganos. Instead, there was a young fellow there like you said. He didn't seem to know where I could find Dyaganos. Would you happen to know where I might find him?" he said, stuffing his mouth with a piece of ham. He hadn't really realized how hungry he was until he tasted the food. "I've gone out of my way to get here just to see him. It is rather important."

"You a friend of the old man's, are you?," Darvin asked the stranger.

It seemed to the Counselor there was considerable suspicion in the innkeeper's voice. Surely they hadn't done anything to Dyaganos. It was beginning to sound like they were hiding something though.

"Oh, not really. I just met him once when I came through here last spring. You're sure you couldn't direct me to him? I think he would find it most important."

Darvin glanced over at Jennifer, who came in on the pretext of wiping tables and sweeping. She had heard

most of the conversation.

"Sorry, I really don't know where he is. Wish I could help you," Darwin said, and left the stranger to eat alone.

This is going nowhere, the Counselor thought. These folks weren't talking, and he couldn't understand why. He decided to go at the problem from a different angle.

After breakfast, he left the tavern and strolled across to the stable and smithy. No one was in the blacksmith shop, but when he went into the stable, there was a young boy cleaning the stalls.

"Excuse me, young man, could you tell me where I might find the blacksmith?"

"Oh, yes sire. He's out at the Delwright's place delivering something. Is it anything I can help you with? I can take care of your horse, if that's what you need," the young boy offered.

"No, that's alright. Maybe you could direct me to old Dyaganos. Where is his place now? I see his shop is closed."

"Yea, he's closed up. He closed up just a couple weeks ago or so. Left town."

"I see," the Counselor said. "Is he living anywhere about?"

"Gee, I don't think so. I think he left on a trip. Him and another fellow. Everybody seemed all fired up about it, like they was heroes or something."

"Oh, tell me more," the Counselor encouraged. This sounded interesting. He remembered the old man as being a bit too old for gallivanting around the countryside on a long trip.

"Well, there's not much to tell. Him and the fellow went off together. The other fellow had a big horse. Real nice. He had a big sword too. In fact, he had lots of weapons, a regular weapons arsenal on horseback, he was. Good thing he rode that huge gray horse. A regular riding horse couldn't have carried that much weight very far. I know my horses, and that was a fine one. Yeah, I'd say just about the finest horse flesh I ever saw. He tipped me a silver piece, too. Nobody's ever done that before."

"Do you know where they went?"

"Uhh, no, don't recall anybody saying."

"Who was this other fellow with him?"

"It was..., uh..., oh blast. I can't remember right now. It's on the tip of my tongue," the boy grumbled.

"Do you suppose the smith knows where they went?"

"Not sure. He ought to be back in a couple of hours, by noon anyway. You can ask him."

"Alright, thank you for your help," the Counselor said. He turned, and went back to the tavern, deciding to wait for the smith. If this other fellow had such a fine horse, the smith might have talked to him and would know something. He wondered why no one else mentioned he'd left town.

Back at the tavern, the Counselor ordered another cider and sat down alone by the fireplace. Jennifer went about her chores, changing linens and sweeping rooms, but she kept a watch on the stranger when she passed through the main room. She was very curious about his silver hair that was so much like the color of Roth's. She wondered if there was any chance they were related. She decided to ask her father what he thought.

"Not a chance," Darwin assured her. "Roth was very far from home. Surely no one around here would be related to him. I don't think the odds are good that two strangers from the same family would come through our little village, just a couple of weeks apart, from so far away. That's just not likely to happen. Why, a Silver Dragon would probably come through here more often than such a thing like that happening."

"What if I just...ask him?" Jennifer said. "It couldn't hurt, could it?"

"Well, I don't suppose it would. Just don't you be disappointed when he tells you he doesn't know anybody named Roth. Don't get your hopes up."

Jennifer nodded, and walked slowly over to the stranger, trying to decide how she would go about broaching the subject. She knew it was not polite to pry, but she just had to know. Her curiosity had overcome her natural shyness, at least for the moment.

The Counselor looked up from his mug when he heard her coming, and smiled. "I need nothing just now, Miss, but you can take my mug if you please."

"Certainly," she said, glad for not having to speak first. She picked up the empty mug, and just stood there holding it, undecided about where to start.

After a moment, when the stranger realized she was still standing there, he glanced up at her again and said, "Is there a problem?"

"Oh, no. No. I...I was just thinking. I...well...your hair...it is a rarity around here. I mean, the color. It's quite

lovely, I mean." She frowned at herself, not knowing what to say next.

"Yes," the stranger smiled back at her. "I do often get comments on it. I suppose it is unusual most places. I'm not Elven though, if that's what you're thinking. It isn't so uncommon where I'm from."

His casual manner gave her the courage to press on. "I was wondering...I mean...I don't suppose you happen to know someone named Roth do you?"

Jennifer saw a strange look come over his face. In a moment he said slowly, "As a matter of fact I do. Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering, because he has silver hair too, and since it's not so common...well, I thought you might...might be from the same place...perhaps."

Darvin listened to this from the counter, and was quite surprised.

"He has silver hair, does he? What can you tell me about this person, Roth? Is he here about?" he asked with a detectable eagerness, though he tried to conceal it, which was very difficult since it felt like his heart had leaped into this throat, and was suddenly beating very fast.

"Well, no, not now," Jennifer said, frowning suddenly, sensing she was about to disappoint the stranger. "He was here a few days ago, though. It's not been so long, really."

The Counselor hardly dared hope, but he could not help his excitement. "Can you describe him?" he asked, just as a thought hit him. Could it be Roth was the fellow with the big horse and all the weapons the stable boy told him about, the fellow that left town with Dyaganos?

"He was taller than me, about your height. A strong nose, broad shoulders, such deep blue eyes," she said, almost dreamily. "He was passing through. Then he met up with Dyaganos, the man you're looking for, and they left on a trip."

"Did he say where he was from?" the stranger said, openly excited now at the distinct possibility.

"Why, I'm not sure I heard him say exactly, but he used the name Roth of Dazman," she answered.

Darvin was almost to the table by now and butted in. "Do you know Roth?" Darwin asked the stranger as he came up to the table.

The Counselor could hardly believe it. He had found Roth. Perhaps his long search for the boy was over.

"Yes. Yes I know him. He's..," the stranger paused, almost slipping in his excitement. "He's...family."

"I knew it," Jennifer blurted in a squeak of joy. "I knew you would know him. He was here. He told us this story about the Red Dragon and Sir Dazman. He said he was searching for his grandfather. Are you Sir Dazman? Are you Roth's grandfather?" Jennifer was almost beside herself with excitement.

What would he tell them? The Counselor wondered how much they knew. What should he say?

"Uh, did he tell you about his great uncle Zeebak?"

"Yes, I believe I heard him talking with Dyaganos about his uncle several times when they were in here eating?" Darwin interjected. "I think he said his uncle used to visit him when he was little."

"Are you his great uncle Zeebak?" Jennifer asked excitedly.

The Counselor smiled with relief. That name would do fine for now. They would likely be quite satisfied with it, and there certainly was no reason they should know otherwise.

Chapter Thirteen



Great Uncle Zeebak

The man they now knew as Roth's great uncle Zeebak spent two hours talking with Jennifer, Darwin, Julian and Wattle. He filled them in on what they needed to know, and no more. He knew now, because he had discovered Roth's whereabouts, his original plan to warn Dyaganos and to double back and take care of the thugs himself had to be changed. He was keen to be on his way to catch up to Roth, especially after Julian remembered that Dyaganos had mentioned Bane's Meadow a time or two before he left. It was the only clue he had, and he wanted to pursue it. Now, instead of doubling back and taking care of the thugs himself, he had to come up with some other way to assure the safety of the townspeople before seeing to his own agenda.

He explained he was a trader in antiquities, and told them how he had been looking for clues to Roth's whereabouts while on his business travels ever since Roth left his foster home some eight years ago. He told how Drew and Eldemere, Roth's foster parents, received only two messages from him in all that time, and none of them, himself included, had heard anything further from Roth in five years. He said he would get word to Roth's foster parents that he recently crossed Roth's path, and that Roth was safe and well.

Then he told them why he came to find Dyaganos. He needed to warn him about the trouble that he believed was coming because of a stolen piece of jewelry he heard about in his dealings. He explained that he'd found out Dyaganos purchased it, not knowing it was stolen.

"So you see," Zeebak continued, "Dyaganos bought this jewel from a man who had stolen it from someone else. I learned that the man it was stolen from has sent his henchmen looking for the thief. They may soon find this thief, and if they do they will probably learn the thief sold it to your friend, Dyaganos. From what I know of this man, he is quite ruthless, and will surely send them to find Dyaganos. They could very well come here looking to get the stone back. I met Dyaganos when I came through this village some months ago, and he seemed like an honest fellow. I am sure Dyaganos had no idea the jewel was stolen, and he would be unaware of the danger. I felt he deserved to be warned. Besides, it wasn't so far out of my way that it would be any trouble."

"Well, it's obvious they won't find him if they come looking," Darwin said. "He's not here. He left town with Roth."

"Yes, meaning all the more danger then for you good people," Zeebak explained. "They will do whatever is necessary to get the information from you. You would be no match for them. They might torture you, even kill you one at a time, until someone tells where Dyaganos or the jewel is."

"This sounds like real trouble," Wattle said. "We can't take on such people. Someone will surely get hurt, even if we are prepared for them."

"We could send someone over to Dunn Vassar Hold and ask the garrison Captain for some soldiers," Julian suggested.

"Even if we could get them to come, that's at least three days travel each way", Wattle noted. "Besides, do you really think they'll send soldiers just because a stranger came into town and said some trouble might be coming?"

"He's right," Darwin told them. "They're not going to send soldiers unless the trouble is already here, and then it will be too late."

"Not to worry," Zeebak said. "I have a plan. I can handle this myself, with only a little planning and assistance from you good folks. Will you allow me to help you?"

"You can't take on several men all alone, if that's what you're suggesting," Wattley objected.

"Trust me, friend, I can handle them, and ten more if necessary. You need not worry."

"Just how do you propose to do this all by yourself?" Julian asked, clearly not convinced this old man could fend off two ruffians, let alone ten.

"Let us just say that I have some special training in that sort of thing. I am a well-traveled man, and I've learned much in my travels. I have acquired knowledge of many ways to protect myself from worse than a few heavy-handed scoundrels. These men will never suspect a feeble old man such as myself would be any problem for them. I may look old, but I am not so vulnerable as I may look. That in itself is one of my advantages. I can take care of myself far better than you, or they, would ever think possible. You need not worry."

"Assuming you can do this by yourself," Darvin said with considerable skepticism in his voice, "then what can we do to help?" Darvin asked.

"Actually, it's quite simple. My plan is to pretend to be Dyaganos and draw these men to me when they arrive. Would it be possible to use the building where the apothecary used to be, and make it look like the old apothecary is still occupied?"

"Well, I bought the building from Dyaganos," Wattley offered. "I'm using it for storage, but I suppose I can move some of it out temporarily. The counters and shelves are still there. You could make it look like a shop without much trouble."

"That would work nicely. In fact, I can even stay there and not be a bother to anyone, except to come here to the tavern for meals."

Despite their concerns that Roth's great uncle, as old as he was, could actually defend the whole town, or even himself, against the thugs he claimed were coming, they accepted his plan and set about putting it into place. Once Wattley's workmen finished removing the stowed boxes from the front room of the old apothecary, Zeebak set about trying to make it look like an apothecary again. Julian loaned him a lot of bottles, and jugs and pots and such to put on the shelves, and even took down his sign and put it up in front of Zeebak's place. The word spread all over the village about what was going on, which caused a mix of concern, excitement and disbelief among the populace.

By late afternoon, he had the place looking quite convincing, at least in the front room. Then he went to the back and tried to make a comfortable place to sleep. While moving some wooden crates stored in one corner of a back room he found a tattered old book that apparently had fallen down behind one of them. It had a heavy leather binding of deep burgundy, with worn and faded gold gilt, and dark aged paper which looked very old. He picked it up carefully so as not to damage it further. Flipping through the pages out of curiosity more than anything else, it took only a few seconds to realize, much to his surprise, it was a book of spells.

"Why, I'll be chicken plucked. Old Dyaganos must have been dabbling in magic," he said aloud.

He sat down on one of the boxes and carefully looked through the spellbook. It was hard to believe anyone would be so careless with something as rare and potentially dangerous as a spellbook. His knowledge of learned magic was limited, though he had learned enough in his profession that he was often able to understand a bit of the unique arcane writing of magic incantations. As he scanned this book, he recognized the use of one of the spells he found, a spell that interested him greatly.

This spell could give important information about something or someone that had been famous or legendary. Certainly Sir Dazman was worthy of being called legendary. Perhaps such a spell would be useful in finding him, for he had been looking for Sir Dazman much longer than he had searched for Roth. It was surely a windfall that the townsfolk so readily accepted him as Roth's uncle, but even more so that he had stumbled onto Roth's path just as he was getting close to catching up to the great red stone. To also come across this old spellbook with such a spell in it at the same time was more than the fabled luck of a Silver Dragon. The hand of fate must be stirring the air.

Still, it would not be so easy to take advantage of this fortunate turn of events, for casting this spell would require someone more powerful with learned magic than himself. That wasn't the biggest problem though. The spell required certain components, not the least of which was the presence of the person or item that was the subject of the spell, or something belonging to them or closely linked to the spell subject.

He wondered if the great red stone or maybe the place where Sir Dazman met the Red Dragon would be helpful. Since he believed Dyaganos had the dragon's red stone, it might be just the thing for this spell. The urgency

he felt to find Dyaganos, the great red stone, and Roth as well was now keener than ever. He first had to find Dyaganos and the stone, and then get them together with someone who had the magic abilities required. Then there was the problem with the spell results. According to what he understood of the arcane writing, the spell might provide nothing more than a riddle or rhyme with only vague or cryptic information. After searching for so long he felt anything was worth a try. Vague clues had to be better than nothing at all.

He read for some time before he realized it was already dark. Getting up and stretching, Zeebak decided to go to the tavern for some supper. Perhaps he could get more information from the people there, now that they'd had the whole afternoon to dwell on events.

At the Hedgehog's Fancy he ran into Julian. They sat together and talked over their supper. Since Julian was the one who previously mentioned how Dyaganos spoke of Bane's Meadow prior to leaving, Zeebak pressed him for anything else he might remember.

"You know, I think I remember him saying something about a festival, but I don't know if it has any connection with Bane's Meadow," Julian told him.

"Why, come to think of it, I believe it does," Zeebak said with a smile, remembering having been there many years ago. "I passed through there long ago. It must have been close to festival time, because I recall there was a lot of chatter about it. But alas, I was unable to stay long enough for the festivities. I'm so glad you mentioned that."

After supper, the short stroll from the tavern to the shop was pleasant. The insects were singing, and the air was cool. Zeebak knew a crescent moon would rise about midnight, which would make it a fine night to visit Ondra, he thought. He wished he could tell Ondra what was going on, but there was still the problem of Gaileywood's men. This situation was much his doing, inadvertent as it was. He had to clean up the mess he'd caused before he could leave these good folks. He knew he must stay and take care of Gaileywood's henchmen when they came. Yet, it was important to tell Ondra. Maybe she could concentrate her efforts on Roth and Dyaganos while he stayed to take care of the henchmen.

"That's it," Zeebak mumbled to himself as he reached the shop that was once again playing the role of apothecary. It could take nearly two weeks for Gaileywood's thugs to find the thief and then double back to Chelting. He could slip off to see Ondra tonight and tell her everything. No one would know he was gone. While she was looking for Roth and Dyaganos, he would come back and stay long enough to take care of the henchmen.

Chapter Fourteen



Trail to Oberlaen Plateau

After two days of rest, and eating more than they really needed, Roth and Dyaganos were packed and on the trail long before the first rays of sunlight reached the stream valley where they camped. Roth felt much better now, though his thigh was still sore and tender. The splint Dyaganos made for Roth's leg made him a little off balance in the saddle. He soon found that if he slung his longbow over his other shoulder, it helped balance him.

The terrain was much steeper since leaving Snowthistle. They were traversing the Cedarbough Rise, a range of low but steep hills that climbed to the Oberlaen Plateau, a vast plain of thin forests and grassy savannas, crossed by wide slow rivers feeding from the great mountains beyond. The steep hills and stream valleys of the morning soon turned into rockier hills, with ragged vertical cliffs, and the road was very rough. Though wide enough for a wagon to pass, the road was badly washed by rains. Wagon travel would have been treacherous and extremely slow. Riding horseback wasn't much better.

The crisp air carried a brisk breeze that constantly fanned the cedars and pines clinging precariously to the rough hillsides. It made for beautiful scenery, which they took in with little talk between them. They were busy enough paying careful attention to guiding the horses up the road as it made occasional switchbacks, snaking its way up the steeper terrain. They caught glimpses of the river gorge now looming below them. They heard the echo of crashing water much of the morning, becoming louder as they worked their way up the treacherous road.

At midmorning the sound quickly became deafening as they rounded a bend and saw ahead a spectacular waterfall cascading from two hundred feet above. It fell through a huge hole worn over the centuries by the water crashing into the rock next to the road. It splashed off an overhang beneath the road, and crashed another hundred feet or so to a pool below. The road actually went across the natural stone archway carved by the water, bridging over the falls to the ledge on the other side. The morning sun made a double rainbow above the pool. Fine water droplets of foggy mist reflecting the sun swarmed around the bridge like a sparkling cloud of tiny crystal glowbugs.

They came to a stop and just sat there in the thundering rumble of the waterfall, mesmerized by the beauty of this natural wonder. Roth could think of nothing to say, for he had not the words to express his wonderment. Although Dyaganos had heard of this place, he never thought he would see it.

Finally Dyaganos yelled to Roth over the water's roar, "Have you ever seen anything like it? It's called Faerie Mist Falls. Stories say if you fall off the bridge, you can see faeries playing on the underside of it."

"How would anyone know that?" Roth yelled back. "Wouldn't the fall kill you?"

"I suppose it would. That's why I said it was just a story."

Roth laughed. "Well if I ever meet a faerie, I'll ask her if it's true."

Once their initial curiosity was satisfied, they carefully started single file across the damp stone archway. Except for Graymist, the horses were balking, and coaxing didn't help. The view was precipitous, and the noise almost unbearable. When they switched so Roth went first instead of Dyaganos, the other horses seemed satisfied to follow Graymist's lead.

Once on the other side, the trail widened somewhat, and was not as steep as it had been earlier. Within two hours they passed through a narrow gorge between steep ridges and came out into a lightly wooded area of mixed

cedars, pines and poplars. The trees soon thinned into sparse poplar growth and shortly opened onto a grass savanna of the Oberlaen Plateau. The trail was little more than a worn path in the grasses, until just before noon when they came to a small crossroads among a thin grove of maples. The roads leading east, west and north appeared to be well worn. They stopped to rest and feed the horses, and Dyaganos took time to check Roth's bandages. While they were eating a lunch of dried fish, some travelers approached from the west.

"I hear horses," Roth told Dyaganos.

"Oh, yes, I hear them too. What should we do?"

"Just grab one of those swords and put it somewhere handy. Be ready for anything. First, give me a hand standing up. I won't be much help stuck sitting here."

Dyaganos helped Roth stand up. With the splint on his leg he couldn't flex his knee, and getting up and down was a problem. They could now see three riders coming up the west road toward the crossroad. One was dressed as a knight, riding a barded warhorse, with banners and ribbons adorning his lance. The other two were younger men on riding horses. Both had packhorses in tow. The sound of heavy armor clinked loudly under a cover on one of the packhorses.

"I think these folks are on their way to the tournament at the festival," Dyaganos said when he saw their dress.

"That would be my guess also," Roth responded. "Still, be ready if anything happens."

"I will."

Roth hobbled over to the roadside as the strangers came close and greeted them.

"Good day to you gentlemen. Are you headed to the festival?" he called out.

The knight pulled up his horse, and the others did likewise.

"Greetings to you and your friend, my good fellow," said the knight. "I am Sir Broden of Hawkwing. We are on our way to the tournament."

He looked the two over and eyed Graymist almost jealously.

"I see you have a very fine mount there. Would you be headed to the tournament as well?"

Roth saw Sir Broden eyeing Graymist and his many weapons, and realized the knight might be thinking he would be entering some of the events himself. "My friend and I are going to the festival on business, but I had not considered entering the tournament. As you can see, we ran into some trouble awhile back and I've not yet fully healed. I am Roth of Dazman, and my friend here is Dyaganos of Chelting. Would you care to join us in some lunch? All we have is smoked fish, but it was caught only yesterday."

"Your offer is most generous," Sir Broden answered, "but I think we will ride a bit further before we eat. I know a place that has water for the horses, not far up the north road where we can stop. Surely you will pass that way and you can water your horses as well."

"That's good to know. We will see you then in awhile, I suppose," Roth told the knight.

"We will be on our way. Until later then," Sir Broden said as he tugged on the reins. The threesome turned up the north road from the crossroads and soon disappeared over a rise.

The two finished lunch and headed up the north road in the direction of Bane's Meadow and the festival. Within the hour they saw the threesome ahead resting by a stream.

"Let's water the horses while we're here," Roth told Dyaganos. "Perhaps we can ride to the festival with these three. How much further is Bane's Meadow?"

"We might get there late tomorrow, or early the next day," Dyaganos answered.

When they got closer Roth hailed them.

"Good afternoon, Sir Broden. We decided to accept your gracious offer of fresh water."

The knight was seated on a stump, eating. He looked to be in his early forties, with black hair and mustache.

"Come, join us, Roth of Dazman and Dyaganos of Chelting. Winston! John! Give the man a hand to dismount."

One of the boys held Graymist's reins while the other helped Roth dismount with his awkward splint. They were obviously awed by the size of Graymist. He was truly a large animal.

"See to the gentlemen's horses," Sir Broden told the boys, which was an unnecessary order, since they would have used any excuse as a chance to handle this animal.

"Where did you come to acquire such a fine animal as that?" Sir Broden asked Roth as he and Dyaganos came over to join the knight.

"I bought him several years ago, far from here, west of Pamjora Province. Very expensive, but well worth the

price."

"He is magnificent indeed. I don't suppose you would consider selling him, would you?" Sir Broden asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

"I'm afraid not. I'd sooner cut off my arm."

"I thought as much. From the looks of your leg, someone's already tried to cut it off," said the knight.

Dyaganos jumped in at this, saying "To the contrary, he sent four, or possibly five highwaymen to their just reward to pay for that injury. We were jumped three days ago a good bit south of here, and Roth took them on single-handedly. He even had to rescue me from their clutches."

"Single-handed? Five of them? Well, we have a warrior of great skill to match that fine horse, don't we? Come and sit. I'd like to talk to you." Sir Broden motioned to Roth to sit with him on the log next to his stump. Dyaganos began eyeing the surrounding greenery, always on the lookout for herbs and useful plants.

"If you gentlemen would excuse me, I think I'll take a look around," Dyaganos told them.

"Just don't bring back any wild boar," Roth told him. "We don't have time to cook it. We'll have to eat it raw."

Dyaganos laughed at this and headed into the trees, while Sir Broden looked at them a bit confused.

"All he's carrying is that old sword. How can he bring back a boar?" the knight asked.

"You'd be surprised what my friend can do, but then, I don't suppose you really wanted to talk about my friend's fighting prowess, did you?"

"Quite. Yes, well, to get to the subject I had in mind, you see, something you said back at the crossroads struck some vague recollection in my mind. I puzzled over it all the way here. Is there any chance we've met before?" he asked.

"Not to my memory," Roth answered, "though, I can't say we have not. Why do you ask?"

"It's just that there is something about you, your horse, or your face, but I can't seem to decide what it is. It has something to do with the tournaments, though. It's almost like this has happened before, like I met you somewhere. They have a name for it. You know what I mean," the knight said with a puzzled look.

"Oh, I see. Yes, I know exactly what you mean, but I don't think we've met. I think I would have remembered a knight such as you."

"Well, still, it has me puzzled. You look familiar, or maybe it's your name. I don't remember knowing anyone named Roth though. It is surely a puzzlement. I suppose being rattled around for twenty years in a tin bucket like this armor," he said waving a hand toward one of the packhorses, "does things to your thinker. Enough war hammers on the helm and you can't remember your own name for awhile, you know," Sir Broden said with a little laugh. "Such is the lot of a knight, I suppose." Then changing the subject back to Roth's horse, he said, "I see my boys have taken a liking to your horse. What do you call him?"

"Graymist," Roth answered.

Graymist pricked his ears up at this and looked back at Roth for a moment.

"I see he knows his name," the knight said.

"I sometimes think he's smarter than me," Roth noted.

"With that fine horse of yours, you could do well in the tournament, provided you had some decent armor," the knight said.

"My chain mail serves me well enough, I suppose," Roth told him.

"Well, if you ever take up the sport, you'll need proper armor. I think most of us barter our brains for our armor," he said with a smile. "You might survive without a brain, but you won't without good armor." Sir Broden let a weary look fall across his face. "I, for one, am about ready to give this up. My years are exceeding my ability to compete with the younger knights, and the small keep I have looks more and more comfortable every time I return to it. Once you've seen the world, there's little else that looks so good as your own courtyard."

"I have a bit more of the world to see before I am ready to settle," Roth told him. "Well, I need to stretch my one good leg for a bit. If you would excuse me, I must check on Dyaganos. There's no telling what he may bring back from the woods," Roth said, getting up from the large log.

"Well, I need to get back on the road. We still have a long way to go before we get to Bane's Meadow," Sir Broden told Roth. "I don't suppose you would like to ride with us. I'm sure we would enjoy swapping stories to pass the time, and besides, the more of us, the better chance we would have against any highwaymen that might be foolhardy enough to challenge us, heh?"

"I was about to suggest the same thing, Sir Broden. As soon as I find my friend, and get a drink of water, I'll be

ready to go."

"Done then," the knight said with a smile. Then he called to his squires to get ready to leave.

Roth hobbled along the stream for a short way, and heard Dyaganos coming back through the trees before he saw him.

"Looks like you found something there. What ill-tasting plant have you brought back this time?" he asked Dyaganos.

"Since you seem to have such a keen interest in my expedition, I'll tell you. I found your favorite — dragonberries," he told Roth as he squeezed between some brush, waving a pouch over his head.

"I'm pleased your expedition was successful," Roth told him. "Now we must be getting on with our main adventure. Sir Broden has asked us to ride along with him. I think it might be wise to do so. With me injured, the extra hands could be most helpful."

"I would agree. I take it then you two have some things in common. It ought to be interesting listening while each of you tries to outdo the other with tales of battles and vanquished foes," Dyaganos said while making gestures with his arms as if sword fighting.

"We could start with the one you were telling him about me rescuing you the other day," Roth teased.

They walked back to the horses and mounted up. The five of them, with four packhorses in tow, headed again for Bane's Meadow. Just as Dyaganos predicted, Sir Broden told stories, which Roth tried to match. In fact, this was getting most interesting to Dyaganos. Roth had not said too much thus far about his adventures while they traveled together, but the natural competitive spirit between two warriors was different than between he and Roth. Roth had some pretty good tales to share too. By late afternoon though it was becoming almost more than Dyaganos could bear. He'd heard more stories of battles and close calls than he thought two people could have ever survived. He wasn't sure at this point how much of it he believed, if any.

As the sun began setting they stopped and made camp in a clearing at the top of a knoll about fifty yards off the road. From this vantage point the immense mountain range to the north took on new prominence. The low sun glistened off the snowcapped range, as the peaks poked above clouds painted pink and orange by the red-orange light. One gigantic peak in particular was so much higher than the rest that only the base of it was visible below the dense shroud of gray clouds surrounding it. The covering of clouds was so high they blended into the darkening sky and disappeared as if by magic. It was as though the mountain itself pierced into another dimension not of this land.

The boys took the horses down to a creek for watering, and Dyaganos set about preparing supper. Roth and Sir Broden were still swapping stories when the boys returned and busied themselves with setting up camp. Pointing north, Roth asked Sir Broden, "What mountains are those?"

"Those mountains are called the Pillars of the Sky," Sir Broden explained. "The common folk believe those mountains hold up the edge of the sky. They say the moon has to pay tribute to those mountains before it can pass into the sky. It's silly superstition, of course. The tallest peak there, completely covered by clouds, is called Dragon's Throne. It's impossible to climb. They say no one's ever been there. It's said it is so cold there, and the wind is so wild, that if you don't freeze solid to the rock first, the wind will blow you away. Supposedly the only thing that can reach the top is a dragon."

"Can you ever see it, Dragon's Throne peak I mean?" Roth asked.

"Sometimes in the late autumn the clouds will clear out, but there is still a lot of haze. You can make out the shape, but usually can't see much detail. It's said that mountain range is the ancestral home of the Dwarves, and a lot of dwarves do live in those mountains. Nobody bothers them much. The terrain is far too rough and it's too cold up there. No one has ever crossed those mountains to my knowledge, except those who claim the dwarves have taken them under the mountains all the way from Icehammer Trading Post on this side to whatever is on the other side."

"You don't know what is on the other side?" Roth asked in surprise.

"Sorry, can't say that I do. I've spent all of my life to the south. I hear tales of wild lands, strange beasts and wondrous magic across those mountains. You know, the usual superstitious drivel. The Dwarves spread most of it to keep people away, I think. I never put any credence to any of it. Frankly, I never wanted to find out. You're not thinking of traveling that way, are you?" he asked Roth.

"I hadn't considered it, actually. I'm on a quest of sorts, and I'll travel wherever that takes me. Maybe tonight I'll tell you all about it."

They joined in to help set up the tents with little else said, and prepared for supper. After eating, the stories continued, though they weren't quite as wild as the earlier ones. Roth finally got around to telling the story about his

grandfather, Sir Dazman and the dragon, just as he'd told it back at the tavern in Chelting. The two boys seemed quite fascinated by this story in particular. Roth realized this, and was so intent on making the most of it with his theatrics, he didn't notice the way Sir Broden was reacting, but Dyaganos did. The old man recognized the same look of revelation on Sir Broden's face that he himself must have had at the tavern when Roth told it to him. He had the feeling Roth was about to get another piece to the puzzle. As for himself, he was perhaps one step closer to finding that amazing spell.

Chapter Fifteen



Festival

When Roth finished the story, the two boys congratulated him on such fine storytelling. Dyaganos watched intently to see what Sir Broden would do. He was willing to wager the knight had some information about Dazman.

"That was a most fascinating story, Roth," Sir Broden told him. "I don't know when I've heard a more interesting tale. Quite a bit different than the swaggering battle sagas we swapped all day."

"Well, it is different, I agree. It's the closest thing I have to a family history. I heard these tales about my grandfather all my life. I suppose that's why I decided long ago to try to be like him. Since I completed my two year's of service with the Silverblade Dragoon, I've been wandering about keeping my eyes and ears open for anything I could find out about him."

"Yes. Well, perhaps then you will be interested in what I have to say. Do you remember earlier today I said that something about you made me think we had met before?" Sir Broden asked Roth.

"Yes, I remember you saying something like that. Why?"

"Now I know what it was I was trying to remember. I heard those stories too. In fact, when I was squire to Sir Haygarth of Trevor, he told me of his own experience. Sir Haygarth was in that very tavern when the Red Dragon came. The only thing he actually saw was the Red Dragon flying away, but there's no doubt in my mind it was the same event. In fact, it was in Bane's Meadow, well over fifty years ago, maybe sixty years ago, at this very festival when it happened. Sir Dazman was there. Sir Haygarth spoke of Sir Dazman in his story, and when I heard your name, it triggered those memories," Sir Broden explained.

"What did he tell you of my grandfather?" Roth asked with much interest.

"Sir Haygarth spoke of your grandfather quite highly, as I recall. I believe they served together in some campaigns for Lord Thorngate. His stories of Sir Dazman were inspiring for a young squire like myself, just as your story tonight has been an experience for young Winston and John. That is as it should be."

"Do you know anything of my grandfather of recent? I mean, well, I don't suppose you know anything of him now?" Roth asked, knowing full well the answer.

"I wouldn't want to give you false hope, you understand. I don't believe Sir Dazman, or any man, would normally live to be the age your grandfather would be if he were alive today. So, I will tell you something with the understanding that it is hearsay, and so implausible as to sound ridiculous. Nevertheless, it is what I heard. About two years ago, perhaps a little less, I heard someone speak of Sir Dazman. I was curious because I remembered the stories about him from long ago, so I listened in on the conversation. I heard the man say he knew someone who claimed to have seen Sir Dazman some years ago, and that he was living at the time with an obscure brotherhood of priests. He also said the priests made him promise not say where this was. When I heard that I mostly dismissed the tale. It smacked too much of sheer fantasy. Besides, to my count Sir Dazman would have been in his nineties by then. Not only that, but why would he join a priesthood? I had nearly forgotten it until you told your story tonight," Sir Broden told him. "It is surely only rumor, nothing more. It's best forgotten."

"I see," Roth said, a bit disappointed, yet grateful for the information. It was, as Sir Broden said, perhaps as ridiculous a tale as any he'd ever heard. Yet, he would keep it with him. Any hope was better than no hope.

Sir Broden stood up. "Well then, I think it is time this tired old knight got his rest. We should reach Bane's Meadow tomorrow, and I must look fit for the crowds. It is still four days until the tournament, but people will already be gathering for the jugglers and jesters and vendors from many places. You should have time to see many sights before the real festivities start. Tomorrow then, gentlemen."

"Have a good sleep," Roth told him.

Dyaganos had been quietly sitting opposite them at the campfire. He had not said a word most of the evening. Roth looked at him now, seeing the disappointment in the old man's face.

"It is so? Would he be so old?" Dyaganos asked.

Roth knew he had to come out with it now. "I suppose I should have said something, but it was only in the past few days that I thought about it, and took time to count back to discover for myself how old he would be now. I had not the heart to say anything to you about it. There is still hope, though. I think Sir Broden has given me that. We must believe it is possible he is still alive, or we have no reason to go on."

"It is a vaporous dream at best, and you know it."

"Perhaps, but think about it. Look what has happened in just a few days. I found you, and you have the stone. You thought the stone was a fool's purchase until I came along. Now you know what it truly is. Then by chance we meet Sir Broden, who has a tale he has heard, and it gives us hope. How many coincidences does it take to make a truth? I for one have to believe it is possible," Roth pleaded.

Dyaganos stared a bit, then said, "Oh, I suppose it is a possibility still. I would not hang another hat on it. Since I've already hung my hat on it once, I will see it through until I am convinced that there is no hope left. Besides, what else is there for me to do? It's too far to turn back now. We will see what fate hands us in Bane's Meadow."

"Good then. We will see what fate hands us. Let's get some sleep," Roth told his companion. "Tomorrow is another day."

"We'll make the best of it," Dyaganos assured him. "First though, let's check that bandage and put a fresh poultice on your leg. Then we can get some sleep."

They woke before sunrise. The air was chilly, and the skies remained clear, as they had been for most of this trip. Except for the misfortune of being attacked by the highwaymen, their luck with everything else, including the weather, had been very good. The five of them broke camp by sunrise, and were on their way to the festival. They passed groups of people walking or leading pack animals, obviously headed to the festival also. It looked like there was going to be quite a crowd. It took most of the day to reach Bane's Meadow, but they entered the town before sundown.

There were campsites along the road at the edge of town, and vendors with carts and simple stands draped with colorful cloth along the streets. The children ran along following Sir Broden as he rode by.

Sir Broden explained he already had lodging waiting for him at the castle of Lord and Lady Drayloch on the east side of town. It was the custom for the host of the tournament to board his guests, and Sir Broden was obliged to accept. He recommended a good place for Roth and Dyaganos to find a room. He bid them good day, saying he hoped to see them at the tournament three days hence. It was evening now, so they would have two more days to explore the town, and see the sights. Roth's leg would have some time to heal better than it had atop his horse.

They soon found the inn Sir Broden recommended, the Blue Pheasant, but the prices were higher than they expected. With so many people in town, rooms were already scarce. Only the better inns had rooms left because many folks simply couldn't afford them. With Roth's leg like it was, they decided it was better to have a room with a hot bath available than to continue camping at this point. His leg needed to heal, and it was stiff from not being used. Furthermore, the splint was rubbing sores and needed to come off and stay off. A hot bath would be just the thing.

There was a stable associated with the inn, and they boarded the horses there. Once settled, they both took hot baths, and ate a hot meal. They slept well that night.

After a hearty breakfast the next morning, they decided to walk around and see what they could see. Dyaganos thought Roth could walk on the leg now, so long as he didn't flex it too much. It needed the exercise, and there would be much soreness to work out.

There were crowds in the streets, and vendors with all manner of wares for sale, from exotic pottery and porcelain from faraway places, to baked apples on a stick. Colorful fabrics, and furriers showing off fine cloaks, and minstrels singing, and jugglers, acrobats and balancing acts of every description combined to make the atmosphere one of excitement and wondrous entertainment.

"I do believe this is the largest festival I have ever seen," Roth told Dyaganos. "Look at that. That man is shoving a sword down his throat! I never thought of using it for that," he teased.

Dyaganos laughed at the thought of Roth eating a sword. Then he saw someone eating fire from a small torch. He thought of his first experience with the great red stone and wondered how the man could avoid cooking his face.

They looked at the shops, and stopped in a tavern for a midmorning drink. Here too, minstrels were singing and telling tales of great knights and damsels in distress. Everywhere there was song and dancing, as well as the expected episodes of drunken rowdiness.

They lunched off the food vendors, sampling tasty pastries of unusual origin, and cooked meats of questionable origin. By evening they were ready to sit and watch the fire at the inn, and enjoy another hot meal they wouldn't have to cook themselves.

After their meal they talked for awhile, and then Dyaganos went to his room. Roth struck up a conversation with an older gentleman, who turned out to be a town official. Thinking that a town official might know about the Red Dragon episode from so long ago, Roth told the man about his grandfather, Sir Dazman, and the Red Dragon. He hoped he could learn the location of the inn where this all took place, since Sir Broden claimed it happened right here.

The official said it had indeed happened here, but the tavern had burned a few years ago. He told Roth the innkeeper at that time died many years ago, but the innkeeper's daughter was still living here. He suggested Roth visit her if he wished, and told him where to find her. Roth was quite excited with this news.

He thanked the man and excused himself. It was late, and tomorrow would be the official start of the local festivities in preparation for the next day's tournament. Roth decided he would visit the woman early the next morning before the crowds became too large. Roth stopped at Dyaganos' room to tell him what he had learned, but he could hear heavy snoring through the door, so he went on to bed.

The next morning at breakfast Roth told Dyaganos what he learned from the town official the night before.

"I want to go out to see her as soon as I finish eating. The fellow said she lives just outside of town, down the southeast road. You want to come along?" he asked Dyaganos.

"Well, actually, I had planned something else. There is supposed to be an apothecary on the north edge of town. Nothing you would be interested in seeing, I'm sure. I want to visit there and try to find a few items I need, and perhaps sell a few things I picked up along the road on our way here. With any luck, I'll leave there with more money than I went in with. Why don't you go ahead and visit this lady, and I'll run my errand. Then we'll meet here at noon. That way we'll get more done."

"That sounds reasonable," Roth agreed. "The fellow said it was just a fifteen minute ride. I could easily be there and back before noon. Alright, that's what we'll do."

When they finished eating, Dyaganos took his bag of roots and herbs and walked up the street to find the apothecary. Roth saddled Graymist and rode out of town down the southeast road. As he left town, the aroma of vendors' foods and spices gave way to the smells of warm hay in the sunshine, and fragrances of wild flowers. The sun's warmth quickly faded under the occasional shade of trees along the road, punctuating the reality of the cool autumn air. Still, it was perfect weather for any kind of outdoor activity, especially a festival.

He passed quite a few people, many of them families with children, walking or riding carts toward town. Some were carrying baskets filled with homemade items or baked goods they hoped to sell to the festival crowds.

Before he knew it, he came upon a small stone cottage some thirty yards back from the road in a clearing. It fit the description the town official gave him. There were two dogs barking in the yard, and some chickens. Clothes hung drying on a line strung between two small trees beside the house.

He rode up the path to the cottage and dismounted. Though his leg was much better it was still sore, and he walked with an obvious limp. The dogs continued barking, but they kept their distance, so Roth went to the door and knocked. He heard footsteps and a tapping sound on a wooden floor, like someone walking with a limp, or maybe a cane. In a moment the door opened a foot or so, and a face peered at him around the edge of the door. It was an old lady, with stringy white hair, who looked as though she might have been quite lovely years ago, but age had gotten the best of her.

"What do you want?" she asked, sounding annoyed at being bothered.

"I'm looking for Rebecca, daughter of Miles the innkeeper. Do I have the right house?" he asked her, smiling that easy smile he had when dealing with nervous people he wanted to calm.

"That's me, Rebecca. Have been all my life. If you're selling something, I'm not interested. If you want to rob

me, you won't find anything. I don't have any money. Now go away," she ordered.

"You don't understand. Sire Longthorpe told me where to find you. I'm looking for my grandfather, Sir Dazman of Glenngolden."

"Well, you won't find him here, sonny, now go away," she said and started to shut the door. Roth slipped the toe of his boot in the door so it wouldn't shut all the way.

"If you will but listen a moment. I'm not looking for my grandfather so much as I am looking for anyone that knows about him, or might know stories about him. Sire Longthorpe said your father's inn was the place where the great Red Dragon came and turned a maiden into a golden statue and then smashed a coach and tore up the town many years ago. Do you remember that?"

In a moment the door opened again, and the old lady peered out at Roth, squinting her eyes as if trying to better see.

"Well, I'll be, you have silver hair just like him. So, you're looking to find Sir Dazman, are you? Hmmm, what did you say your name was?"

"Roth. Roth of Dazman."

The door swung open full now and she invited Roth in. He ducked to enter the low opening, and she shut the door behind him. He looked around at the cottage. It was very plain, but clean and neat. Rebecca shuffled with her cane over to an odd looking chair and sat down. He could tell it had been painted with colorful decorations many years ago, but much of it was worn off or chipped off now. The odd thing about it was that the legs ended in what looked like curved sled runners made of wood. When she sat down, it rocked backward, then forward, like a drunk teetering on wobbly legs. As it rocked back and forth, either it or the floor squeaked, though he couldn't tell which.

"Sit down, make yourself comfortable," she said, pointing with her cane to a bench by the window. Roth didn't see anything comfortable about it, but he sat anyway.

"That's a most unusual chair you have," he told her. "What do you call it?"

"I call it mine," she answered in no uncertain terms. "Now, what was it you wanted to know about your grandfather, young Roth?"

Chapter Sixteen



The Search for Roth

As soon as all the lights were out in the village, Zeebak took the spellbook he'd found and slipped out the back door of the old apothecary, then made his way to the edge of town. Once he was sure no one had seen him, he headed straight to where he knew Ondra would be. The night was cool, and though the clouds were a little denser than earlier in the evening, the crescent moon was still easily visible. It took over an full hour to reach their meeting place, where she had waited patiently for his return.

"I was beginning to worry when I didn't hear from you," Ondra said. "You usually aren't gone for so long."

"I have wonderful news," he told her with a smile. "I came upon some very promising information that led me to several towns, and finally to a village called Chelting where Roth has been recently, within the past two weeks in fact."

"Oh, that's wonderful, my sweet. Then you've found Roth?"

"I haven't actually found him, though I believe I know where he has gone. That's what I wanted to tell you about. I have a problem I must resolve first before I can help look. I want you to try to locate him while I take care of the problem." Then he held up the book for her to see. "I found this spellbook. It has an incantation that may give us some information about Dazman, but I can't cast such a spell. We must get someone with learned magic to use this spell. You will have to do that as well. Let me explain the situation and you will better understand."

He told her the whole story from the time he found the thief who stole the great red stone, until he tracked down the fact that a magician named Dyaganos now had it. He told her about having to wait for the henchmen to show up in Chelting so he could take care of them before he could continue tracking Roth. Then he explained about the spellbook. She said it would not be difficult to find a wizard powerful enough to cast the spell, but getting the necessary things together might prove to be the most difficult part. He explained she would have to go to Bane's Meadow to try finding Roth and Dyaganos, and the red stone. Then the spell could be tried, in hopes of finding out more about Sir Dazman. Even if it didn't work, just finding Roth was enough of a reward for their long eight years of searching and wondering what had happened to him.

They had little time before he had to make his way back toward Chelting. He told her how to reach Chelting and which way to go to reach Bane's Meadow. They agreed to meet again in two weeks if they had not made contact before then. They said good-bye as Ondra headed for Bane's Meadow with the spellbook. Zeebak hurried back to Chelting, arriving just an hour before dawn. He returned to the apothecary, being sure no one saw him. He didn't need to be explaining what he was doing wandering around in the night, in the event there were still some here who did not yet trust him. He didn't want to do anything to create undue suspicion.

Ondra continued on her way to Bane's Meadow, arriving barely before dawn. She walked out of a dense patch of woods outside the town and onto the southwest road, and was joined in her trek by others who were also on their way there for the festival. Blending into such a crowd made things so much simpler. She didn't have to worry about being a stranger in town since there were a great many other strangers in town for the coming tournament.

She listened to many conversations, and from what people were saying she gathered that today was the official start of the festival, with the jousting tournament set for the next day. As she neared the main area of town, there

were more and more people, vendors, jugglers and all sorts of entertainment. She soon realized that her cover here was also going to be her biggest drawback. With so many people gathered for the festival, not only could she be lost in the crowd, but Roth and Dyaganos could also. She felt sure she would recognize Roth instantly, but she only had a description of Dyaganos gleaned from the people of Chelting. He'd been described as an old man with gray hair about a balding head, gray beard braided on each side, and probably wearing a robe, none of which was uncommon with so many people at the festival.

Where would she look first, she wondered? Should she try the taverns, or watch the streets, or check every shop? Why, they could be anywhere. Perhaps they were staying at an inn, or they could be camping outside town. Maybe she could try the inns and ask about anyone with unusual silver hair like hers. Surely that would be something people would remember. Of course, there was no guarantee anyone would even pay attention to oddly colored hair in this carnival atmosphere. Still, it was worth a try.

She knew one thing. She had to be slow and methodical. She would have to take things one step at a time, being sure she left nothing out. She needed a logical plan of action. She wandered about town, looking the area over, trying to decide how to best go about this. She was half hoping Roth would walk right up to her and ask directions, but that could actually prove to be a bad thing. She would have to be sure he didn't see her. She eventually found herself on the north edge of town and decided this was as good a place to start as any. She would just begin by going down the street, looking in every place, and spending more time asking questions in places that seemed logical, like an inn or tavern.

The first shop sold clothing, but it was ladies' clothing. She couldn't resist stopping to admire some lovely silvery fabric that caught her eye, but this was wasting time. There was no reason why two men would have visited here. She left and went into the next shop, a haberdashery.

"Good morning my lady," a slim balding man greeted her. "What can I help you with today?"

"Good morning to you. I was hoping you could help me find my husband. He came this way earlier. I thought he might have come in here, a tall man with silver hair like mine. Have you possibly seen him?"

"I'm afraid not, my lady. I would have noticed someone with such unusual, and stunning hair such as yours. No, I'm quite certain no one has been in here with such hair."

"Perhaps earlier this week? He might have come in here before today."

"No, I'm afraid not. As I said, I would have noticed silver hair. That's not very common. Where are you folks from?"

"Oh, we're from far east of here. It's quite common where we come from."

"Yes, I see. Well, I'm sorry, I can't help you. Are you sure I can't show you something?"

"No, but perhaps you might have seen my father-in-law. He's about seventy, balding with long gray hair. His beard may be braided on the sides, wears a robe, perhaps blue or violet? Have you seen anyone like that?"

"No, my lady. I don't get many customers in here wearing robes. I'm sorry."

"Oh, that's quite alright. I'm sorry to have troubled you. Thank you anyway," she said as she turned to leave.

"When you find him, maybe he could come in for a fitting," the clerk called to her, but she continued out the door and down the street.

This part of town was busy, but it was far less crowded than the center of town. She looked carefully at everyone on the street, hoping to find Roth. Next she came to a cobbler's shop, and went in. The smell of leather was very pleasant, she thought.

"Excuse me, is anyone here?" she called.

"Just a moment, I'll be right out," came a man's voice from the back. An overweight man with red hair, and smoking a pipe, came through a curtain and greeted Ondra.

"Good morning. What can I do for you this fine day?"

"I was looking for my husband and my father-in-law. They said they were going to come by here to see about some shoes, and I seem to have lost them in the crowd."

"Oh, yes. It's quite easy to get lost during the festival, with so many folks about. It's good for business though. So, what do they look like? Maybe I can help you," he said with a most pleasant smile.

"A tall man with silver hair like mine, and an older man, with gray hair, balding, gray beard braided on the sides, wearing a robe. Have you seen either of them?"

"Humm," he muttered as he thought, staring at the ceiling for a moment. "Can't say I have. I know no one like that has been here today. Don't recall anyone fitting that description in here all week in fact. Are you sure they were

coming here? There is another cobbler near the center of town. Perhaps they were going there," he suggested.

"Yes, maybe I am confused. I'm sorry to have troubled you."

"Oh, that's alright. It's nice to have a lovely young lady as yourself visit my shop," he said with a silly grin. "Come back anytime."

"Yes, well, thank you," she said, leaving quickly.

She went from shop to shop down this street, with no luck. Then she turned down a side street, trying a bakery, and a tailor's shop, and then she came to an apothecary.

"Ah," she said quietly to herself, remembering what she had been told about the old man. "An apothecary. That's what Dyaganos did before he left to adventure with Roth. He had an apothecary."

When she entered, the smells of a hundred different leaves and spices and herbs greeted her nose. Some were pleasant, and some were not so pleasant. "Hello, anyone here?" she called out.

Almost instantly she heard footsteps, and a door opened near one corner. A slim man of undeterminable age came in. He wore a dark green robe, and had long reddish sandy hair with gray beginning to show, bushy eyebrows and a short beard.

"Good morning to you. How nice to have such a lovely visitor this morning. How may I help you with your medicinal needs?" the man said softly, smiling, giving a slight nod of his head as if to bow. Unknown to Ondra he was actually taking a peek at his ring, as was his custom after so many years. To his surprise he noticed the clear stone had turned cloudy, a sure indication that something was not as it seemed. This was starting out as a most unusual day, he thought to himself. This was the second time today his ring had told him some strong magic was present, and it wasn't yet midmorning.

"Well, good morning to you," Ondra said, taken with the man's apparent gentile nature. "I was hoping you could help me locate my husband and my father-in-law. I seem to have lost them in the crowd, and knowing my father-in-law's interest in herbs, I thought he might have come in here."

"Only too glad to help, my lady," he said in a quiet voice.

"My husband is tall, with silver hair like mine, and my father-in-law is bald, with gray hair around the sides, gray beard braided on the sides, and..."

"And wears a robe like mine, I suppose," the man added.

"Why, yes, as a matter of fact he does," Ondra said with surprise. "How did you know that?"

"Oh, just a guess. You said he was interested in herbs. It was a logical assumption," he lied. "Give me a moment, and I will check with my assistant. Perhaps he has talked to someone today that fits either description."

He disappeared back through the door where he came out. Then he slipped through a back room, picking up an odd looking pair of spectacles with dark green glass, and came out the other side of the room into a hallway. A heavy burgundy curtain covered the end of the hall that opened onto the front of the shop. He put the spectacles on and peeked around the curtain at Ondra. Peering through the magical device her aura was unmistakable. He nearly choked before he caught himself. It wasn't everyday his luck was this good. He quickly removed the spectacles and returned the way he had come, entering the shop front through the door again. He smiled at Ondra and gave her the good news.

"As a matter of fact, he has seen someone fitting the description of your father-in-law. Actually, it was just this morning, not two hours ago. I was busy and didn't really notice much about him. I only caught a glimpse, but now that I think about it, that does sound like the man I saw. I believe he bought some herbs, and in fact," he paused for a moment as if thinking, "why yes, I think he was the one we purchased a few unusual items from as well. He brought in some hard-to-find roots, for which there is always a demand. Could this possibly be your father-in-law?"

"Yes, that was probably him," she said, sensing deception, but not with ill intent.

"Did you find out anything else interesting while you were in the back checking with your...assistant?" Ondra asked him, cutting her eyes momentarily toward the burgundy curtains.

Her tone and inflection left him no doubt she was aware he had been watching her from behind the curtain. Realizing he had been found out, or at least his interests had been severely compromised, he tried to make the best of it. He knew this was a wondrous opportunity that could turn out to be very beneficial, or very dangerous, depending upon how he responded to it.

Chapter Seventeen



Remembrances of a Red Dragon

Roth was still looking at the funny chair with runners, watching Rebecca rock back and forth in it, wondering what it would be like. He was most curious to try it, but decided to get to the point for now. Perhaps she would let him try it before he left.

"Yes, my grandfather. Well, as I said outside, I wish to find out about him. I could tell you a long story about him, but basically, I came to Bane's Meadow hoping to meet people who had seen him or heard of him. He killed the Red Dragon some sixty years ago that came to this town and smashed a carriage just outside your father's tavern and carried off a young lady. I was hoping you would know something about this."

"That was a long time ago, young man. I was just a little girl then. I don't remember things so well anymore, but I remember that day like it was yesterday. Me and Mother, we helped Father in the tavern, you know, and I helped Mother in the kitchen. I was helping wash dishes that day. There was a little window by the wash tub to let light into the kitchen, and I enjoyed looking outside. It was Festival time, and there were many people going by the tavern. Lots of things for a little girl to see. When you're that young and not knowing much about the world, all those things seemed wondrous. At Festival it seemed as though the world came to us, all kinds of colorful clothes and jugglers, and minstrels from everywhere. Then there were the knights that came for the tournament. I was fascinated by those knights. Their shiny armor and their big horses, it was all so exciting for a little girl."

She had the cane lying across the arms of the chair in front of her now, resting her folded arms on it. Her eyes were closed, as if looking into the past, remembering. Roth wasn't even sure if she realized he was still there. She rocked constantly back and forth with the steady rhythmic creak of wood as she spoke.

"Being around the tavern, I always heard stories of knights and such. I heard lots of stories about Sir Dazman, but I don't really remember them. I just remember that I heard them, and he was said to be a great man and a brave knight. I remember it because he was staying at the tavern. When he was in the dining hall for a meal, I would take peeks from behind the counter when Father wasn't looking. He was a handsome man, with the most wonderful silver hair I had ever seen. There was something about that hair that fascinated me to no end. I could hardly take my eyes off it. Whenever Father came back from the tables where he could see me I would scurry back to the kitchen."

She opened her eyes and looked at Roth.

"Your hair looks just like his. Looks different in the sunlight too. Amazing. Never saw anybody else with hair like that until you came along."

"It does seem to run in the family. My mother and father both had silver hair, and my great uncle Zeebak too. That is all the family I ever knew. My mother and father were killed when I was little, and I never got to meet my grandparents," Roth told her.

"I don't understand that," she said. "Why, less than, oh, maybe ten years ago, when I was still able to get around, I was at the festival, and I heard someone speak of Sir Dazman as if he were still alive. Don't tell me he never saw you."

She stopped her rocking for a moment and leaned forward.

"Now that I think about it, I suppose he would have to be more than ninety years old now, the way I figure,

maybe a hundred. I suppose they were wrong after all. He would be very, very old if he were alive. You say you never saw him at all?" Rebecca asked.

"I'm afraid not. I don't ever remember him anyway. My uncle Dru and aunt Eldemere raised me, and they told me stories about him, but he never came to see me. Great Uncle Zeebak used to visit all the time, but I haven't seen him or Uncle Dru or Aunt Eldemere in eight years, since I left home and started adventuring. I've been looking for Grandfather ever since. You're the first person I ever met who said they personally saw him."

"Well, as I said, he was handsome, and had that silver hair. That's all I can say I remember. So, as I was telling you, I didn't get to see him much, but I remember the day the dragon came. I remember it well, all too well."

She leaned back and began rocking again. The steady squeak returned.

"That day I saw him walk by the window, and I looked the first chance I got to see if he came in. Sure enough, there he was, talking with some other fellows. They were dressed like your grandfather, so I knew they were knights or warriors too. Then I had to get busy with dishes, because we were very busy during the festival. We made more money during Festival than any other time of the year. I only got to see the festival through the window, but after the festival, Father would always buy me a new dress or something special, because that was when he had a little extra money. Anyway, he was there, and I was washing dishes at the window when a beautiful coach pulled up in front, and a fine dressed lady got out. I could tell she was coming into the tavern, so I peeked again when I could. I saw her sitting with Sir Dazman, and the other men had left them alone."

"That could have been my grandmother," Roth told her. "I wager that's who it was. Do you remember what she looked like?"

"I remember she was a pretty lady, with very nice clothes. Her dress was prettier than anything Father ever got for me, and I remember wanting to get one like that. Anyway, I had to hurry back and wash more dishes before Father caught me. Mother knew I would sneak a look sometimes, but she never said anything. Later, I saw the lady outside again, walking to the coach. A very big man in fancy clothes came up to her and started talking, and then all of a sudden the lady froze still. She turned sort of yellow, and then she was shiny, just like polished gold. Then the man turned into a great ugly Red Dragon right in front of my eyes, and I screamed and fell off the stool I was standing on. Mother ran over and I guess Father came in and I screamed something about a dragon. I guess Mother saw it too because I remember she screamed. Father picked me up and carried me into the cellar, and told Mother to get in there too, and he shut the door. That's all I know, except what people said later about the dragon carrying the lady off, smashing rooftops and scaring people half to death."

She stopped rocking and looked Roth right in the eye. "You ever seen a Red Dragon, young man?" she asked him.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't," Roth answered.

Rebecca's eyes became cold and they glazed over for a moment. "It's the ugliest, vilest thing I ever saw in my whole life. I hope I never see another one. I don't think I would live through it. You better hope you never see one either," she said, poking her cane in the air at him.

She leaned back in her chair and began rocking slowly again, but she said nothing. She just looked at him in silence.

Roth had no doubt that he never wanted to see a Red Dragon, but the way Rebecca had looked at him gave him chills. It must have done something to her, seeing such a monstrous evil creature at close range, and her being so young. He would wager she had nightmares about it for most of her life. He was surprised she had even talked to him about it. Roth said nothing else. He just smiled and watched her rock. He was afraid he had stirred up old memories she might rather have left alone. He waited.

After a couple of minutes Rebecca stopped rocking and looked out the window. Then she turned back to Roth.

"You know, ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to ride on a big horse like yours; a big horse like the knights use in the tournaments. Why do you have a horse like that when you don't look like a knight?" she asked him. This wasn't exactly the kind of question Roth was expecting.

"Well, you see, I am a warrior of sorts. I suppose with my grandfather's influence, you know, the stories about him that I was told all my life, I decided to try to become like him. In my travels I picked up Graymist. That's my horse. It's best for a warrior to have a proper horse."

"He looks like a mighty fine one," she said wistfully.

Roth caught a look on Rebecca's face, an almost childlike wishful look, as she watched Graymist through the window while he talked. Then it dawned on him what she had been trying to ask, but for some reason didn't.

"Listen, I know he would be very gentle. Would you like to sit on him for a bit, maybe have me walk him around the yard with you?"

"Oh, goodness," she said, waving her hand at Roth. "I'm much too old for that sort of silliness. Besides, I couldn't get on a horse. I can't even walk around so well."

Though she tried to dismiss the idea, she kept looking out the window.

"Well, I could bring him over to the front stoop, and between that and my height I could set you on him gently. I'm quite sure it would be alright. You could get down anytime you wanted to. Just tell me and I'd get you down."

"Don't be silly. I might fall off."

Roth could tell she was wavering.

"Alright, what if I bring him to the stoop and you can just pet him? He'd like that. Do you have any apples or carrots? You would make a friend for life if you gave him one," Roth told her.

"Well, I suppose I could do that," she said smiling big. "I do have some carrots. Just a minute while I get one."

Rebecca got up slowly and accompanied her cane to the next room, returning very shortly with two carrots that looked freshly pulled. Roth opened the front door for her and they went out to the stoop. Roth called Graymist, and he trotted over to them and nuzzled Roth's outstretched hand with his nose.

Rebecca eased over and pulled out a carrot, holding it out for the horse. Graymist nuzzled her hand, and then wrapped his lips around the carrot and bit it in two. Rebecca hooked her cane over her arm and petted his nose. It was soft as silk. She smiled. She stroked his nose again and again, marveling at the softness of such a huge animal. Graymist mouthed the rest of the carrot and she let it go. It was gone. He nuzzled the hand where the carrot had been, so she gave him the other carrot. She rubbed the side of his huge head, staring into the big brown eye blinking back at her. All she could do was grin.

Roth just watched this with a smile of his own. He knew she wanted more than anything else to ride Graymist.

"I think he likes you," Roth encouraged. "I know he'll be still right here if you want to try sitting on him."

Rebecca just petted his head, rubbing down his great neck, and finally to his shoulder. Graymist twitched his skin and shook his head gently. Rebecca just petted for another minute or so. Finally she got up the courage.

"Maybe I could sit on him for just a minute."

"Alright," Roth said. "Let me lift you up. You can sit sideways and I'll hold you."

He pulled on Graymist by the saddle to get him closer to the stoop. Then he lifted Rebecca up onto the saddle, and stood facing her with one hand on the front of the saddle, and one hand on the back.

Somehow Graymist seemed to understand, and he stood still, swishing his tail a bit, and twitching his skin.

"Oh, he's so big. I didn't realize I would be so high up. Goodness," she exclaimed, grinning the whole time.

This was a considerable change in her demeanor from when Roth had arrived. He felt like he had at least brought a little fun and excitement into her life, if he had accomplished nothing else this morning.

Rebecca was emboldened by her success thus far, and tried to pull one leg over the saddle, but Roth caught her.

"If I were to get on Graymist, I could pull you up and set you on the saddle, and we could ride around the house. Would you like that?" Roth asked her.

"Oh my, that would be exciting," she said. "You would have to hold on tight."

Roth slipped her down gently and stood her on the stoop.

"You just stand here, and give me a second."

He climbed onto Graymist behind the saddle and moved him back up to the stoop. He told Rebecca to turn around with her back to him, and then he pulled her up onto the saddle, setting her sideways with one arm around her waist.

The grin on Rebecca's face could only be described as being almost as big as Graymist. They rode around the yard very slowly two times.

"This is absolutely wonderful, Roth. This is such fun. I've always wanted to ride a knight's horse. I feel like a little girl again."

Roth had an idea.

"How long has it been since you went to the festival?" he asked her.

"Oh my, it's been awhile. It's too far for me to walk, and I don't have a horse. I used to ride in a cart with the next family down the road, but old James has not been healthy the last few years and they haven't been going. I suppose it's been five or six years since I went to the festival."

"Well, would you like to go?"

"Oh, I would love to, but how would I get there and back?"

"I'll take you. We can ride. It would only take an hour or so to get there on Graymist walking slowly. You would have half the day to see things, and then I can bring you back. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"I don't know. This is all too much for an old lady. I'm not properly dressed, and I would need to take some food."

"You can change and pack something if you like. There is no particular rush."

He fibbed, wondering what Dyaganos would think if he was late. He had promised to be back by noon. Maybe an hour or two wouldn't make any difference.

"How about it?" he asked her.

"That's so far for me to go for just the afternoon. I would be too tired to come back. You don't realize how exhausting that could be for an old lady like me. That's just foolishness anyway."

He could see she wanted to go. He wanted to do something for Rebecca. After all, she was the only person he had ever met that had actually met his grandfather. He had to think of something.

"Maybe you could stay in town."

"Now you are being foolish. There's not a room to be had anywhere, I'd wager. Even if it was, I don't have any money. At least, not any I could spend for such as that."

"Well, do you know anyone in town? Family maybe."

"I don't have any family. Not close around here anyway. Wait a minute, I bet I could stay with Zelda's daughter, Trina. She has a shop on the north side of town. She might have room for me in the back of the shop. It wouldn't be much trouble for one night. Zelda was my best friend for, well, goodness, ever since I was little. She died a few years ago. Trina knows me though. She wouldn't mind, I'm sure. It would be nice to see her."

"It's settled then. You get what you need, and we'll go. I'll take you to the joust tomorrow, and I'll even introduce you to a knight I met earlier, Sir Broden. How about that?"

"My, oh my. I can't imagine, but maybe we could eat lunch first. I could fix us something good, and then you wouldn't be hungry when we got there. Get me down, so I can get busy."

Roth guided Graymist over to the stoop and he gently put Rebecca down. She made herself busy fixing a quick meal, and Roth watered Graymist. Then he asked Rebecca if he could try out her odd chair. She said it was alright. Roth rocked for awhile and rather liked it.

Soon she had a lunch of stewed yams with vegetables ready, and they ate quickly. She gave Roth an apple for Graymist. Then she put on her dressiest dress, which wasn't so dressy, but it was all she had. She packed some more apples and carrots, and bread, and some dried meat in a sack, and they set out for town.

Chapter Eighteen



Palomaine

The man smiled at the beautiful young lady before him, unable to hide the knowing look in his eyes. Now that he knew her true nature, it did not surprise him that she had known what he was doing behind the curtain. He knew it was important to make the best of this opportunity.

"Please forgive my harmless deception, my lady, but in this business it is wise for one to know whom he is dealing with. There are people in this world that would not appreciate my abilities as you perhaps can. I am called Palomaine. I am at your service. Anything you wish, should it be within my power to perform such a task, I shall do so graciously and with pleasure, so long as it is not against my good nature, and not harmful to any good creature of this material plane."

Ondra knew by this that her little deception had been found out as well. His words were those of a wizard wise enough to understand the situation he found himself in. She smiled at him, though she was not at all pleased. It was extremely dangerous for anyone to know about her. It could jeopardize her mission.

"Your candor and discretion is wise. It serves you well. Perhaps our abilities will be mutually beneficial," she told him, not knowing as yet exactly what kind of assistance he was offering, though she had a pretty good idea.

He bowed his head slightly again, and continued.

"The gentleman who came in this morning fits your description. His name, as I recall, was Dyaganos. Is this helpful at all?"

"Dyaganos is the man I seek. Do you know anything of the other man with silver hair?"

"I am afraid I know nothing of him. There are many strangers in town during the festival, so I do not go out much. No one has come here fitting that description, and Dyaganos did not speak of anyone else. We discussed only herbs and medicines. He is apparently very knowledgeable. I should also point out that he had something magical on his person, though I could not detect its exact nature. I know only that it was very unusual, and very strong."

She decided this might be an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak, and she let him in on some more interesting information. It was something of a test of his knowledge as well.

"I believe he has a great red stone with some kind of powerful magic. Do you know anything of this?" she asked.

His face changed, despite his attempt not to show it.

"I know nothing of the nature of his magic, but I have heard the stories of a great red stone. Is this the one said to have been carried by the Red Dragon that terrorized this very town so many years ago? Or is it some other, of which I have not heard?" he asked her.

"I believe it to be the one used by the Red Dragon of which you speak. It appears as though he lost it before his demise, and it has changed hands several times before coming into the possession of Dyaganos."

"Then do you know if he is using it for good purposes, or do you seek him because he is using it for evil purposes?" Palomaine asked with earnest concern.

"I do not believe him to be evil. I also do not believe he would be in the company of the other man whom I seek if he were evil. I believe him to be of good intent."

"That was the impression I had when he was here, though I could have been fooled," Palomaine admitted.

"Perhaps you can be of assistance to me after all," Ondra said. "You may call me Ondra. I may be in town for a few days, at least until I find those whom I seek. May I call on you again?"

"The honor is all mine, Ondra. I would be pleased. You may visit any time, day or night. If the shop is not open, you may place the palm of your hand on the front door and say these words, 'Palomaine, Ondra seeks you', and I will hear them wherever I am. Should I be somewhere else, it may take a few minutes to return, but I will return immediately at your call."

"You could do me a favor in the meantime," she said, reaching into the leather bag she carried by a shoulder strap. She pulled out a large book bound in a deep burgundy leather with faded gold gilt, a book that was much larger than the bag itself, and gave it to him.

"What do you think of this book?" she asked.

He laid it upon the counter, opened it carefully, and flipped through a few pages slowly.

"This is a book of spells. I see nothing out of the ordinary, though a couple have an unusual twist or two. Is there something special you are looking for?"

"Turn to the page which is marked. Tell me what you think of that spell," Ondra told him.

Palomaine found the white ribbon marking a page and read the page with interest.

"Is this Spell of Legends what you are interested in?" he asked.

"That is the one," she said. "Is this something you can do?"

"Hmmm, I would have to study this carefully, but I think it is certainly within my capability. Would this be a service which I may perform for you, Ondra?"

"It may prove useful for me. Your help would be rewarded."

"I would be honored to help," he said. "I require no reward if this is of benefit to you. I must tell you, however, that I cannot guarantee the fruits of this will be easily understood. You may find yourself with more of a riddle than you began with. Such is the nature of this spell."

"Your best effort is all I ask. You may study the book. I will return when I can. Before I go, do you know anything of where I might find Dyaganos?"

"I fear he did not mention where he was from, or where he was going. I do not even know if he is still in town. He may have been passing through. If he should return, what are your wishes?"

"Do not speak of our conversation. He would not understand as yet why I wish to see him. If you can discreetly find out where he is staying then I could approach him properly. I would not wish to alarm him. I will see you then, perhaps tomorrow."

"I await your return, Ondra," he said with a gracious bow.

"Good day to you then, Palomaine."

Ondra turned and left the shop, happy to know that someone had at least seen Dyaganos. She was not very happy, however, about her cover being discovered, but she decided it may not be so bad after all. If Palomaine can work the spell, it would save her much effort in having to call on some acquaintances, and any one of them would have to travel a great distance just for this.

Palomaine had said Dyaganos was there only a couple of hours before she came in. He couldn't have gone far. He was surely in town or very close to town.

It was now almost noon, so she continued down the street, stopping in shops, giving the same descriptions. Before long she came to a tavern and asked the same questions, with no luck. She decided to eat while she was there.

While eating she realized that a better approach might be to check all the inns first. Checking at any place they might be staying would be the most logical thing to do at this point. If she didn't find them, they must be camping. More people would be at the tournament tomorrow, leaving town far less crowded. However, Roth and Dyaganos could then be at the tournament too, which meant just as many people would be even more tightly packed. This was not getting easier.

After she ate, Ondra asked for the name and location of all the inns and taverns and other places in town with rooms for rent. It took all her charm to get that, but she got it. Armed with this information, she began methodically checking each one. Twice she saw balding gray-haired men with beards, wearing robes, and followed them. It turned out neither had braided beards, and someone called each by name, something other than Dyaganos.

Ondra reached the Blue Pheasant late in the afternoon. She walked up to the counter and got the clerk's attention.

"I'm very sorry, my lady, we have no rooms available," he said before she could ask anything.

"I'm not looking for a room. I am trying to locate two friends," she told him. "I believe they said they would be staying here. One is tall with silver hair like mine, and the other is about seventy, balding, with gray hair and gray beard. He wears a robe most of the time."

"Oh, yes, my lady, you mean Master Roth and the other fellow, um..."

"Dyaganos," she filled in, already smiling.

"Yes, Dyaganos. Yes, my lady, they are staying here. I don't think they are here now. Shall I give them a message for you?"

"Oh, no. No, please, don't say anything. I wanted to surprise them. They were not expecting me until tomorrow, and I wish to surprise them this evening. I'll just wait for them if you don't mind."

"That's alright. Just have a seat in the dining room if you like."

"Thank you."

Ondra found a seat in the dining room where she could see people coming by, though it was not a good place to see the front door. Everyone would have to go past here to get to their rooms though, so she was sure she would see them when they arrived.

She ordered some wine, and waited. It would be wonderful to see Roth again, she thought, though she knew she would have to be careful. She could not chance Roth seeing her. She would need to catch Dyaganos by himself.

Within the hour Dyaganos returned from sightseeing, after waiting long past noon for Roth to return before deciding Roth must have misjudged how long his visit would take. Entering the Blue Pheasant, he stopped at the counter to get his key. A different clerk happened to be on duty now.

"Here's your key, sire. I think someone is waiting for you in the dining room."

"Oh, Roth is here."

"No, but she has silver hair just like his."

"She?" Dyaganos asked, quite puzzled.

"Oh, yes. I heard her talking to the other clerk this afternoon. She was asking about you and Master Roth, with the silver hair. She's a pretty young lady."

"Her hair is the same color as his?"

"Yes, sire. Most unusual. Is she family?"

"Oh, I don't really know."

Dyaganos didn't understand this. It was very unusual.

"She's right there in the dining room," he told Dyaganos, pointing with his finger.

"Yes, thank you. Oh my, I forgot something. Here, put my key up. I will be right back," Dyaganos said, and he turned for the front door.

"What about your friend?" the clerk asked him.

Dyaganos didn't wait. He was out the door.

This was most odd, he thought. He wondered who could be here with silver hair asking about them. Who did he know of with silver hair that knew him, or Roth, or both? He wasn't sure he liked this. What should he do? If it was a clue to Roth's family, it was important. Yet, Roth's family was supposedly all dead, with the possible exception of his grandfather or grandmother. The clerk said it was a lovely young lady, so it certainly couldn't be Roth's grandmother. Who else could it be? Besides, no one knew they were here, certainly no one who knew either of them. There was something wrong about it, and he had a bad feeling.

He decided he would wait out here, out of sight, where he could see Roth coming in or putting up his horse. They could discuss it. Maybe there was something Roth wasn't telling him. He walked over closer to the stable, thinking Roth must come to the stable first to put away Graymist. He went inside, and checked on his horses, checked his tack, and pretended to be busy so no one would bother him, hoping Roth would return soon.

A half hour later, Roth came riding in.

"Well, Dyaganos, I didn't expect to find you here. What are you doing with the horses?"

"I'm killing time, trying to stay out of sight. That's what I'm doing here."

"Oh, and what pray tell have you done to be hiding out?" Roth teased.

"The same as you, I'm afraid. Listen, we have to talk. Put up Graymist and..."

"Shall I take your horse, sire?" the stableboy said as he came up to them.

"Uh, yes. See that he gets a rubdown. He's been working hard all day," Roth instructed

"Yes, sire."

The stableboy took the reins, and Dyaganos took Roth by the elbow and led him outside. They ducked into the shadows between the stable and a storage shed.

"As I said, we have to talk. Let's go up to my room."

"Why all the secrecy? What's wrong?" Roth asked.

"Someone is looking for us."

"Who would be looking for us?"

"That's exactly what I am wondering. The clerk said a young lady with silver hair asked for both of us. She's waiting inside."

"That's strange. Why would anyone be look...? Wait. Did you say she had silver hair?"

"Yes. I was told she was quite lovely too," Dyaganos answered.

"I wonder if she's the same one."

"What do you mean the same one? Have you already seen her?"

"No, I haven't seen her, except, well, it's a long story. Let's go and get something to eat and I'll tell you."

"I don't think that would be wise," Dyaganos told him. "We might be seen."

"What has you so nervous?" Roth asked.

"I just don't think we need to be wandering in right now. Think about it. Who knows we are here? What young lady do you know that knows we are here?"

"Well, none that I know of. She does have silver hair, like mine. Right?"

"Exactly. You don't know any young ladies with silver hair, do you?"

He didn't know anyone except his parents and Great Uncle Zeebak that had silver hair, except of course, his grandfather.

"No one but family," Roth answered.

"Alright. Now, do you have a sister?"

"Not that I know of."

"A cousin?"

"I don't know of any."

"Then who is the young lady with silver hair that is looking for both of us? And how do you know about this anyway?" Dyaganos insisted.

"That's what I was going to tell you," Roth answered.

"Then let us get to my room before someone sees us."

Roth started toward the inn but Dyaganos held his elbow.

"No, not that way, we'll be seen," Dyaganos warned.

"So, just how do you propose to go in without using the front door?" Roth asked.

Dyaganos pulled the great red stone out of his robe.

"Put one hand on this," Dyaganos said holding out the stone. Roth looked at him rather puzzled, but he put one hand on it.

Dyaganos covered the stone and Roth's hand with both of his and mumbled something under his breath. They were instantly engulfed in a swirling cloud of colored vapors, with twinkling lights like tiny stars streaming all about them. Roth felt as if he were in slow motion, his brain not quite keeping up with all that was whirling around him.

Chapter Nineteen



Just a Joust

After what seemed an eternity the swirling cloud and lights suddenly were gone. Roth had to steady himself with his legs as if he'd jumped from a speeding wagon and tried to land in one spot without moving. He looked around and recognized he was in a room just like his at the inn, but it wasn't his.

Dyaganos peeled Roth's fingers from the stone, as Roth had not thought to let go of it. When he realized what Dyaganos was doing he let go, still blinking his eyes, slightly disorientated.

"You'll be alright in a minute. We're in my room. Now sit down," Dyaganos told him, motioning to a chair by the small table in the corner.

"I didn't know you could do that, I mean, that I could do that," Roth said in amazement.

"Actually, I didn't either," Dyaganos admitted. "It was worth a try though." He was quite pleased now to know he could take someone with him when he place-shifted. It could prove useful in the future.

"How long were we gone, in the cloud I mean?" Roth asked. It seemed they were in the cloud of lights forever.

"No time at all. An instant maybe, as best I know," Dyaganos answered.

This was all quite amazing to Roth. He was hardly used to magic, and wasn't so sure he liked it that much.

"Tell me how you knew a young lady with silver hair was looking for us," Dyaganos said as he sat down at the table across from Roth.

"I didn't know she was looking for us. I was only wondering if it was the same lady I heard about today."

Roth explained about what had happened at Rebecca's, and why he didn't meet Dyaganos at noon like he promised. He told Dyaganos about giving her a ride back to town for the festival.

"I took her to visit a lady named Trina, the daughter of an old friend of Rebecca's. Trina has a clothing shop on the north edge of town where Rebecca was planning to stay tonight. While we were there, Trina mentioned that someone with silver hair like mine had been in her shop this morning. She said it was a rather nice looking young lady, maybe twenty-three or twenty-five. I asked if she was mistaken, perhaps the hair was white or gray, and she said definitely not. It was silver like mine, just like mine. I didn't know what to think of it."

"Well, when I came in earlier to get my key," Dyaganos explained in turn, "the clerk said a young lady with silver hair was looking for us, and was waiting in the dining room. I didn't know what to make of it, so I left immediately. I waited in the stable for you, hoping to catch you before you went to your room. Is there something you are not telling me, Roth?"

"Just what do you mean?"

"I mean, family. There must be someone else in your family. Who else has silver hair?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's not as unusual as everybody seems to think. I just don't know. I will tell you this though. She sounds interesting to me. I can't imagine why you are so afraid of a young lady. You think she's going to poke you with her sword?" Roth asked him half in jest, and half in agitation. "What are you so afraid of?"

"In the world of magic, things are not always what they seem. I have a strange feeling about this, Roth."

"Magic? What magic. Who said anything about magic?"

"You know, magic. The thing I have been studying for longer than you've been born. That's what magic. I can

tell you there are things in this world you would not believe or understand, even if you saw them with your own eyes, and there are things you should not believe, even if you do see them with your own eyes."

"Alright, but what does magic have to do with the lady with silver hair?"

"I don't know that it has anything to do with her. I'm just saying this is odd, don't you think? Someone with silver hair shows up asking for us. Not asking for you or for me, but asking for both of us. Who knew we were here to start with? If we don't know her, then why is she looking for us?"

"That is a good question. Why don't we just go and ask her? I'm not afraid of her," Roth insisted.

"I'm not afraid of a lady either. Except, what if she isn't what she seems to be?" Dyaganos asked.

"You've been out in the sun too long, or maybe you've been eating too many mushrooms. I'm going down to see her. What if she has information about my family, or Grandfather. Maybe she is related to Great Uncle Zeebak. Perhaps he sent her."

"That's ridiculous. How could he do that? How would he even know where you are?"

"I don't know. I'm grasping at straws here, the same as you," Roth answered.

"Alright, if you are so determined to see her, I will go with you," Dyaganos relented. "Just be careful."

"Then we'll both go," Roth told him. "If she attacks us, maybe two grown men can subdue her."

"Let's not be cynical about this," Dyaganos chided his friend.

"Fine. It just seems you're being overly cautious." After a moment's thought though, Roth decided that if he could learn to trust in Graymist's instincts to keep him out of danger, it might be well to trust in this feeling Dyaganos had, at least for the moment. "If it will make you feel better, my friend, we shall indeed be cautious. Even a tiny spider can be deadly. So, let us go and see this lady."

Dyaganos nodded, and they both walked down the hall, and down the stairs. They approached the dining room, looking all about for the young lady with silver hair. There was a crowd gathering, as it was time for the evening meal. There was laughter and drinking, but there was no silver-haired lady to be found.

"I will ask the clerk," Roth told his friend, and he walked over to the front counter.

"Ah, Master Roth. I see you have come down for dinner," the clerk greeted.

"Uh, yes. I understand there was a young lady with silver hair awaiting us this afternoon. Have you seen her?"

"Why, yes. I told Master Dyaganos that she was looking for the two of you, and he simply ran out the front door, and didn't come back. The young lady left, oh, maybe ten minutes ago. She was a charming sight too. I would not have missed such an opportunity myself for anything but my own funeral," he told Roth.

"Which way did she go?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, sire. She said nothing to me, and I did not see which way she went outside."

"I see. Well then, I suppose I did miss an opportunity, did I not?"

"Yes sire. Perhaps she will return."

"Perhaps," Roth replied. Then he returned to the dining room, and told Dyaganos the news.

"Well, so much for the lady. I suppose she will return if she wants to see us," Dyaganos told Roth.

"I am counting on it," Roth said. "Now, since we are here, we may as well eat. Tomorrow is the tournament, and I would like a good meal and a good night's sleep before I go. Did I mention that Rebecca will be joining us for the festivities?"

Dyaganos shook his head "no".

"I promised to take her and show her a good time."

"Isn't she rather aged?"

"In years, yes, but she is a little girl in spirit. I was surprised by her girlishness. Come, let's eat, and I will tell you more. Oh, and I must tell you about this most wonderful chair she has."

They found a seat and ordered dinner as Roth told Dyaganos more details about his day visiting Rebecca. After dinner they both retired early in preparation for a long day at the tournament.

The night passed quietly, and morning dawned cool and foggy. After breakfast, Roth and Dyaganos rode through the fog to the clothing shop to pick up Rebecca. Roth introduced her to Dyaganos, and they chatted for awhile. Then Roth lifted her onto his horse and all three rode east out of town to Drayloch Keep, where the joust would be held in a nearby meadow.

This was a treat Rebecca had waited for all her life. She just didn't realize how much she had wanted to do this all those years, and never had the chance as a child. It looked as if it might turn out to be a beautiful day, and she was so busy taking in the sights and enjoying being high on a horse, that she hardly said anything the whole way. She

felt like a princess riding on Graymist, with Roth in his chain mail, and blue and white tabard, and his great sword slung over his back. She had dreamed of such a day, but never really thought it would come.

They arrived at Drayloch Keep at midmorning. By then the sun had burned off the fog and warmed the air to a pleasant degree. They followed the crowds to the meadow and the lists. There were colorful banners and crests and heraldry everywhere. Every color of the rainbow was represented in the tents set up at each end of the lists, with flags and shields hung high for everyone to see. The meadow was painted with people wearing equally colorful clothes.

"Dyaganos, let's ride over to Sir Broden's tent. I promised Rebecca I would introduce her," Roth told his companion.

"Do you see it?" Dyaganos asked.

"Down there at the end, next to the yellow and black. Come on."

They pulled up at Sir Broden's tent, and were greeted by Winston, his squire.

"Master Roth and Master Dyaganos, what a pleasure to see you here."

"Good day to you young Winston. We came to see Sir Broden. Is he about?" Roth asked.

"He is attending to his horse, sire. He came up lame yesterday, and I fear Sir Broden will be unable to compete without his horse."

"Where is he?"

"Over there by the fence with John," Winston replied.

"Ah, yes, I see him. Let us give a hand to Lady Rebecca, and I will see Sir Broden. Rebecca, this is Winston, Sir Broden's squire."

"Good morning, Winston," Rebecca said.

"Good day to you, my lady," Winston greeted as he bowed, and then he helped Rebecca down. Dyaganos dismounted and took her arm.

"We shall look around while Roth attends to his business," he told Rebecca.

"I'll take care of the horses," Winston told Dyaganos. "You and the lady fair enjoy yourselves."

"Thank you, Winston," Dyaganos said. "Now, fair lady, shall we stroll the tents and see the sights?"

"Oh, this is wonderful. I can scarcely believe all this. Look at that," she exclaimed as they walked away.

Winston took the horses to the fenced area and removed their saddles and watered them. He could hear Roth and Sir Broden discussing the problem.

"I see. Surely you cannot compete with this horse. I think with rest he will heal, but that does not serve you today, does it?" Roth asked Sir Broden.

"That is indeed my problem. I would try to find another horse, but there is not time."

"Listen, you may ride Graymist. I shall not need him this afternoon. He would serve you well, and he is well trained in the lance."

"That is most generous of you, Roth. Do you think he will accept me?"

"You will have no problem. Just take some time to become familiar with him today before you prepare."

"I don't know how well we can modify the barding for him. He is so big," Sir Broden lamented.

"Sire, I think Winston and myself may be able to work it out. Shall we busy ourselves with it?" John asked.

"Yes, right away. Time is short and we have much to do. Winston, come, we need you," Sir Broden called.

"Perhaps I can be of help," Roth offered.

"You have done enough already, Roth, but if you wish to help, every extra hand will be appreciated."

"Good then. Where should I start?"

Sir Broden directed the work, and all four set about making modifications to the barding to make it workable and comfortable for Graymist. While they were working, Dyaganos and Rebecca came over to see what was going on. Roth explained the situation and the pair quickly made themselves scarce so the four could continue their work.

Dyaganos and Rebecca soon found a good spot to sit and rest. They watched the crowd for awhile as Dyaganos talked about his and Roth's adventures, and Rebecca listened intently. He kept the part about his great red stone to himself, but he told her about the mysterious lady with silver hair. She told Dyaganos the same thing Roth had said, that Trina told them she saw someone fitting that description the morning before.

"Do you really think this lady is dangerous?" she asked Dyaganos.

"Well, not dangerous exactly. We just don't understand why she wants to see us, nor do we know who she is. I am just being cautious," Dyaganos told her.

Rebecca looked at Dyaganos with utter puzzlement.

"If you are so cautious, then why are you out adventuring? How could you call yourself an adventurer, and be so cautious at the same time. Wouldn't that take all the excitement out of adventuring?"

Dyaganos realized she was painfully correct. Perhaps we was being a bit too concerned about a little thing.

"I suppose you have something there," he said.

"Then perhaps you can find out who she is if you talk to her. Is that the young lady with the silver hair you speak of standing over there?" Rebecca said, nodding to his right.

"What?" He turned his head to see a nicely dressed and rather lovely young lady with silver hair standing not fifteen feet away, smiling at him.

Chapter Twenty



Lady in Blue

Dyaganos was dumbstruck. He felt as naked and helpless as he did days ago when the wild boar was raking by his feet and he was scrambling up a slippery rock for his life. Here though, there was nowhere to scramble to and nowhere to hide. His intuition told him this stranger with the silver hair had to be either trouble, or good fortune. He was wagering on the trouble end of the spectrum.

He looked back at Rebecca.

"Well, what are you waiting for? I don't think she'll bite," she told him.

He looked back at the young lady, who was still smiling. Then she broke the silence.

"I take it you are Dyaganos?" Ondra asked him.

He composed himself and stood up.

"I am Dyaganos. How may I help you?"

"Perhaps it is I who can help you," Ondra said. "I wish to speak with you."

"Are you the lady who has been looking for me and my friend?" he asked her.

"Yes. My name is Ondra. I take it this is Rebecca," she said looking at Rebecca.

"Uh, yes. This is Rebecca," he said, wondering how she knew. It seemed as though she knew everybody, but nobody knew her.

"Is there somewhere we can talk?" Ondra asked politely.

"I'm sorry, Ondra, but I don't believe we've met before, have we?" Dyaganos asked.

"No, we have not," she said as she gracefully glided closer. "It is not because I have not tried. You seemed rather reluctant to meet me yesterday. I don't understand why. Is something wrong?"

Dyaganos wondered how she knew about that too. Perhaps the clerk told her after he left.

"Oh, that. No, no. Nothing is wrong. I must apologize, but I had remembered something important I had to do, which took much longer than expected. Uh, I was just wondering how you seem to know me, since we never met. Surely I would remember meeting such a lovely lady as yourself."

"Let's just say I know you through a mutual acquaintance."

"Oh, I see. So, who is this mutual acquaintance, that I might thank him, of course?"

"Your friend Roth, ...in a roundabout way of course."

The old man's eyebrows went up.

"Oh?" Dyaganos said, quite amazed at this, since he didn't believe Roth knew this lady any better than he did.

"Yes, and it is most important I speak with you, in private."

"Can we not talk here?" he asked her.

"I'm afraid this is all very personal. I must beg your pardon," she said, looking at Rebecca. "I do need to speak with Dyaganos alone."

"Goodness me, that's quite alright. That Roth is a fine young man. You would do well to get to know him," Rebecca said. "You two go right ahead. I'm fine right here. I won't go anywhere."

"We'll just be over here, Rebecca," Ondra assured her. "Just speak up if you need anything."

"May we step over here and talk now?" she said, turning to Dyaganos.

"Well, yes, I suppose," he muttered a bit reluctantly.

Ondra and Dyaganos walked about fifty feet away in the meadow, all by themselves. Ondra did most of the talking. Rebecca couldn't hear what they were saying, but she could see all manner of expressions flashing across Dyaganos' face. It seemed as if he couldn't decide what to think, and his face changed constantly, leaving her with no hint whether the news was good or bad. After a couple of minutes she gave up trying to read expressions, and began looking at the crowd again, watching everything else that was going on. She was frankly more interested in the festivities at this point.

Ten minutes later Rebecca noticed they were walking back. Ondra said good-bye, and walked away into the crowd. Dyaganos appeared quite preoccupied in his thoughts.

"So, what did you think of the young lady?" she asked Dyaganos.

"She is most interesting, most interesting," he answered.

"Will you introduce her to Roth then?" she asked.

"In time they will meet, but not today," Dyaganos told her. "I think you should not speak to Roth of this meeting. I need to talk with him before anyone mentions our meeting with Ondra this morning. It's important."

"Well, you are being mysterious, aren't you?"

"Please, Rebecca, it's important."

"Oh, don't worry, I won't say anything, but your face might give you away. You look quite preoccupied."

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm just thinking. Anyway, that was that, and this is now, so, what shall it be my lady? Whither shall I take thee?" he asked, smiling once again.

"Don't overdo it," Rebecca warned. "Your acting isn't that good."

"You wound me deeply, fair madam. I am struck down." He put his hand over his heart as if injured and made a face. Rebecca laughed.

"Let's go watch the jugglers over there."

"Your every wish is my charge and duty. Shall we sally forth?" He helped Rebecca to her feet and took her by the arm. Together they went to see the jugglers and acrobats that were attracting a crowd nearby.

In the meantime, Roth, Sir Broden, and his squires had been working diligently trying to get Graymist prepared for the joust. Sir Broden had called in a leather craftsman, a halfling named Jobo, who had the proper leather working tools. With his assistance they managed to adapt enough of the armor for Graymist. This took so long that Sir Broden had not been able to ride Graymist at all. They were still getting Sir Broden ready when the herald's trumpets sounded, and the processional began forming up.

"Just a moment, sire, one more buckle to do. There, that is it, sire," John said as they readied the last of Sir Broden's armor. "Your helm, sire."

He handed Sir Broden his ornate helmet, with a large white plume on it, and helped guide it over his head.

"The parade is forming. I must go now," Sir Broden told Roth.

"May your lance be sure," Roth told Sir Broden as they shook hands. Then he walked over to Graymist and said, "Serve this knight well, as you would me, old boy."

The squires readied Sir Broden to mount Graymist as Roth left to find a good spot to watch the proceedings. He squeezed his way to the fence near the end of the oval. He could see the Marshall of the Tournament, followed by the heralds, proceeding to the center of the lists. The tournament rules were read and the knights then paraded in, followed by their squires. The color and pageantry was truly a sight to behold. Everyone was cheering, common and noble alike.

Roth looked at the large gallery that had been set up for the special guests and high nobles. He could see the Queen of Love and Beauty in the seat of honor at the center of the pavilion, and guessed this honor had gone to Lady Drayloch.

Then a lovely lady by the fence on the far side of the pavilion caught his eye. She seemed to be looking at him intently, though with such a crowd he couldn't be sure. When he looked at her, she quickly looked away. She was dressed in a fine light blue gown. The same blue material, held by an ornate silver head band, covered her head and draped over her shoulders. She was obviously well-to-do. He looked at her several times, and each time he noticed that she would look away. He was sure now she had been watching him.

Roth started to leave and walk around to the lady in blue when he saw Sir Broden and Graymist appear. He decided to wait and watch them first. Sir Broden and his opponent set themselves, and then the flag dropped.

Graymist almost leaped at Sir Broden's urging, his great hooves thundering along the fence charging toward the other knight. As they met there was a thunderous crash. Sir Broden's lance crumbled into splinters, but his opponent missed completely. Cheers went up all through the crowd, Roth included.

Graymist came to a stop and turned at the end of his run. Winston ran over and handed Sir Broden another lance. Sir Broden waited for the flag to drop again. When it did, he urged Graymist on. Again they charged, Graymist's nostrils flared as if this were his fight. The crowd yelled and hooves flew. Again a crash. Sir Broden's shield went flying, and he was nearly unseated, but he held on. His opponent was not so lucky, finding himself on the ground. That meant Sir Broden had five points for breaking the lance, and ten points for unseating his opponent. With only one more joust to go between the two opponents, Sir Broden could not loose, even if he were unseated. He had won. There would be no third run.

Graymist turned and trotted back to the center of the fence and almost danced in place, as Sir Broden held up his lance in victory. The crowd's reaction was deafening. Sir Broden rode up to the seat of honor and removed his helm. He bowed to the Queen of Love and Beauty and said something, but the cheering was so loud Roth couldn't hear what was said.

Roth's eyes found their way to the spot where the lady in blue had been, but he could not see her. He looked all around, then decided to walk to the other side to find her, and had to push his way through the crowd. When he reached the other side of the pavilion, he looked all about but he could find no lady in blue.

After a few minutes he gave up and walked back to Sir Broden's tent. There was a small crowd gathered around the tent congratulating Sir Broden.

"Ah, here is my friend, Roth of Dazman," he told the group. "Come here, Roth, come. Roth loaned me his horse today when mine came up lame. It is a fine horse indeed, steady and strong."

"You have brought honor to yourself today," Roth told Sir Broden, shaking his hand. "Perhaps you could give me some instruction in your secrets of the lance."

"No secrets, Roth. Practice and luck, and a good horse, too. That's all it takes. By the way, would you mind if I rode him in the processional to the castle and banquet afterwards? I will provide you my squire's horse."

"I have a guest, Lady Rebecca, with me today," Roth answered. "She is getting on in years, and I let her ride here with me today. I will need to get her back to her home this evening."

"Oh, I could not think of it. I have already spoken to my host, Lord Drayloch. You and your friends are invited to the banquet tonight at Drayloch Keep. Please, won't you come? It is the least I can do after your help today. I should think your lady friend would enjoy it, and of course Dyaganos also. Will you come?"

Roth knew Rebecca would be overjoyed at such an opportunity, but he was afraid she would be too tired to travel.

"I would be honored, although Lady Rebecca will likely be exhausted after today's excitement, and then a banquet too. Her age, you know."

"Don't concern yourself. We will find room for her at the castle. She can stay the night and rest."

"In that case I see no problem. I just need to find Dyaganos and Rebecca to tell them. We will meet here in time for the processional."

"Fine," Sir Broden said. "I will see you then."

Roth turned and walked over to Graymist to pet him before he went looking for Dyaganos and Rebecca. He searched for his friends between the action, stopping to watch each challenge. He was keeping an eye open for the lady in blue also, but he had no luck finding her. He did finally find his friends, enjoying the excitement from the other end of the oval.

"There you are," he said as he came up to Dyaganos. "Did you see Sir Broden?"

"Yes we did. Most impressive," Dyaganos told Roth.

"Oh, this is so wonderful," Rebecca said. "I haven't seen this much excitement in years. You are such a dearie for bringing me, Roth."

"Well, I'm glad you are enjoying yourself. Do you think your system can stand another surprise?" he asked her.

"Another surprise?" she said. "What pray tell could you do to top this?"

"Oh, just dinner."

"Dinner? Are you taking me to dinner too?"

"Actually, you and Dyaganos and I are invited to the banquet at the castle this evening, compliments of Sir Broden. Does that interest you?"

"The banquet? At the castle?"

"Yes, at the castle," Roth told her.

"My goodness. I've never been to the castle. Oh, my. I don't know if I'm dressed for that."

"Oh, you'll be fine. Just fine."

"That will probably be very late, and I will still have to get back to Trina's tonight."

"I've taken care of that too. You can stay at the castle."

Rebecca was beside herself. She couldn't believe this. Here she was just a peasant girl, riding with knights and going to a banquet with Lords and Ladies, and sleeping in the castle. She couldn't help herself. She broke into tears.

"What's wrong, Rebecca?" Dyaganos asked when he noticed she was crying. "Are you ill?"

"Goodness, no. How silly of me. I'm just so happy. You can't imagine how many times I dreamed of such a day as this when I was a little girl. I never thought I would see it. Yet, here I am, an old lady with no money and no husband, and no children, and little in my life to make it happy. Then in Roth rides on a big horse and takes me away from all that, even if it is only for one day. He treats me like a lady, and you too, Dyaganos. You have been so kind too. I just never expected this. I'll be alright. I'm fine."

She wiped her eyes and smiled at them both. Roth hated it when women cried. He hated it when his aunt Eldemere cried the day he left to go adventuring. He hadn't seen her in eight years now. He wished he could tell her he was alright, but he was far, far from home. It would take two, maybe three months to get home to Senguri if he didn't stop for anything. Now that his quest was finally bearing fruit, he couldn't just give it up. Perhaps making Rebecca happy was his way of trying to make up for missing his aunt Eldemere and uncle Dru. They had always been so good to him.

They watched the rest of the day's events, and ate from the sack of food Rebecca brought. As the activities came to a close, they walked over to Sir Broden's tent. Sir Broden gave Rebecca a ride to the castle with him on Graymist, and Roth and Dyaganos followed.

Chapter Twenty-One



Silver Trinket

When they arrived at the castle, Rebecca was in total awe. There was dancing and entertainment and food until dark. Then the banquet started. By now Rebecca had rested enough while watching the entertainment to enjoy her dinner. Roth and Dyaganos were having a good time too. Roth kept looking for the lady in blue, thinking she must be with a retinue of one of the noblemen, but he didn't see her anywhere. They ate and drank until they could hardly move.

Roth could see that Rebecca was very tired, and he asked where she was to sleep the night. One of the chambermaids showed her and Roth to a small room. Roth helped her get settled and started to leave when Rebecca asked him to wait.

"You have been so kind to me, Roth, I don't know how to repay you. I never thought I would get to do any of the things I did today. It is a wish come true."

"There's no need to repay me, Rebecca. I did it because I wanted to, and I would do it again. Now, you get some sleep, and I'll ride back here in the morning to get you and take you home."

Roth excused himself and went back to the banquet. He told Dyaganos they should be riding back to town to get some sleep. They both found Sir Broden and thanked him, and said they had to go. Sir Broden thanked Roth again for the loan of Graymist and bid them good night. On the way back to town Roth told Dyaganos about the lady in blue.

"She was beautiful, and dressed all in light blue. I saw her looking at me several times, but when I went to find her she was gone. I didn't see her the rest of the day."

"Do you think she was the lady with silver hair that was looking for us?" Dyaganos asked, trying to be casual.

"I don't know. I couldn't see her hair. She kept it covered."

"Well, maybe it was just a young lady that was attracted to you."

"Perhaps. I wish I knew. I thought she might be with some of the parties that attended the banquet but I didn't see her there."

"I wouldn't fret on it. If she wanted to talk to you, she would have. Maybe you'll see her again in town," Dyaganos encouraged, not wanting to give himself away. He had promised not to mention meeting Ondra. He didn't want to spoil the surprise she had promised for Roth.

It didn't take long to get back to town. They went by Trina's shop to let her know where Rebecca was, and that Roth would take her home in the morning. Then they rode back to the Blue Pheasant and retired for the evening, quite ready for sleep. It had been a busy day.

The next morning, Roth rode to the castle for Rebecca to take her home. She was ready to go when he got there. The morning air had been quite cool, but the sun warmed it comfortably by the time they left Drayloch Keep. At a walk, Graymist took some time to get back to Rebecca's, but she enjoyed every minute of it. Many of the people who had been in town for the festival were now leaving town the same way Roth was going, down the southeast road.

When they arrived at Rebecca's, she insisted Roth stay for lunch, which he did. He took a few more turns

rocking in Rebecca's unusual chair. He asked where she got the chair. Rebecca told him she bought it at the festival a long time ago, but she had never seen another one since.

They had lunch, and Rebecca just couldn't stop talking about her adventure to the festival, and the castle, and riding with Sir Broden. She was practically floating on a cloud. Roth was glad he had been able to give her some pleasant memories to keep her company.

Finally, Roth said he had to go. Rebecca knew this was coming, but it didn't make it any easier. She went to the back of the room and picked up a small wooden box from a table. She brought it over to Roth and slowly opened it. Inside was an odd shaped piece of silver, which she carefully took out.

"I want you to have this, Roth."

"Oh, I couldn't take your money, Rebecca. Don't be silly."

"No, you don't understand. This isn't money. It is a trinket that belonged to your grandfather."

"What?" Roth asked in amazement.

"This belonged to Sir Dazman, truly," she assured him. "You see, I know it was his because the time he stayed at my father's inn, when the incident with the Red Dragon happened, I saw him with it. Mother had sent me to his room to take some clean towels. When he came to the door I saw it dangling outside his shirt when he bent down to take the towels from me. After the dragon incident, after he signed out and left town, I was cleaning up rooms, sweeping and such. I found it in his room, under the bed. It must have come loose from its chain. I suppose it fell and he didn't see it."

She turned and sat down in her chair, then continued explaining. "I would have given it back, but I knew he was gone. I didn't tell Mother or Father about it because I knew they would only take it away from me, and I knew they couldn't give it to him either. Besides, if he came back the next year for festival, I could give it to him just as easily as they could, so I kept it hidden away. I thought it would give me an excuse to talk to him again, but he never came back. I don't know why," she said.

Then Rebecca started rocking. The chair, or the floor perhaps, began squeaking again as she stared off into a distant place for a moment. Then she looked back at Roth.

"I didn't tell you about it because, well, I didn't really want to let it go before. It belonged to your grandfather, and since I cannot return it to him, perhaps you can do it for me. It has brought me both good and bad memories all these years, but now it will only mean good memories for me. You gave me something yesterday that I dreamed of all my life, and made me feel like that little girl again. Now I have the memories of yesterday to keep with me, and I no longer need this. If you find your grandfather, you will remember me to him, won't you?"

Roth didn't know what to say. He could not very well refuse, nor did he want to. To hold something with his own hands that his grandfather had owned was exciting and very satisfying.

"Of course I will, Rebecca. I shall cherish it, and keep it until I find him and can return it. Thank you."

Roth looked at it. It was just as shiny now as it must have been when it was new. Rebecca must have taken special care of it.

"You have certainly kept it shiny all these years."

"Not really. It just never seemed to tarnish. I always wondered about that. Never saw a piece of silver that didn't tarnish before. That's the way it was when I found it. I never did have to shine it. It just stayed that way," she told him.

"Well, that's most unusual." Then he smiled at her. He knew he had to go, but did not want to disappoint her.

"I really must be going. I want to thank you for the information about my grandfather. I hope to find him someday, or at least find out what happened to him. You have helped more than you know."

"I don't see how I was much help, but I wish you luck in finding out what you can. He was a great man, and I can see you are following in his footsteps. Luck be with you, Roth of Dazman. Wear the name well."

She gave him a hug and hustled him out the door, trying to smile. Roth kissed her on the forehead and climbed onto Graymist. He turned and trotted to the road. Roth looked back and waved to Rebecca as he urged Graymist into a gallop toward town.

Graymist's hooves thundered when he galloped, which Graymist seemed to enjoy. He had spirit, and all this walking had made him eager to cut loose. Roth felt his steed's power, and it made him feel good to ride with the wind in his face. Roth enjoyed it as much as Graymist always seemed to. He couldn't decide if he was running away from his past, or toward his future. He only knew he was more resolute than ever about finding out what happened to his grandfather.

It was a short ride back to Bane's Meadow at this speed. There were still folks leaving town in wagons and carts, on horseback, on mules, and walking. Traveling merchants and curious troupes of entertainers headed to the next town or festival, and the local peasants headed home.

Roth slowed to a trot as he entered town. He soon took notice of a pony cart set up as a stand beside the road. A wooden pole at each corner of the cart, with a pole in the middle all supported an animal skin canopy. Tanned skins, furs and handmade leather goods hung from light ropes strung between the poles while other items hung over the side of the cart. Some white furs hanging on the cart caught Roth's eye, so he decided to stop.

A little man, standing less than four feet tall, seemed to appear from nowhere next to the cart. He wore a plain gray cloak, pulled open and tied back at the waist. Under it he wore a dark green shirt and brown calf-length breeches slit and tied at the bottom. He was barefoot, and had a smiling, childish face framed by curly sandy-brown hair. His eyes were merry and his movements were quick and agile. He greeted Roth pleasantly with a surprisingly strong voice for someone so small.

"Good afternoon to you, sir. How may I be of service?"

Roth recognized him immediately as the halfling that did the leather work for Sir Broden the day before at the tournament.

"Well, fancy meeting you again. Your name is Jobo, is it not?" Roth said with a smile.

"Why, yes, of course. I remember you too. How could I ever forget that grand horse of yours? You are Roth, I believe."

"Yes, Roth. So, I see you do other things besides harnesses. Is all this your handiwork?"

"Why, yes it is. Do you see something you like?"

Roth leaned over on Graymist and pointed to the white furs hanging from the cart.

"Those white furs are nice. What are they?"

"Rabbit," Jobo answered. "I found a place with an unusual number of albino rabbits, and I managed to catch several."

"Oh, you are a trapper too?"

"Certainly. So, you like the rabbit furs?"

"They are nice, but I can't use them as is. What might you suggest making from them?" Roth inquired.

"Well, they are too nice to use as fur inside of gloves. The white fur should be contrasted by a darker color on the outside of something for decoration. With winter coming soon, perhaps a warm cloak would be nice. I could use the white fur to decorate the collar or edges, and some other fur for the cloak. Might I suggest otter. It is more waterproof, and has a nice sheen to it. Very soft and supple, and most serviceable," Jobo explained.

"Oh, this is not for me. It is for Lady Rebecca, who lives down the southeast road. Would you make a lady's cloak for someone about five feet two, and deliver it please?"

"Certainly. I take it you would like the white fur on the collar and trim."

"Yes, yes, and a good sturdy cloth lining. Put some of the fur around the hood to warm the face."

"I have some sturdy cloth in deep green, a rich and elegant color for a cloak," the halfling said with a reassuring smile.

"That will do nicely. So, my friend, how long will this take to make, and how much will it cost me?"

"It will take about two days, sire. As for the cost, let me see. For a lady's size, I think I can do it for seven gold pieces."

"Alright, done." Roth reached into his pouch and gave the halfling seven gold pieces and directions for delivering it to Rebecca's cottage, with instructions to say only that it was a gift from an admirer.

"If you need to find me I will be at the Blue Pheasant today, though I may leave there and find a cheaper room tomorrow, or even camp outside town. Good day to you, Jobo."

"Good day to you, sire. I shall start work on the cloak immediately," Jobo replied.

Roth turned Graymist toward the inn and trotted off, while Jobo busied himself packing away his wares. He had a big order to fill, and he would have to work diligently to finish it on time.

When Roth arrived at the inn, he put Graymist away in the stable and went looking for Dyaganos. The clerk said Dyaganos left before noon and had not yet returned as best he knew. It was now about three in the afternoon, so Roth decided to walk up the street to a jeweler he saw earlier. The town that was a bustling frenzy the day before seemed deserted by comparison now, though still far from what he expected was normal. There still were vendors straggling about trying to wring every last coin they could from the festival-goers who still had not left town. Unlike

the previous days, his silver hair received a couple of curious stares, now that the carnival atmosphere had subsided somewhat. The jeweler's shop was only a couple of minute's walk. As he entered the shop, the proprietor greeted him.

"Good day, sir. Come right in. What can I show you today?"

"Good day to you. I'm afraid I wasn't looking for jewelry, but I do have some silver work I would like to have done. Can you handle that?"

"Why, certainly. You came to the right place. My name is Sloman. Silver Sloman they call me. Best silversmith in town. You have something you need repaired I suppose."

"No, I have something I want made."

Roth took his grandfather's silver trinket from his pocket and then took the silver dragon pendant Jennifer had given him from his neck. He held them up to show what he wanted.

"I'd like this silver trinket mounted in a frame that can be hung under this dragon on this chain," Roth instructed. "I specifically do not want a hole in this trinket. Do you understand? I want it mounted some way with a loop so I can hang it under the dragon, not beside it."

Sloman reached behind the counter and took a pendant out of a wooden box to show Roth.

"Why, yes. That's just the sort of thing I want, but I don't want it fancy. Just a plain, smooth mounting."

"That should be simple enough. I can have it ready for you in three days."

"Oh, that wouldn't do. I plan to leave town before then, and I won't let that trinket out of my sight. It's..., well, it's quite special to me."

"I'd say it was too. It's most unusual. Can't say I ever saw anything like this before. Not a mark on it. No symbols or anything. What is this supposed to be?"

"It's just a trinket, handed down in the family."

"It might be some kind of coin, perhaps," Sloman said, turning it over in his hand, "but this is not silver."

"What do you mean it's not silver. Of course it's silver. Do you think I'm a fool?"

"I didn't mean to insult you, sir, but I know silver, and if this is silver, it's not ordinary silver. It certainly looks silver, but the weight is not right, and it's too shiny. If it's silver, it's not like any I ever saw."

"Well, no matter," Roth fussed. "I plan to leave here before you can have it ready. Three days would be too late."

"I do have some other work promised, but for an extra two silver pieces I can have it for you tomorrow afternoon late."

"That might be acceptable, but as I said, I won't let this out of my sight. How will you work on it?"

"Give me a few minutes, and I'll make a clay impression of it and take some measurements before you go. I can rough it out from that tonight, and when you come in, I can do the final fitting. Would that be acceptable?" Sloman asked.

"Quite suitable. So, how much is this going to cost me?"

"For someone of such obvious taste as yourself, seven silver pieces altogether will be quite sufficient, and a real bargain at that."

"That's what I get for spending my money in a festival town," Roth chided himself aloud. "Alright, but the workmanship must be of the highest caliber."

Sloman smiled and said "It will, sir, I assure you. Now I'll just get started on that impression."

When the silversmith was done Roth took his trinket, and his lucky dragon pendant, and walked back to the Blue Pheasant. He toyed with the unusually smooth item as he walked, wondering about what the silversmith had said. There were certainly no markings on it at all, and it was as smooth as anything he had ever seen. He was sure of one thing though. It had to be silver.

"Not silver, hah," he mumbled to himself as he wove between the people he passed on the street. "Any fool can see it's silver. Maybe it's some kind of very pure silver, but surely it's silver alright."

"What are you mumbling about silver?" a voice asked from behind him. Roth recognized it was Dyaganos and turned around.

"So there you are. I didn't see you. I was just talking to myself about this."

Roth held up the trinket and showed it to Dyaganos as they walked toward the inn.

"Rebecca gave it to me when I took her home this morning. She found it in the room at the inn where my grandfather stayed, the very day the Red Dragon came. She said she knows it's his because she saw him wearing it."

After he left, she was cleaning the room and found it under the bed."

He held it out for Dyaganos. When Dyaganos touched it, it flashed blue and Dyaganos jerked his hand back with a squeal.

"Ooh! That thing shocked me," he said shaking his hand. "Hold it up here so I can see it."

Roth stopped and held it out for Dyaganos to see better.

Dyaganos looked at the trinket carefully and then looked at Roth in amazement.

"That's not just a trinket, and it's not exactly silver either."

"That's what the silversmith was saying too, but I didn't believe him. If it's not silver, then what is it?" Roth puzzled aloud.

"What you have there, my fine companion, is a Silver Dragon scale."

"That's a Silver Dragon scale?"

"Surely it is," Dyaganos confirmed. "It still has magic in it. That must be why it shocked me, though on second thought, it could have just been the weather. Here, let me see it again."

Roth held it out as Dyaganos gingerly touched it with his first finger once more. Again it flashed blue and Dyaganos jerked his hand back in pain. Roth however, felt nothing.

"Well, it's not the weather. It's magic alright. Didn't you feel it?" he asked Roth, puzzled that Roth had not reacted in pain.

"No, I didn't feel a thing."

"Well now, that doesn't seem right," Dyaganos mumbled, half to himself.

"What's that?" Roth asked, not catching what Dyaganos said.

"Oh, nothing. I was just wondering why it didn't shock you, but no matter. That's a most unique trinket you have there, but right now I have more important news for you. Come, let's find a table at the Blue Pheasant and eat. I'll tell you about our good fortune over a hot meal. I'm sure you'll want to be sitting down when I give you the news anyway."

Dyaganos ushered Roth through the front door of the Blue Pheasant and into the dining hall as Roth began trying to pry this mysterious information out of his gray-haired companion.

Chapter Twenty-Two



A Surprise for Roth

After talking with Dyaganos at the tournament, Ondra made herself scarce. Soon her heart was begging her to take the small chance of at least seeing Roth from a distance. It had been so long since she last saw him. Ondra soon realized Roth had spotted her watching him, despite the large crowd. It seemed his eyes were drawn to her, so she thought it best to leave. She couldn't risk the chance of him even thinking he recognized her. It could very well ruin everything.

Ondra left the tournament and returned to the apothecary to conclude her business with the wizard Palomaine, who was only too happy to help her. She gave him complete instructions on what needed to be done. She stayed until dark, and then returned to Chelting as quickly as she could. She was most pleased at having completed her mission so quickly and was eager to share the good news with her beloved.

By the time she reached Chelting it was already getting light. Ondra decided to stay in the woods the whole day to avoid being noticed as a stranger in town.

When night finally came she slipped into town, and into the back door of the old apothecary. There she shared her good news with the pretend Dyaganos, as they talked in the back room that had served as a study. It was dark in the room, except for the dancing light of a small fire in the fireplace. Ondra was sitting in the only chair, while Zeebak paced the floor. He was usually far more calm and patient than this, but the news had excited him considerably.

"So everything just fell into place for me," Ondra said as she finished detailing her eventful trip, "even down to finding the wizard called Palomaine, who was quite eager to help. Palomaine has my instructions, so as soon as you arrive everything will be ready. My greatest concern had been talking to Dyaganos without Roth seeing me, and taking the chance that Dyaganos would react favorably to my story. Dyaganos promised to go along with everything, though he seemed quite overwhelmed by it all."

"That's simply wonderful. I didn't dare hope for such good luck. I suppose after so many years it was time our luck improved. Are you sure Roth is unaware of what's going on?" he asked.

"Until Dyaganos talks to him, I believe he will be totally unaware. It will be a big surprise. I only wish I could be there and have more time to see him," Ondra lamented.

"I know it is hard for you, my dear, but it's for the best in the end."

"Yes, I know," she replied with a sigh. "So, what do you plan now?"

"Ah, well, that is the problem. You have managed everything so quickly, it makes a shambles of my plan here. I must go to Bane's Meadow tomorrow, but the townsfolk are expecting me to stay here pretending to be Dyaganos. I must do something about the henchmen that will surely be coming."

He paced the floor a bit more before he made his decision.

"In the morning I will tell them I've thought this all through, and decided I can head off the henchmen before they ever arrive. Then I will tell them that whether I find the henchmen or not, I will return within two weeks so I can either protect them here, or tell them of my success. Perhaps they will be satisfied with that. In any event I must reach Bane's Meadow tomorrow to keep with your arrangements. Surely it won't take more than two or three days to

conclude things there, and we will have time to manage any other business before I return here in two weeks. Sire Gaileywood's thugs cannot possibly get here before then, even if they find that thief right away."

"That will mean traveling in daylight," she noted.

"I will be careful, but it must be done. I will establish contact with Roth again, and this time I will not lose track of him. I will find some way to ensure we can find Roth wherever he goes. Perhaps Palomaine can assist me with that."

"It's quite possible he could," Ondra told him after a moment's thought. "I truly hope all this works. With continued good luck, that spell will provide the information we need to find Sir Dazman. Dyaganos told me their quest was to find Sir Dazman, and this was just the kind of break he had hoped for," Ondra noted.

"With all of us searching, surely we can find an answer. After all my years of spreading the story, this is the first time anything has come of it. I hope our luck continues. In any event, I am happy to have found Roth, as I know you are. Let's rest on that thought for now," he told Ondra.

They talked until the wee hours of the morning. Then Ondra left while it was still dark. Zeebak slept for a couple of hours, and rose after sunrise to explain to Darwin and the others what his new plan would be. He hoped they would accept his wisdom on the matter at face value and allow him to do what he felt was best. If not, he would simply have to try a little charm.

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"So the woman that was waiting for us when you popped us from the stable into the room with your magic was the same lady in blue I saw at the tournament?" Roth asked a bit too loudly for his companion's comfort.

"Shh. What's the matter with you, Roth?" Dyaganos muttered through gritted teeth. "I don't want every busybody in this place to know about that."

The dining hall was crowded. Everyone was laughing and talking and drinking, so there wasn't much chance anyone would overhear their conversation. Still, Roth understood it was probably not a good thing to advertise the old man's magic.

"Sorry. I wasn't thinking. So, why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because I had to promise her I would not tell you until tonight. She insisted, but that's not the important part. She was just a messenger for someone else," Dyaganos answered, pausing for a moment to let that sink in before hitting Roth with the real news.

Roth looked at Dyaganos, not saying a word, just waiting for whatever Dyaganos was obviously about to spring on him. Then it came.

"Your great uncle Zeebak sent her. He was in Chelting and heard about us," the old man said with a very big grin, now that he could finally tell Roth what was going on.

"Uncle Zeebak?" Roth blurted. "You mean Uncle Zeebak is coming here?"

"That's right. We're to wait for him. He has a surprise for us too — something about a spell that will help us find your grandfather. It's supposed to all be arranged with a wizard here in town. His name is Palomaine, and we are to go see him tomorrow night after dinner. Your great uncle is going to meet us there."

The old man's eyes showed his excitement, though it was not as much about meeting Roth's great uncle, or knowing how happy Roth would be, as it was about the wizard. He had not realized the magician running the apothecary here was such a high level wizard. This was going to be educational, as well as exciting.

"This is wonderful, but what was Uncle Zeebak doing in Chelting? Did he follow me there? He's an awfully long way from home," Roth said. "Did the lady explain any of this?"

"Well, apparently he's been searching for your grandfather too. Then when you disappeared — I mean, left home — he began trying to find out about you as well. He was quite pleased at having found us. Well, I mean finding information about you, and finding where you might have gone. He sent the lady ahead since she could travel faster than he could. He's supposed to be here tomorrow."

"I don't understand how he could have set up this spell thing with the wizard though, since he hasn't been here, has he?" Roth wondered.

"I think the lady set everything up by his instructions. I didn't understand all that, and she didn't go into much detail on how all this came about. She just said to be there, and sent greetings from your great uncle," Dyaganos answered as well as he could.

"Who was this lady? She looked so familiar to me. It's as if I'm supposed to know her from..., from...well, from before, but I don't. It's really a strange feeling. I just can't put my finger on it. Did she give you her name?" Roth said, quite puzzled with these feelings he had that he couldn't explain.

"She said her name was Ondra. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Ondra, Ondra," Roth slowly repeated aloud, trying to jog his memory, but nothing would come.

"I can't remember ever meeting anyone by that name," he mumbled. "I'm sure though that I know her from somewhere. I just can't get over the feeling that I know her."

"Well, don't fret about it. She was just a messenger. How could you know her?" Dyaganos puzzled.

"I don't know. I don't really understand. Maybe it will come to me. Well, anyway, Uncle Zeebak is coming. That's really great news."

Then Roth stopped, as if frozen.

"Wait a minute. Why didn't she talk to me? Why would she talk to you and not to me?"

"Your great uncle wanted to surprise you, and besides, she didn't want to spoil your fun at the tournament. You had enough excitement going on that day without throwing this at you too. At least, that's what she told me," Dyaganos explained. "She said I could tell you tonight, so you would have time to get ready for tomorrow."

"Well, I suppose that makes sense," Roth muttered. Then he added, "I'm sure I know her from somewhere. I just know it."

Dyaganos grabbed Roth's shoulder and shook it a bit.

"Look, let it go for now. If you fight it too much it will never come to you. Let's eat this meal before it gets cold. You've got plenty of time to worry about that later. Come on, let's eat."

Roth opened his mouth as if to say something important, but all that came out was, "Alright, let's eat."

After dinner they sat by the fireplace downstairs and talked about their plans for some time. They puzzled over the talk about a spell to help them find Sir Dazman. They looked at it from every angle, trying to figure what all this meant. Then Roth remembered he was supposed to check with the silversmith about the trinket, or dragon scale, or whatever it was. He told Dyaganos to remind him to go see about that tomorrow afternoon before dinner.

They each finally went to bed, though Roth couldn't sleep. He thought mostly about the lady in blue, but nothing made any sense. If she was just a messenger, why did he have the feeling he knew her? What bothered him most though was that the lady had been so well dressed. He'd never seen a messenger dressed like that before unless it was for some aristocracy or very wealthy person. His great uncle Zeebak wasn't that wealthy. Then there was the question of why such a beautiful young lady would be acting as a messenger? None of it really added up like it should.

He pondered this and the other things he and Dyaganos discussed by the fire that night. He thought for a long time before sleep finally overtook him. When he did fall asleep, he dreamed of his adoptive parents, Dru and Eldemere, and his childhood on the farm.

In the morning, after breakfast, Roth checked on Graymist and took him an apple. Then he went back to his room and sharpened his daggers, and sword, and checked his gear. After lunch, Roth and Dyaganos both went to pick up supplies for the trail. Roth went one way, and Dyaganos another. He was getting the itch to get on the trail after several days here. If this spell his great uncle Zeebak had set up was going to help them find his grandfather, he wanted to be prepared for the trip, wherever it took them.

Late that afternoon Roth returned to Silver Sloman's shop to get his trinket finished. Sloman was waiting for him, and skillfully formed the preshaped silver setting around Roth's trinket while he watched. Roth could see now there was a difference between the color and sparkle of the trinket Rebecca gave him and the silver mounting Sloman was putting it in.

Roth was well pleased when it was done, deciding it was worth the cost after all. He returned to the Blue Pheasant in time for dinner with Dyaganos. After dinner, they saddled the horses and rode to the apothecary in the north end of town, with Dyaganos leading. When they arrived, the apothecary door opened for them seemingly by magic just as they reached for the handle.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Spell of Legends

"Uncle Zeebak!" Roth exclaimed as his only known living relative opened the door for them. They hugged and patted each other on the back.

"Roth, my boy, it's good to see you after all these years. Let me look at you. My word, I believe you've gotten even bigger and stronger since I saw you last."

"Not really. Look at you. You haven't changed a bit. You don't look a day older. How are Dru and Eldemere? Have you seen them lately? I've been wanting to get word to them, and you for that matter, but it was so far. What are you doing here so far from home, anyway?" Roth inquired of his great uncle.

"My, my, one question at a time. Dru and Eldemere are fine. I saw them four months ago. They asked about you, but I could tell them nothing, of course. However, I will send word to them that I've found you safe, or I will see them myself. Either way, I will let them know," he answered. "As for what I'm doing here, the answer is to find you, and to find your grandfather as well. Now it's my turn," Zeebak told him. "What are you doing here?"

"That's a long story," Roth sighed. "It has a lot to do with my friend here. This is Dyaganos."

Roth gestured to the old man, who came over and shook Zeebak's hand.

"So, you're the great Dyaganos I've heard so much about," Zeebak said, causing Dyaganos to look rather puzzled.

"Oh, you've heard of me?" Dyaganos asked.

"Why, I certainly have. A lovely young lady, Jennifer, spoke most highly of you, and of Roth too as I recall. Darwin sends his best regards as well."

"Oh, I see. Well, thank you," Dyaganos said with a sheepish grin. Then he turned to Roth. "I see your great uncle has a sense of humor like yours."

"Come on in now," Zeebak told them. "Our host will be with us in awhile. He's busy getting ready. Besides, we have much catching up to do. We can sit over here."

They all three sat on two benches in a corner next to an old wooden desk containing a bound book, quill and ink, and a small lantern that gave plenty of light to see by. The apothecary was full of many smells of herbs and potions, and things that Dyaganos recognized, but to Roth they were just smells. The room was spacious, with a door and a curtain on the back wall behind a counter. The stone walls were nearly hidden by shelves that ran from near the floor to well above head high, all filled with bottles, jugs, cups and flasks of every description. Many small cloth pouches and more bottles covered three large tables in the center of the room. The ceiling was made of rough boards, supported by hewn wood beams. Hanging all about from the beams were clusters of dried plants and berries tied up with string.

Roth began telling his great uncle about his adventures, and how he came to meet Dyaganos. Dyaganos took over at that point, and with great flair and theatrics told how they defeated the wild boar and the highwaymen who tried to rob them. Roth filled in the details of how Dyaganos had healed him, and their experiences here in Bane's Meadow the last few days. He told Zeebak about meeting Rebecca and took out his new trinket the silversmith fixed for him.

"You won't believe my luck," Roth said as he held up the chain and dragon figurine, resting the trinket hanging beneath it in his palm for his great uncle to better see. "Rebecca gave this to me. She said Grandfather lost it in his room at the inn, and she found it after he left."

"I told him it is a Silver Dragon scale," Dyaganos pointed out knowingly, "but I'm not sure he believes me. It still carries some magic."

Zeebak looked at it in amazement, trying to hide his surprise, but not doing a very good job of it. Roth was right about one thing, Zeebak could not believe their luck at all. He reached for the trinket before Dyaganos could say anything, and took up the trinket in his hand, flipping it over, and back again. He showed no sign of it shocking him, much to the surprise of Dyaganos who had started to warn him.

"You are right, Dyaganos," Zeebak said with a smile. "This most certainly is a dragon's scale. What I'm sure you do not know is that this holds great significance for Silver Dragons, and should you ever meet one, show this trinket. If you need help, the Silver Dragon will assist you in any good cause you request, even at the risk of its own life, so long as you possess this."

With this bit of cryptic information Zeebak sat back, taking a deep breath, allowing Roth and Dyaganos a moment to think about what he had just said.

"You both are here tonight for one reason. Now each of you holds something that may lead us to Roth's grandfather. You, Dyaganos, have a great red stone which came from the evil Red Dragon that Roth's grandfather defeated."

Dyaganos was more than a little surprised, since neither he nor Roth had mentioned the red stone in their recounting of previous happenings. He looked at Roth, whom he could tell had not yet realized this fact.

"You, my dear boy, have this treasure from your grandfather. Between these two items, we shall surely have good fortune with the spell Palomaine is preparing at this very moment. I never told you, my boy, but I have spent many, many years searching for your grandfather. I never told you because I feared you would end up like me, wandering about searching for someone that will likely never be found, and yet, here we both are, doing just that. Fate holds many surprises for us, and tonight, perhaps fate has smiled on us both."

Neither Roth nor Dyaganos quite knew what to make of all this. They stared at each other, and then at Zeebak, who for the moment seemed lost in his own thoughts. Dyaganos was beginning to think Zeebak was more than he seemed. This man and his messenger both seemed to know things he didn't think they should. How did they know about this wizard Palomaine, and how did Zeebak know about his red stone? He was also thinking about things Roth had said, like why was this lady in blue so nicely dressed if she was a mere messenger, and why was Roth so sure he knew her from somewhere, yet he was sure he didn't?

This all made Dyaganos a bit wary, and yet, Roth was perfectly at ease. After all, this was his great uncle, or at least Roth believed this man was his great uncle. Dyaganos decided he would sort all this out eventually, but for now he would go along for the ride and see what happened.

"Uncle Zeebak," Roth said, finally breaking the silence, "this is all so much to take in. I'm not sure I understand it, but the thought of finding Grandfather is wonderful."

"I am excited about it too, my dear boy. I'm not so sure Dyaganos is though. You look a bit apprehensive," he said, turning to Dyaganos.

"Well, there are some things I would like to have cleared up, if you could. There's the matter of how you knew about my red stone. Then there's the lovely lady, Ondra, whom you sent as a messenger. She was certainly dressed finer than any messenger I've ever seen. Then..."

Dyaganos was interrupted by a rustling of curtains behind him, and the sudden appearance of shadows on the wall in front of him. He turned, as did the others, to see the curtains on the back wall part on one side as if someone were holding them back. A soft glowing ball of yellow light about six inches in diameter gently floated at shoulder height, moving a foot or two into the room and then back through the curtains into the hall, pausing there. Though the light was a bit brighter than the lantern in the room, Roth could see no one holding the light. In fact, there appeared to be nothing to hold onto.

"I see Palomaine is ready for us. Come, it is time for the most interesting part of the evening," Zeebak instructed. He rose and walked toward the curtain.

Dyaganos rose also, and looked at Roth, who was still staring at the floating light with some uncertainty.

"It's just a bit of magic," Dyaganos told him. "Nothing to be afraid of."

The threesome walked toward the curtains, with Zeebak in the lead. As he went through the curtain, the light

moved away and the curtain fell back. Dyaganos and Roth had to hold the curtain open for themselves as they entered the stone hallway, with Roth warily bringing up the rear. The fragrance of incense became more apparent here, now that they were leaving the front room so burdened with the scents of herbs and potions.

The light led them down the hall, turning a corner at an archway where a heavy wooden door stood open. As the light entered the doorway, the gaping black hole that had been there became a stone spiral stairway. The ball of light descended, followed by Zeebak, Dyaganos and Roth, winding their way counterclockwise down the steep steps of dark stone.

The heavy door shut unexpectedly behind them with a boom that echoed long, making Roth jump and look back, but the doorway was already engulfed by the darkness. The floating light ahead of them cast eerie out-of-proportion shadows which danced a ghostly demon dance, mocking the movements of Zeebak and Dyaganos against the cool stone wall ahead of Roth. Their footsteps echoed in the hollowness of the dark stone-lined corkscrew they descended, as the smell of incense became ever stronger.

It seemed to Roth they must have descended at least forty feet before the steps opened onto a six-foot wide stone corridor with an eight-foot ceiling. The walls, ceiling and floor were of a light gray-tan stone, making the corridor much brighter and less oppressive than the dark stone of the narrow stairway. For Dyaganos though, this was not comfortable at all. He expected stairs to be close, but he did not like closed-in places like this. He steeled himself against the urge to go back. The air was slightly humid, but it was cool and easy to breathe.

The light continued about twenty feet along the corridor before the ball of light turned a corner, and the threesome followed, as did their mocking shadows. They walked another twenty-five or thirty feet to the end of the corridor where the light stopped within one foot of the wall at the corridor's dead end. The smell of incense was much stronger now, but Roth couldn't tell where it was coming from.

The light hovered for a moment at the dead end, then came back toward and around them. All three stepped aside and turned around as the light floated by them and turned left into an arched opening they must have passed, but hadn't noticed. They followed.

This short corridor of stone ended in a large metal door that swung open silently as they approached. They followed the light inside. In the center of the room was an elaborately carved pedestal of light green marble. It was round, about three feet in diameter at the top and two feet in diameter at the bottom, and four feet or so high. It was covered on top with a black cloth, the corners of which hung off the edges of the round platform forming four triangles.

Next to it stood a man with his back to them, dressed in a long robe much like Dyaganos and Zeebak, except it was deep green, or appeared so by the light in the room. The bottom edge of the robe and the sleeve cuffs were trimmed in gold. Gold tassels dangled from the yoke of the robe, as well as from the ends of the white sash about the waist.

The soft diffuse light in this room came from overhead, but not from any one spot that Roth could see. It was just there. The floating ball of light they had been following now dimmed and disappeared. Without so much as a squeak the metal door began closing behind them, but it sounded a loud echoing boom as it made contact with the metal door frame.

The man in the robe turned from what he was doing at the marble stand to face them. Dyaganos recognized the man at once as the one who ran the shop above.

"Welcome, gentlemen," Palomaine said graciously, bowing noticeably to Zeebak. "I am honored to be at your service. Please come in and stand over here while I finish my preparations."

He motioned for them to stand by the wall to the right of where they entered. Zeebak didn't say a word, and followed the wizard's instructions. Dyaganos and Roth took his example and followed suite.

Palomaine walked over to a dark wooden podium, also very elaborately carved, on top of which was a thick opened book. He looked at the book for a moment as if reading, and then went to a shelf and took down four candles in silver candleholders. He placed them equally spaced around the marble stand, lined up with where the corners of the cloth hung off the edge of the stand. A flame seemed to spontaneously appear at the end of his index finger, which caused Roth's mouth to drop open in surprise. He lit each candle with it, then again referred to the book.

Dyaganos had almost forgotten his feelings of near panic from the close corridor now. He was watching this most intently, hoping to learn more about the magic he had studied for so long without benefit of a tutor. He was fascinated with Palomaine's technique. Then he took notice of the book. The binding looked very familiar, but he

couldn't be sure since he wasn't close enough to see it that well.

Palomaine returned to the shelf and picked up what appeared to be three long thin strips of white bone. He took them to the platform, and laid them out in a triangle in the center of the black cloth. Dyaganos could now tell these were of fine ivory. Palomaine took several minutes, fussing over the placement of the ivory strips, adjusting and readjusting them, though Dyaganos couldn't see any difference. Palomaine finally seemed satisfied with the three strips just barely touching each other at the tips.

He reached into a pocket in his robe with one hand and pulled it out again. He made a gesture in the air over the platform, muttering some unintelligible words almost in a chant. Then he sprinkled a light dust over one candle flame with his thumb and forefinger. The dust sparkled when it hit the flame, and the smell of incense in the room became even stronger.

He did this to each of the four candles, circling the table counterclockwise. Three times he walked around the table, stopping at each candle, sprinkling the dust and muttering the same chant. Then Palomaine turned to Zeebak.

"Do you have the item necessary for the spell?" he asked politely.

"Dyaganos, will you show the red stone to Palomaine?" Zeebak asked, much to the surprise of both Dyaganos and Palomaine.

"Roth, show him the trinket Rebecca gave you," Zeebak instructed.

Dyaganos was a bit flustered, not having expected this. He was not prepared to let anyone else know of his red stone. Roth on the other hand, pulled out the trinket and handed it to Palomaine.

"The great stone will not be necessary," Palomaine said, looking at Dyaganos, who was fidgeting with his robe in frustration at being on the spot. "This is what we need. Roth, would you take the trinket from the chain and give it to me?"

Dyaganos was relieved to be off the hook, but was not pleased with Zeebak for what he did. He was going to have some words with the old man over this, whether he was Roth's great uncle or not.

Roth skillfully bent the loop holding the trinket chain to the other chain and handed the trinket to Palomaine.

"I don't want to loose this," Roth told the wizard. "It's important to me."

"I assure you, nothing will happen to it. It will be returned."

Palomaine took the trinket and carefully placed it on the black cloth in the exact center of the triangle of ivory. Then he walked over to another shelf containing some scrolls and chose one. He returned to the marble platform, placing the scroll over the trinket and stepped back.

Chapter Twenty-Four



The Riddle

Dyaganos tried hard to concentrate on Palomaine's spell casting, though he was a bit preoccupied with his irritation at Zeebak. Within a few more moments though, Palomaine grabbed Dyaganos' full attention. He reached into a robe pocket once more and pulled out his clinched fist. He held it out in front of himself, about head high, and let some powder from that fist sprinkle down onto the palm of his other hand, held just beneath his fist. Then he clinched that hand into a fist like the other one, held them both high over his head, his wide robe sleeves sliding down below his elbows in the process. Palomaine closed his eyes, said some words aloud that nobody in the room understood, except for himself, and cast both fists of powder into the air over the triangle.

In that instant, several things happened. Roth jumped, Dyaganos blinked, and Zeebak just smiled. The powder seemed to explode in the air with a loud "foomp", the candle flames went completely out, and then flickered back to life a moment later. The soft even light in the room went out, and was replaced by a blue glowing light coming from beneath the scroll. This blue light crackled for a moment, and then the scroll erupted into blue-green flames. The smoke from the burning scroll floated up into the air, combining with the smoke being created now by the candle flames. It swirled about over the triangle of ivory as if confined within some invisible glass container three feet in diameter. The ivory strips themselves now began to radiate a blue glow, which pulsed brighter and dimmer, brighter and dimmer.

As the scroll burned away, the small black remnants of soot drifted up into the air over the marble platform and gently settled back down as glowing cinders onto the black cloth. The smoke became denser, swirling into abstract shapes, in and out of vaguely recognizable forms, lit by the cool blue light emanating from the trinket and the pulsating ivory strips still lying on the black cloth.

The whole area above the marble stand now glowed with a blue light, which in turn was lighting the room, but strangely enough was casting no shadows on the walls. It was as if the ether of air above the platform were glowing blue.

Palomaine said something else now, mumbling softly, his arms still outstretched toward the platform. The trinket began to rise from the cloth, slowly floating upward into the swirling smoke, disappearing inside the animated cloud above the ivory triangle, lighting it from within.

Now more figures formed inside the smoke, becoming much clearer, holding their shape long enough to be recognized. Roth saw a knight with a great sword riding a large horse. Zeebak saw a grown man holding a little boy. Dyaganos saw a teenage boy in a robe standing beside an old man in a long robe also. Palomaine saw the head of a Silver Dragon. None of the faces on the visions had a recognizable shape, yet there was a sense of gender, age and occupation.

Roth thought it might have been himself on Graymist, Zeebak thought it might have been him with his son, and Dyaganos concluded it must have been himself with his old teacher and mentor, but none of them were sure. Palomaine on the other hand didn't know what to make of what he saw, except he knew the dragon was very ancient, and very powerful.

Before any of them could soak in what they had seen, they each began hearing a soft disembodied voice in their

ears saying, "Listen and heed, for but once I will speak. Follow your heart to find what you seek. Through dread black forest north and east lies evil mind and devil beast with sinister eye and flesh of fire that dreads naught but the crystal lyre. Find castle keep where brothers dwell, awaiting death. Yet dreams foretell the brave and pure should death not fear, for death means life. The time draws near, and ancient curse denies birth still. Make haste, let not the hourglass fill, so ancient wings of gossamer three might strike the curse to set them free."

Then there was silence. Suddenly the blue glow intensified inside the swirling smoke until it became a smooth blue sphere. It slowly shrunk in size to about eighteen inches diameter and the smoke inside it cleared revealing the face of an old man with long white hair, and a white beard. The face looked around first at Palomaine, and then Dyaganos. It turned to see Zeebak, and standing next to him, Roth. There was a faint twinkle of recognition in the eyes of the man in the globe, and the hint of a smile. Then he raised his hands in front of his face and made a gesture, and the image was gone, as was the globe.

The blue light went out, and Roth's trinket clinked as it fell to the platform and bounced onto one of the ivory strips. The candles flickered and went out, leaving them all standing in pitch black darkness. There was utter silence, as even Zeebak was speechless. They all stared at the space where the smoke and the vision had been, unable to think for a few seconds.

Slowly the soft indirect lighting returned to the room as it had been before. Suddenly they all were snatched back to reality when Palomaine startled them by turning and rushing to his desk in the corner of the room. He sat down and began scribbling frantically on a piece of parchment with his quill pen, softly mumbling to himself.

Zeebak was the only one there who had recognized the face in the globe, but it was not the face of Sir Dazman. The face belonged to Xzi-Xzo, someone he had searched for just as long as he had for Sir Dazman.

A glowing ball of light like the one that led them here appeared in front of them and slowly drifted to the large metal door. The door opened as the light approached, and the light paused as if to see whether the three were following.

Still dazed from all that had gone on, even Zeebak wasn't quite himself yet, since he had not expected to see what he saw tonight. Roth was trying to repeat in his head what the voice said to him, and wasn't doing so well with it. Only Dyaganos realized at this point what was going on with the light.

"I think we are supposed to leave now," he said quietly to Zeebak, who was standing next to him.

"What? Oh yes, I see," Zeebak mumbled, half to himself, and grabbed Roth's sleeve, giving it a tug. "Come on, my boy, it's time to go."

Roth was watching Palomaine writing frantically at his desk and started to say something when Zeebak tugged again.

"Shh. Come on," Zeebak repeated.

"What about my trinket?" Roth whispered to him.

"He'll bring it, don't worry. Now come."

The three walked quietly toward the door, and the light continued on its way out the door and down the hall. It led them back up the winding stairway and out to the front room of the shop, where it hovered next to the benches they were seated in before.

The lantern on the desk was still lit, and the three seated themselves on the benches. The floating light went back through the curtains and disappeared, leaving them alone with their thoughts. Roth was the first to speak.

"That was some show, wasn't it Uncle Zeebak?" he said with puzzled excitement. "Did you see me riding Graymist in the smoke? Wasn't that fascinating?"

"Uh, well, no, I don't think so. I mean, I didn't see you riding anything. Who is Graymist?"

"Never mind that," Dyaganos said with a little irritation. "Did you hear anything?"

"Yes, I did," Zeebak answered. "I heard a voice, and it was speaking in riddles."

"I heard it too, something about a devil beast and a crystal lyre. Is that what you heard?"

"Yes, yes, uh...In the dark forest to the north and east, lies evil mind and devil beast, with eyes, uh...something, and flesh of fire, who dread naught but the crystal lyre. Oh..., uh..., oh blast, I can't remember it all," Dyaganos bellowed in frustration.

"Find the castle where the brothers dwell awaiting death," Roth added.

"Yes, that's it. Dreams foretell the brave and pure should not fear death, the time is near, the ancient curse, hmmm..., oh, curse the ancient curse. I hate riddles!" Dyaganos bellowed again. "Never could figure how some people can be so fascinated with riddles and parlor games. It's such a waste. Just get to the point I always say. Cursed

riddles!"

"Now, now, my friend," Zeebak said. "Let's not get frustrated or we'll never remember it. You are right. It is important for us to remember the riddle, assuming we all heard the same thing. Let's just take our time and see if we can figure it out."

"We might not have to. I think that's what Palomaine was doing. I think he was at his desk writing down the riddle. Didn't you see him writing frantically over at his desk?" Roth asked.

"Why, yes, of course, that's what he was doing," Zeebak exclaimed. "Of course, he was writing down the riddle before he forgot it. He's done this sort of thing before and knew just what to do. Now that's what I like, professionalism. You hire someone to do a job and they do it properly. All business, this Palomaine. Ondra certainly made a good choice."

"Speaking of Ondra," Dyaganos jumped in, "I have some questions about that young lady, and another thing. How did you know about my red stone? On top of that, I don't appreciate you telling everybody you run into that I have this stone, and furthermore..."

"Ah hmmm!"

The sound of someone clearing his throat behind them interrupted the third degree coming from Dyaganos, who stopped in mid sentence. They all turned to see Palomaine standing behind them with a large book and a piece of parchment.

"I am happy to know you are pleased with my work, your graciousness," he said, looking directly at Zeebak. "I hope I have done well. I believe this is what you came for."

Palomaine handed the parchment to Zeebak, who took it and looked it over.

"Your graciousness?" Dyaganos mumbled to himself so softly that none of the others were likely to have heard it.

"Most excellent. How do you do it? It sounds just as I remember it, now that I see it in writing. It all comes back to me."

Zeebak held the parchment up to the light to reveal the riddle they had heard, written in the form of rhyme, making it easier to read, and certainly making it easier to memorize. He read it aloud for the others.

"Listen and heed, for but once I will speak.
Follow your heart to find what you seek.
Through dread black forest north and east
Lies evil mind and devil beast
With sinister eye and flesh of fire
That dreads naught but the crystal lyre.
Find castle keep where brothers dwell,
Awaiting death. Yet dreams foretell
The brave and pure should death not fear,
For death means life. The time draws near,
And ancient curse denies birth still.
Make haste, let not the hourglass fill,
So ancient wings of gossamer three
Might strike the curse to set them free."

"May I see?" Dyaganos asked with some excitement in his voice.

Zeebak almost absentmindedly allowed Dyaganos to take the parchment from him, as he became lost in his own thoughts. He was beginning now to understand some of this, or so he believed. The passages about 'death means life', and the 'ancient curse denies birth still' were phrases he could put a meaning to, although he had no way to be sure if it was the right meaning. The part about 'ancient wings of gossamer three' and 'strike the curse to set them free' utterly fascinated him. Was there really a way to strike the curse and set them free? And the Gossamers? Well, he had heard tales of Gossamers, but these were no more than mythical tales for entertainment. It was hard to believe that they might really exist.

While all this was wonderful news to Zeebak, it was not exactly what he had hoped for. He was looking for Sir Dazman, and he just didn't see what all this had to do with Sir Dazman. What would Sir Dazman have to do with

this riddle or a curse? Could the riddle really be speaking of the same curse that Sir Dazman, as well as himself, was a victim of? Neither Roth nor Dyaganos knew about the curse, and he knew they must never be told, especially Roth. That was forbidden, and quite unthinkable.

Even if it was the same curse as the riddle mentioned, and he couldn't really be sure of that, what did Xzi-Xzo have to do with it? Xzi-Xzo had been Sir Dazman's teacher when he was apprenticing in magic before he became a warrior. He knew Xzi-Xzo had very powerful magic, but he had not seen Xzi-Xzo in many, many years. How did Xzi-Xzo become involved in this smoky vision from the spell, unless it was the fact that he had been connected so strongly to Sir Dazman? Could that be it?

He wondered if there really was a way to strike the curse, and what a castle where brothers dwell had to do with it? What brothers, or perhaps more properly, who's brothers? Maybe Sir Dazman had a brother. If he did though, Zeebak had never heard about it. It was all simply too much to ponder at once. He'd have to clear his mind, and hope he could find some revelation in all this. In any event, he was reasonably sure that Sir Dazman was still alive. He felt sure he would have known if Sir Dazman had died. In fact, he was almost positive.

Zeebak became conscious of the others talking, and realized he'd been daydreaming. Roth and Dyaganos were discussing the riddle like two blind men describing opposite ends of a horse. He decided he should at least tell them as much of his suspicions as he safely could without giving anything away that he shouldn't. It would be difficult at best.

He looked at Palomaine, who stood there silently watching them, and gave a smile. "We will not figure out this riddle tonight, no matter how much we discuss it," he told them. "Palomaine has things to do, I am sure. Why don't we take our leave and let him get on with his evening? Besides, it is late and I am tired from my trip. We should get some rest. Why don't we talk about this tomorrow?"

"Before you go, I believe this is yours," Palomaine said to Roth, handing him his trinket. "Take care of it. It is very special."

Then he turned to Zeebak.

"I believe this is yours," he said holding out the spellbook Ondra had given him.

Dyaganos took one look at it and went red.

"Why that looks like one of my spellbooks. Let me see that," he insisted, grabbing at it.

Palomaine was quicker, and jerked it back.

"My good man, you surprise me with your ravings. This is not your book. How could I have gotten a spellbook of yours? I'll have you know I do not go about stealing spellbooks. I was given this spellbook, and I will return it to whom I received it from. I'll thank you to keep out of it," Palomaine chided him indignantly.

"Alright. Then answer me this. Would you recognize one of your own spellbooks if you saw it?" Dyaganos asked.

"Why, certainly I would. What a silly question. Wouldn't you?" Palomaine answered with conviction.

Dyaganos raised one eyebrow, looking at Palomaine expectantly. He waited. Palomaine then realized what Dyaganos was trying to say. Of course Dyaganos would recognize his own spellbook, just as he himself would. So then, if what he said was true, how did Ondra come to possess it? He didn't believe her or Zeebak capable of theft. That would not be possible. Now he was as puzzled as Dyaganos.

Zeebak listened to this with utter chagrin. All he needed was one more thing to explain. The old man was already suspicious of how he came to know about the great red gem. Now he was obviously upset about the disclosure of the great red gem's existence to Palomaine. The business of the spellbook only added fuel to the fire. Zeebak knew he would have to explain the business about the henchmen coming after Dyaganos to explain how he came to possess the old man's spellbook. It meant he would have to tell him how he traced them by following the trail of the red stone.

He didn't like going into that much detail about his activities, but it could hopefully put off any further questioning later. He knew that lies grew like a spider's web, trapping one in more lies the harder one tried to extricate oneself. He couldn't afford that now. He had to maintain his credibility with Roth's companion. The whole business of the riddle was now a much more serious matter to his reckoning than just a search for Sir Dazman. Until he could divine what it all meant, he would need to maintain not only Roth's trust, but secure the trust of Dyaganos as well.

"I'm afraid it is his spellbook. You may give it to him," he told Palomaine.

Palomaine gave Dyaganos the spellbook, which Dyaganos accepted with a huff. He was visibly steaming at this

point. He didn't trust this Zeebak fellow, and this was the last straw. Dyaganos was certain now that Roth's great uncle could not be trusted. How was he to convince Roth of this? He really had his work cut out for him.

Roth watched all this with utter amazement. He didn't understand any of it.

"Gentlemen, please. I don't understand what is happening here, but I'm sure there is a perfectly logical explanation for it."

"There is, Roth, and I can explain it all," Zeebak told them. "As I said, I'm sure Palomaine has things to do, and we need some sleep. Do you think there is a room available where you are staying?"

"I would think so, now that the festivities are over," Roth replied.

"Good. Now, Dyaganos, if you have no objections," Zeebak said looking at him holding his spellbook, "and I would certainly understand if you did, I would like to accompany you and Roth to your inn and get some sleep. I can best clear all this up in the morning after we have rested."

Dyaganos was still visibly upset, but he looked at Palomaine, and at Roth, and finally agreed with a simple nod of his head.

Zeebak thanked Palomaine again for his capable assistance, and promised to return the next day to settle up for the services. Palomaine insisted no payment was necessary or expected, but then Zeebak took him aside and spoke privately for a moment, and it all seemed to be settled.

Zeebak picked up the bag he brought with him and they went outside. He climbed up behind Roth aboard Graymist for the ride to the Blue Pheasant.

"So this is Graymist," Zeebak said to Roth as they rode through the cool night air. "A fine horse indeed."

"That reminds me. You said you didn't see me riding Graymist in the blue smoke. What did you see? Anything?" Roth asked.

"Well, yes. I saw myself and a little boy in the smoke," his great uncle answered.

"Well, that's odd. I saw myself as an apprentice with my tutor in the smoke. I thought that's what we all saw," Dyaganos added. Though still upset, he was now more puzzled by this revelation about the magic. "Is it possible we each saw something different?"

"Apparently we did. I suppose it is like watching the clouds. Sometimes you see things in them others don't," Roth told them.

"If only you knew how true that was, my boy," Zeebak said wistfully.

"What do you mean by that?" Dyaganos asked.

"Oh, just that we all see things from a different perspective. Some folks look at a plant and see leaves and sticks, and some, like yourself, see herbs and medicines. That doesn't mean either one is wrong. It just means they see things in a different way."

"I suppose I cannot disagree with that," Dyaganos admitted.

"Then I see you are indeed a man of wisdom. Roth has chosen a companion wisely," Zeebak added, attempting to butter up Dyaganos. "The adventure you two are about to undertake will command all your skill, wisdom and intelligence, and you both must always remember one thing. Things may not be what they seem. You may be looking at them from the wrong perspective. Keep an open mind, and you may see what could not be seen before."

"An interesting philosophy," Dyaganos noted.

Zeebak decided to leave it at that, before he dug a hole deeper for himself. There was little talk the rest of the way to the inn. Dyaganos put up the horses when they arrived, and Roth showed Zeebak inside, where he got a room for the night. Dyaganos came in and they all went upstairs together. On the way up Dyaganos asked one more question that had been bothering him.

"Zeebak, how did you get here? I notice you don't have a horse."

Zeebak smiled and said, "I don't need one. Good night." He slipped into his room and shut the door, leaving Dyaganos standing there with a puzzled look on his face.

"What do you suppose he meant by that?" Dyaganos asked Roth.

"I think he was pulling your leg," Roth told him with a grin, though he was beginning to wonder himself.

Chapter Twenty-Five



A Quiet Talk

The next morning the threesome met in the dining room for breakfast. Things started out pleasantly enough, but Zeebak knew he had a lot of explaining to do. He almost wished he hadn't used that remark last night about not needing a horse, but he just couldn't resist it. The look on Dyaganos' face had been worth it.

Zeebak told them they all needed to take a ride after breakfast to someplace where they could not be overheard, for he had a lot of things to explain, and some even more important things they must discuss. It would not be good if others heard it. He reminded the pair that the adventure they were preparing for was more important than either one of them could imagine, and they needed to know a few things before they left. After that, conversation was light. When they finished eating, they all went to the stable and saddled up. Zeebak rode Sunset, much to the amusement of Dyaganos.

"Don't need a horse, huh? That's a good one," Dyaganos poked at Zeebak as they left the stable. "Ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer I suppose." They all had a good chuckle over it, and it was forgotten as quickly, which gave much relief to Zeebak. It was one less thing to explain.

They rode out of town for a mile or so up the north road, finally stopping beside a stream in a small grove of trees. The oaks that dominated this grove had not lost as many leaves so early as other trees. The sun was out warming the air, though it was still chilly in the shade. They let the horses graze while they found themselves a comfortable seat among the crooks of the roots of an ancient oak, bathed in a patch of sunshine that made its way through the canopy of leaves. With the sun to their backs, they soon warmed themselves.

"So, I suppose I should do some explaining now," Zeebak told them.

"Well, yes, I would very much like that," Dyaganos confirmed. "I have a lot of questions, and some good answers might make things a lot easier."

"Alright then, to begin with," he said turning to Roth, "I understand that you have been traveling around retelling the stories about your grandfather that you heard all your life from me, from Dru and Eldemere, and from others who knew of his great deeds."

"Yes sir, I have, every chance I had. I've wanted to find my grandfather," Roth replied.

"That's fine, for you see, even when you were a child, I was traveling around doing the same thing. All along the way, I would tell the tale of Sir Dazman whenever I could. I've been at it for nearly half a century now. In my trade, searching for and studying antiquities, I've traveled many hundreds of miles, and seen my share of adventures. I've found my share of treasures, and told the story of Sir Dazman more times than I can count. I never told you about any of this when you were younger. I was afraid you would follow in my footsteps. It's not an easy life, but it does have its rewards. I've seen places that no longer exist. I've been high up in the sky, and I've been so far underground I thought I'd never see the sky again. Yet through it all, I've never forgotten you. I would always come and check up on you, to be sure you were alright."

He smiled at Roth as he continued.

"Dru and Eldemere knew your father and mother, as I did, and knew that your parents loved you very much. Ever since your parents were tragically killed, Dru and Eldemere took care of you and loved you as though you were

their very own son. For that they have in turn been taken care of. It nearly broke their hearts when you left to make it on your own. I've searched long and hard for you, and thought I might never find you, and they have worried these long years without word from you. Now that I have found you, rest assured they will receive word that you are safe. I will keep in touch with them and let them know of your progress until such time as you return to see them."

He paused for a moment, as he gathered his thoughts. Then he started again.

"As for the horse, my friend," he said looking at Dyaganos, "I really do not need one. I have, shall we say, friends, whom I can call on if I need to go somewhere. It is not practical to travel about as much as I do without friends. I am surprised at you for not having the imagination to realize you are not the only person in this wide world that has magical abilities to get about."

He eyed Dyaganos knowingly. Dyaganos was caught quite by surprise. His attempt at a sheepish grin failed to hide his astonishment.

"Now, about the spellbook and Ondra. Ondra is my very special friend. She helps me. That's all I need to say about that. The book, however, is a longer story. As I said, I go about telling the stories of Sir Dazman, trying to get information and clues to his whereabouts, or even to find out whether or not he is still alive, though I tell you now, I am almost certain that he is."

He paused a bit to let that last statement sink in. "Not long ago, I came upon some information about the great red gem the Red Dragon Gryphondon may have used to turn Mirianna into gold and goad Sir Dazman into fighting him, and so forth. You know the story, so I won't go into it again. Anyway, I managed to track the gem down to a thief who sold it to an unsuspecting magician, who turned out to be you."

Zeebak pointed a finger at Dyaganos, who was caught by surprise once more. Before now he had not known the stone was stolen.

"You, my friend, are in possession of very valuable stolen property. I would keep the whereabouts of that great red stone to myself if I were you. Of course, I won't tell anyone about it, at least not anyone else," he added with a grin. "Besides, you will need the powers of that stone for some time as you develop your magic skills. It will be of great help to you, as you have no doubt found out by now. The point I must make here is that the rightful owner of that stone has some nasty men out looking for you."

Zeebak continued his tale, telling a slightly modified version of how he went to Chelting to warn Dyaganos about the henchmen, found the spellbook, and asked his friend Ondra to find them, and how she found Palomaine to cast the spell in hopes of finding Sir Dazman. He assured them that the henchmen would be taken care of, and their friends in Chelting would be safe. He explained he had found the spellbook, and simply borrowed it, and in his own way chided Dyaganos for being so careless with his books in the first place.

"I suppose you are right. I should be more careful," Dyaganos admitted. "I really should."

"Well then, that brings us up to the present," Zeebak continued. "The most significant part of which was last night. I think you will both agree on that."

Roth and Dyaganos both nodded in agreement.

"So, we have found out that we each saw something different in the smoke. It might have been our perception of things, as I told you last night. It might have been the magic. I don't know. Now, do we agree we all saw the same man's face in the globe, with white hair and beard?"

"From your description I'd say it was the same face," Roth agreed.

"I think we can all agree on that," Dyaganos added.

"Alright. Do either of you know who that was?"

Roth looked at Dyaganos, who looked at Roth. They both looked at Zeebak and shook their heads "no".

"I hope you will remember that face, for if you ever meet him, you will be in the presence of one of the most powerful wizards you will ever likely meet. He is very old, older than you would ever guess by his appearance, and he knows things none of us will ever be privy to. If he asks you to do something, do it, without question. He is a kind and gentle wizard, but he is not to be trifled with. Do you understand?"

They both nodded in agreement.

"His name is Xzi-Xzo."

Roth's jaw dropped so far you would think it had come out of joint.

"If you don't remember," he told Dyaganos, "Xzi-Xzo is the wizard Sir Dazman apprenticed with, the one who gave him the egg on his wedding day."

Now Dyaganos remembered the story, and his eyes widened perceptibly.

"He now knows we are looking for him," Zeebak explained. "I hope that is a good thing. If you find the wizard Xzi-Xzo, I believe you will find Sir Dazman. I can't say for sure, I just have a hunch."

"Now, my son, I am going to tell you something else it is time for you to know. In the stories you tell, you no doubt mention the sage Veldegarr, do you not, who goes about telling the story of Sir Dazman?"

"Well, yes I do. He's an important part of the story."

"My dear boy, you have always known me as your great uncle Zeebak. I brought you presents and stories from far away places, places where I might find your grandfather, and places where I searched for artifacts, often in places where others would dare not go. Because my work more often than not led me to search for unimaginably valuable and powerful things, I have need to use different names, as I do not want everyone to know my business. To you I am Great Uncle Zeebak. To others I am Counselor Zeebak, emissary to the House of Dazman, Holder of the Silver Staff of Glenngolden. It is a long-winded, contrived title, but it serves to bedazzle many into thinking I am some sort of royal official from some exotic place or another. I find they usually become a bit less nosy, and somewhat more careful of what they say around me. It also gets me into places I might not otherwise have easy access to. It serves me well in my dealings with antiquities and rare artifacts. However, many others know me by still another name. To many, I am known as Veldegarr."

He paused to let this revelation sink in, and to monitor Roth's reaction. Roth was obviously stunned. Dyaganos, on the other hand, had the flicker of recognition on his face.

"Then we have met before," Dyaganos said. "I remembered the name when Roth told his story the day he came to Chelting."

"Yes, my friend, we met. It was a few months ago. I came into your shop in Chelting one day, and then later I told the story of Sir Dazman to you and some others at Darwin's tavern. I thought you would remember on your own, but it doesn't matter. Now you know. So, my boy, what do you think of all this?" he asked Roth, who still looked a bit shaken.

"Uhh, why didn't you tell me before? Why did you keep this secret from me? You're all the family I have left, and you keep such secrets from me? I don't understand," Roth complained, a bit hurt.

"It was necessary, my dear Roth. I did not want to influence you into following in my footsteps, wandering about looking for someone you would probably never find. It can be a dangerous life, as you both have already found out. Yet, it can be exciting and rewarding too, as you found out last night. However, it is the life you've chosen, without interference from me. You've made your own choices, and I shall aid you in your quest henceforth. I cannot go with you always, as I have things which I must do myself, but I will be working toward the same end as you. As for you, my harried magician, you must get a grip on yourself and become more confident in your magic," he advised, turning to Dyaganos.

"The great red stone you carry is very powerful. As you no doubt already know, it will boost your magical abilities as you become more aware of them and how to use them. You will eventually have no further need for the stone, but do not loose it."

Zeebak gave Dyaganos a stern look to emphasize his words. "I have the feeling it could be destined for far greater things. He who holds that stone may hold the key to things as yet unknown. You must heed my words. Do not let it out of your possession. It could be very dangerous in the wrong hands, especially if those hands know how to use it. Keep it safe."

Dyaganos lifted the stone on its new chain he had bought in town and looked at it with renewed wonder. Zeebak looked at him and smiled.

"Did you bring the riddle?" he asked Dyaganos.

"Oh, yes, it's right here." He reached into his robe, pulled out the parchment containing the riddle and gave it to Zeebak.

"This is what we must discuss next. The riddle we have is the guide we must follow now."

He unrolled it for them to see.

"I will tell you what I can make of it. The rest, well, it will just have to come to you. Remember what I said, keep an open mind and you may see what could not be seen before."

Roth and Dyaganos moved to either side of Zeebak and sat down so they could read the parchment also.

"Now this first part of the riddle, 'Through dread black forest north and east', sounds like you must travel northeast from here to a dark forest. I have heard of a forest called Darkmire in that direction. I would suggest starting there. Beware though, for I've heard it is a very dangerous and foreboding place. I would advise you to enlist

the aid of some able and trustworthy companions in this quest. Now, this passage about the 'evil mind and devil beast with sinister eye and flesh of fire', well, that sounds like even more reason to have help. This devil beast could be a lot of things. It could be a Red Dragon, or some sort of demon. There are magical beings in this world that are far more sinister than even a great Red Dragon. In any case, it sounds very dangerous."

"If it means finding my grandfather, I'll go through ten Red Dragons to get there," Roth swore.

"Now, let's not be too foolish, my boy. You don't always have to confront every obstacle, or slay every monster you come to. If you can find a way to avoid trouble, you will be much better off. You won't be much good to anyone dead, least of all poor old Dyaganos here," Zeebak told Roth, looking up at Dyaganos with a grin.

Dyaganos simply nodded affirmatively. Then Zeebak read some more.

"Let's see, hmmm..., 'that dreads naught but the crystal lyre'. This sounds like it might be a way to defeat or do away with this devil beast. A crystal lyre. Don't think I've ever heard of one. It must surely be something magical. Any ideas you two?" he asked.

Both shook their heads "no".

"Then I shall research it. Perhaps I can find out something, now that I know what to look for." Then he continued, "This 'castle where brothers dwell awaiting death', I don't have any idea about that either."

"We met someone named Sir Broden on the way here," Roth injected. "He said he'd heard a story about Sir Dazman joining a brotherhood of some sort. He didn't put much credence to the story since Sir Dazman would have been so old at the time. He wondered why someone nearly a hundred years old would join a brotherhood. I thought it was a bit ridiculous myself. Do you think it might mean something?"

"Well, it does sound a bit farfetched," Zeebak told them. "As I said, open your mind. Don't discount anything until you have investigated it. It could just simply mean brothers, not a brotherhood. Don't pass up the obvious for some farfetched tale," Zeebak replied, and then he continued with the riddle.

"Now, this whole last part says 'And dreams foretell the brave and pure should death not fear, for death means life. The time draws near, and ancient curse denies birth still. Make haste, let not the hourglass fill, so ancient wings of gossamer three might strike the curse to set them free'. I wonder what that's about."

"You don't have any ideas about that?" Dyaganos asked.

"I am afraid the rest of the riddle is beyond me. I suppose I could make some assumptions, though," he replied.

Zeebak actually thought he knew, but he could not tell them. He would have to gloss over it. "I don't know about the curse, but it sounds to me like there is some urgency to this. 'Make haste, let not the hourglass fill, the time draws near'. That sounds like something is about to happen, and soon. If it has to do with an ancient curse, it could be very important," he added.

"I think this part about a curse speaks of the dragon's scale in his back. It was a curse to Sir Dazman, as the story says," Roth noted. "There's nothing in my stories though about any birth. What would that have to do with finding Grandfather?"

"I cannot imagine," Zeebak replied, though he knew differently. There was much he knew, but could not say. It made things very difficult for him. "If the riddle was too easy, why, it wouldn't be much of a riddle, now would it? I don't suppose we will decipher all of it today, or tomorrow, or next week. We may never understand it, but we must take what we can from it and do as we are able with it. I promise you, I will work to solve this. I know people to see, and places where knowledge of ages past is kept. If there is anything to be learned about this riddle, I will find it."

"Is there anything you're not telling us?" Dyaganos asked. He sensed Zeebak was keeping something to himself.

"Nothing that I can tell you," he said honestly.

The three exchanged glances. "You would keep knowledge from us?" Roth said in surprise.

"Not willingly, Roth, but my suspicions cannot be misconstrued as knowledge. I will not burden you or confuse you with suspicions and wild guesses. What I have told you is all I know that will help you. My best advice now is to follow the first instruction in the riddle. 'Follow your heart to find what you seek'. If only you will do that, then I believe all else will fall into place. This quest may turn out to be bigger than either of you imagined, but we cannot know that now. Take things one step at a time, and that which you need to know will be revealed to you. It is a philosophy I have subscribed to in my work for most of my life. If it serves you as well as it has me, then you will find success at the end of your journey."

There was something in Zeebak's voice that told them he was quite serious, but they also had the feeling he was more involved than he let on. It was finally becoming apparent to Roth and Dyaganos that this was no longer a simple search for an old man.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Two Old Friends

Zeebak could see by their faces they were beginning to sense the seriousness of what he was telling them. "I think you realize now this is not as simple a matter as it was yesterday."

"I don't really understand all this," Roth finally said. "So much has happened so fast, and last night was really an experience to remember. It seems this little adventure of ours is growing into more than I planned for it to be. At least we have a little something to go on."

"I am not pleased with your keeping secrets from us," Dyaganos said forthrightly. "I understand you may need to keep some things to yourself, but I tell you now I do not like it."

"I will not begrudge you your dissatisfaction. I would feel the same way in your boots, but I swear to you nothing I have left unsaid has any bearing on your quest. It is a matter I must look into and deal with alone," Zeebak replied.

"Well then, can you at least explain the part of the riddle about 'ancient wings of gossamer three'? What in the world has three wings?" Roth asked.

"My dear boy, I don't know that anything has three wings. I don't think it could fly like that," Zeebak said, chuckling at the thought, which helped break some of the tension that had been building over all this. "I can tell you that I have heard of mythical creatures called gossamers, but they were just that — myth — and I'm sure they don't have three wings."

"Were they evil creatures?" Roth inquired.

"No. In the tale I was told, the gossamers were benevolent beings that look out for you."

"So what would it have to do with the riddle, or the curse?" Dyaganos asked.

"I couldn't say," Zeebak replied. "It may have very little to do with it, or it may have everything to do with it."

Zeebak stood up, brushing dried leaves from his robe.

"In any event, you will someday find out just how important this quest is, but for now you must consider this quest the most important thing in your life. I can tell you that right now it is the most important thing in mine."

He rolled up the parchment and put it in his robe. "I will transcribe two more copies tonight, one for each of you. Together, we must solve this riddle." He turned to Roth and said, "Here, my son, I have something for you."

Zeebak reached into his robe again. From somewhere within its folds he produced a silver ring with an intricate geometric design encircling it. He handed it to Roth.

"Wear this ring at all times. It has some magic. So long as you wear it, I can find you, no matter where you are. This way I can maintain contact with you. I know Dru and Eldemere will feel much better knowing you are safe. Will you do this for me?"

"Surely I will, Uncle Zeebak, but you aren't going away already, are you?"

"Well, yes my boy. I must leave before long. You want me to tell Dru and Eldemere you are alright, don't you?"

"Yes, certainly, but I haven't seen you for years. You've only been here a few hours, and most of that was spent sleeping. Besides, it will take a long, long time for you to reach them. It is so far to go."

"Have you already forgotten what I said earlier? I have friends who help me get around. It will not be as long

and as difficult a journey as you expect. I will not leave before tomorrow. We will have today to catch up on things."

"That's not much time," Roth complained.

"That is true, my boy, but as long as you wear that ring, it will not be so long before I see you again. Remember, you were the one who left home and no one knew how to find you. It's not my fault, you know."

"I suppose I have no room to complain. It was my choice. I was young and foolish and eager for some adventure, and eager to find Grandfather too. I didn't realize my travels would slowly take me further and further away until it was too far to return so easily."

"Yes, but I'm not chastising you. I am, after all, very glad to see you safe. You have certainly grown up."

"Perhaps I should let you two have some time to talk," Dyaganos told the pair. "I can see you have a lot to talk about that doesn't necessarily include me. I think I'll ride back into town and visit Palomaine. Perhaps I can spend the day learning some things."

"That is a most admirable thought," Zeebak told him. "You could learn a lot if you had enough time and money. I think if you told him I sent you, and that I will take care of any expenses, you will find him agreeable."

"That is most generous of you," Dyaganos replied. "Just which name should I use, Zeebak or Veldegarr?"

"You may call me either, but it would certainly be less confusing to call me Zeebak. You are used to it, and I prefer it."

"I will call you Zeebak in deference to Roth, but, well, that wasn't quite what I meant. I was wondering which name to use with Palomaine."

"Zeebak will be fine. Either way, he will know."

"I will be off then. Will I see you two for dinner?"

"I think we will be back by then. We'll meet you in the dining hall after sundown," Zeebak replied.

"Excellent."

Dyaganos mounted his horse and rode toward town, leaving the two to themselves. As he neared the outskirts of Bane's Meadow he came upon a halfling on a pony cart riding out of town. The little man pulled the pony to a halt and greeted Dyaganos as he approached.

"Hail and well met, sire," the halfling said, his strong voice seeming out of place with his boyish face.

"Greetings, to you sir," Dyaganos replied as he stopped to talk to the little man.

"I am looking for a silver-haired warrior on a very large horse. I was told he was seen headed out this road earlier. Have you seen him?" he asked Dyaganos.

"That I have, my good fellow."

"Good. I have been looking for him to give him a message. Can you tell me which way he went?"

"I just left him. He is out riding with a friend, just ahead up this road. I might save you the trouble though. I will see him tonight. Can I give him the message for you?"

"That would be helpful if I do not find him. I am Jobo Thimble. He engaged me to make a cloak for one lady Rebecca. Would you tell him that I have delivered the cloak, and the lady was well pleased with her gift?"

"Ah, yes, I remember he mentioned that. I will be glad to tell him tonight."

"Thank you friend. Then I will be on my way. Good day to you now, and fair weather follow you."

Jobo snapped the reins and the pony cart jerked into motion, still heading out of town. Dyaganos continued on his way to see Palomaine.

Jobo hummed a tune to himself as his cart swayed in the ruts and bounced roughly over stones. This didn't bother him though, as he sat upon a pile of soft furs to cushion his rump from the wooden seat. Between tunes he would talk to his pony.

"Ah, what a fine and wonderful day, is it not, Tinker? A fair sun to warm us and a clear road ahead of us. We shall find trapping aplenty when we get to the River Erim. We will keep warm in my hideaway. It is a fair replacement for my own humble hole back home in Mouhdar, is it not? We can get away from the busy bustle of the town and enjoy the solitude and peace of the forest."

They rode on, Jobo talking, and Tinker listening. Soon Jobo noticed two men and two horses off the road by some trees. He recognized the grand horse Roth had been riding, but was puzzled when he realized both men had silver hair. Other than Roth, the only other human he'd ever seen with silver hair was someone he wasn't likely to forget. From this distance though he couldn't be sure.

He coaxed Tinker to a halt, deftly hopped from the cart and started across the grassy field before the two spotted him coming. He waved and called to Roth.

"Hail, Master Roth."

"Who's that?" Zeebak asked.

"That is Jobo. He does leather working. I engaged him to make a cloak for Rebecca, the lady I told you about," Roth replied.

"Greetings friend," Roth called out. "How is that cloak coming?"

"It is finished and delivered already," Jobo yelled back. "The lady was well pleased, and most surprised. Even though I did not tell her who sent it, as you instructed, she seemed to know anyway. I do not think you fooled her."

Jobo was close enough now to get a good look at Zeebak. Now he was sure. This was indeed who he thought it was.

"Well, I suppose she could have guessed it. Perhaps the surprise was enough to bring her a bit of happiness," Roth said.

"That she was, surprised and very happy indeed. You are a kind sort to buy such a nice cloak for an old lady. Is she family?" Jobo asked as he reached where the two stood. He smiled at Zeebak, who smiled back.

"No, just a friend."

"She is most fortunate to have such a friend," Jobo replied. Roth was unaware of the double meaning Jobo intended, although Zeebak caught it.

"Here, this is my great uncle Zeebak, Jobo. He's come a very long way to visit me," Roth said, motioning to his uncle.

The name brought a momentary flash of confusion across his face, but he knew better than to say anything. He thought it best to let it pass and go along with whatever was said until he could figure out what was going on.

"Morning to you, sire," he said, facing 'Zeebak' and bowing at the waist. "May you always find a blue sky and soft white clouds."

Zeebak grinned, and shook the halfling's hand. He had recognized the small fellow as he approached.

"Do you know who our small friend is?" he asked turning to Roth.

"Why, I just told you. This is Jobo. He is a leather worker, and a fine craftsman at that."

"Yes, I'm sure he is. I am quite sure that Master Thimble is quite skilled at anything he undertakes. You see, we are already acquainted," Zeebak said, turning to the halfling.

"That is correct, sire. I am honored to meet you again. How may I be of service?" Jobo said with another bow. He tried not to show his confusion at the name, as he knew the man as Veldegarr, and Roth was calling him 'Uncle Zeebak'.

Roth was a bit confused also. He was beginning to wonder if he was missing something. This halfling had bowed to his uncle twice already. He remembered the wizard had bowed to him last night and called him 'your graciousness', like he was some sort of royalty. This was, after all, just his uncle Zeebak. Then he remembered what his uncle had said just minutes ago about the name of Counselor Zeebak. Perhaps they actually did believe he was royalty.

"You have already been of great service, my friend. I'm afraid though, that my dear nephew, Roth, is not aware of your other abilities."

Zeebak turned to Roth with a curious smile. "I must presume then that you have never heard of a brave band of adventurers, consisting of a gnome, two elves and a fearless halfling named Jobo Thimble, who took on a great Red Dragon and defeated him."

"Well, to be honest, he was not such a great dragon," Jobo told Roth with a bit of modesty.

"Defeated a Red Dragon?" Roth sputtered.

"More or less," Jobo answered.

"He is being much too modest," Zeebak insisted. "Jobo climbed on the dragon's back and struck the final death blow with a simple dagger. Isn't that so?" Zeebak inquired, strictly for Roth's benefit.

"That is the way it seems to have happened," Jobo answered with a smile.

Roth was speechless, to say the least. He couldn't believe that such a little man, no more than four feet tall, could or would have climbed onto the back of a Red Dragon and killed it with a dagger. Why, he would have to be as famous as his own grandfather, Sir Dazman.

"You see, my boy, adventuring can be quite exciting, and dangerous as well," Zeebak said.

"If Jobo has done as you say, then why have I never heard of this? Stories of such wondrous deeds would spread like a dry brush fire, would they not?" Roth insisted.

"Ah, normally they would, my son, but you yourself seem to find it hard to believe, do you not, even coming from your own great uncle? Don't you think such a tale might find utter disbelief everywhere it is told, perhaps even in the Halflings' homeland of Mouhdar? Such a story may be so difficult to believe that people would fear ridicule from those that say they are foolish and gullible for believing. Thus they would not dare repeat it. Therefore, you see, the story is not spread. I would be tempted to laugh at such a tale myself, had I not seen it with my own eyes."

Zeebak glanced at the halfling with a knowing smile. "You see, my boy, Jobo and his friends helped save my life."

Roth was agape. Jobo had saved his uncle's life?

Jobo was beaming at this point. His smile was almost as big as he was, and Roth's amazement was just as evident.

Zeebak grinned at Roth with amusement for a moment and said "I'm sure Master Thimble would be pleased to tell you all about it sometime, should the opportunity arise."

Jobo had almost forgotten his puzzlement over the disparity of names Zeebak was using. "I would be happy to tell that story, Master., uh, Uncle Zeebak., sire," Jobo fumbled, suddenly remembering he was not quite sure what name to use, "but I was leaving town on the way to my favorite winter trapping grounds. I only stopped to tell Roth about the cloak." That reminded him about the old man with the braided beard he talked to on the way. "By the way, do you have an acquaintance, an old man with bald head and braided beard?" he asked them.

"Why, yes," Roth answered, finally regaining his senses enough to respond. "That would be Dyaganos. Why do you ask?"

"I met him on my way out of town and asked if he saw you. He directed me here. I gave him the same message about the cloak, because he mentioned he would see you tonight, and I was not sure I would find you myself."

"Of course. We will see him tonight. We will have supper together at the Blue Pheasant," Roth noted.

"Why don't you join us tonight at the Blue Pheasant, Master Thimble?" Zeebak asked in a cheerful and encouraging tone. "I was just thinking it would be nice to speak with you for awhile anyway, my friend, to catch up on what you have been doing with yourself since we last met. That would be a wonderful opportunity for Roth and Dyaganos to get to know you better. We all have more in common than you realize. Besides, the food is excellent, as is the wine."

"I really should be headed north. I do not want bad weather to catch me before I arrive and settle in. It can get very cold so far into the hills as Trapper's Hollow lies. However, I cannot find it in my good conscience to forego such a fine feast and pleasant company as I have been offered for tonight. I am not one to miss either good food, good wine, nor the good company and fellowship you offer. It would be pleasant to spend an evening recounting my adventures of the last few years, though I fear they cannot compare with our encounter with the Red Dragon. I hope you will not be disappointed. I humbly accept your kind invitation." He bowed again to Zeebak.

Jobo knew it was not wise to turn down an invitation from one such as Veldegarr. If he was invited to supper, there must be a reason, although he had no idea what it could be. He knew what he and Veldegarr had in common, though if the truth be known, he and his companions had taken on the wrath of a Red Dragon because it had been unavoidable. Roth and Veldegarr, or Uncle Zeebak as he was introduced, were obviously family. He had no idea, though, what he and Roth had in common, except perhaps for the cloak he had made at Roth's request. Then there was Dyaganos, whom he knew nothing at all about.

"Wonderful, wonderful, my friend," Zeebak responded. "Then we shall see you there. For now, though, Roth and I have much to catch up on. I haven't seen him for eight years. He has been searching for Sir Dazman these years, much as I have. We have just received information that will hopefully aid us in our search, so, you see, Roth and I need some time to talk. Perhaps I will see you before supper and we can talk more."

"As you wish, sire," Jobo said, smiling. "I beg your leave now, Master Roth. I shall look forward to tonight."

With that he bowed again to Zeebak, turned, and walked back to his pony cart. He puzzled over the upcoming meeting all the way back into town. This, he decided, was going to be an interesting evening. He just hoped he would like the outcome. Something was up, he knew. To have been politely but summarily dismissed like that to return to town had to mean Zeebak had something going on. Perhaps his search for Sir Dazman had something to do with it. Hopefully all would be explained tonight. He mulled that over in his mind on the way back to town.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



J'Har Harume

After Dyaganos and Jobo left, Roth and his great uncle Zeebak spent several hours catching up on their activities of the past eight years. Sometime after noon they realized they were hungry, and rode into Bane's Meadow for something to eat. As they entered town they passed a caravan of merchant's wagons heading out of town, up the north road where they had been. On the east side of town they soon entered an area lined with warehouses and bustling with trade. In the midst of all this activity they found a tavern called the Wagon's Tongue and went inside.

The innkeeper was a thin and gaunt, but amiable man. They inquired as to what sort of trade was common here. The innkeeper told them there was much shipping between here and Northstead, a town many miles north. Grains and foodstuffs, manufactured goods and other items were carried north. The merchants brought back skins, furs, some kinds of lumber and other items. Some caravans went even further north, into the wilderness, to barter with the dwarves who operate a trading outpost at the base of Icehammer peak in the Pillars of the Sky. The dwarves there dealt in the gems and minerals they mined. He told them such trips were dangerous, but often profitable because of the high prices paid for some of the minerals, and of course, for the gem trade.

They thanked him, then ordered bread and cheese, and some ale. The tavern was quite busy and noisy, with customers constantly coming and going. Zeebak felt relatively anonymous in this crowded atmosphere so they talked more about their experiences as they ate. They did not notice the man at a table in a nearby corner cautiously eyeing them. He was shabbily dressed, wearing the ragged dirty clothes of a common laborer. He could have passed for one of the laborers who worked in the warehouses loading and moving the crates and sacks of goods. His scraggly beard was little more than a week's growth unshaven. Hidden behind the black, unkempt hair that hung over his forehead, his eyes kept darting back and forth between Roth and Zeebak.

Before long their conversation turned to the quest for Sir Dazman. From there the topic wandered to Roth's mysterious silver trinket, or Silver Dragon scale as Dyaganos claimed, that was used in the spell.

"I wish I understood the riddle from the spell. It's such...," Roth started to say.

"Let's not discuss that here," Zeebak interrupted, glancing around suspiciously. His voice changed to a near whisper. "Never discuss magic in public places, my boy, especially when you really know something about it, and when those places are unfamiliar to you. I think we should be getting on our way now before we attract undue attention with our talk."

"I'm sorry, Uncle, I wasn't thinking," Roth apologized.

"That's quite alright, but we should be going. I have an errand for you anyway, which will take a bit of time."

He asked Roth to fetch Dyaganos in time for supper, explaining how he expected Palomaine and Dyaganos would be so deep in discussion that they would not realize the time. He promised to continue their discussion at supper, so Roth grudgingly put off his questions until later and went to find Dyaganos. Zeebak headed directly for the Blue Pheasant while Roth rode back to the north side of town toward Palomaine's apothecary.

He was unaware of the ragged man who followed him through the streets. The man's darting eyes watched everyone, but mostly they watched Roth. He trotted along, hiding himself behind wagons, and horses, and corners of buildings as he trailed Roth. His bare feet made little sound. Those who noticed him eyed him suspiciously, and

watched him carefully until he moved on. It was not uncommon to be accosted in this busy atmosphere by bold thieves who would snatch valuables and then disappear into the crowd, or hide inside the cavernous warehouses or among the myriad of alleyways between buildings.

Roth was in no particular rush as he took in the sights on his way to Palomaine's. During Festival he'd taken no notice of the large buildings that he now knew to be warehouses. He rode along, watching the busy people going about their work. Only occasionally now did anyone take much heed of him and his great steed. It had been different during Festival. Anyone who looked like a knight or warrior was cheered and waved at as they passed. Now, he was just another traveler passing through town, and everyone had their own agenda to complete before the day's end.

Soon his thoughts wandered as he rode along while the sun fell lower and the shadows of buildings lengthened across his path. Tomorrow he would probably be leaving again on his adventure, but at least now he had some guidance, if you could call it that, from the riddle that was supposed to help him find his grandfather. He didn't how the puzzle of the riddle was going to help though. He knew nothing of magic except what he'd seen Dyaganos do, and the show Palomaine had put on last night. It was simply beyond him. He knew the sword, and the bow, and tactics, and horses. He knew how to follow a trail, and both give and follow orders, but magic was something for wizards with their noses in books. It would be good to get back on the trail again, though trying to follow the riddle seemed to him little better than stumbling through the dark. The only advantage he could see was that perhaps with the riddle, if he were to find something important he might recognize it instead of passing it by.

He reached the northernmost street in town and turned west. It would be a short distance to Palomaine's shop from here. Now that he was out of the warehouse district, activity in the street was sparse. With the hour getting late, many people were going home for the day, and some of the shops had already closed.

Roth noticed Graymist's ears twitching this way and that. It seemed odd that Graymist would be acting that way in town. He looked around to see what could be making his horse nervous, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"What's the matter, fellow? You must be excited about getting back on the trail tomorrow. Is that it?" he asked Graymist. He patted the horse on his neck and rubbed it. "I'm a bit excited too, I must admit. It will be good to get away from this busy place and back to the fresh air of the outdoors instead of the smells of this crowded city." Graymist snorted and shook his head in agreement, or so it seemed to Roth.

It was only moments later when he caught sight of something in the corner of his eye, but too late. Someone came from nowhere, catching him completely unaware and knocked him off his horse. Graymist stopped dead in his tracks while the labored breathing and grunts of two men struggling came from a dusty cloud in the dirt of the street as Roth wrestled with a dark figure. The scene was all arms and legs rolling about, muscles straining, and huffs and groans coming from between gritted teeth as the two fought. Roth was on his back with the man on top of him when he felt the sting of a cut on his neck just before he got hold of an arm and twisted with all his might. He felt the arm give and heard the sound of bone crunching. Then a painful yell filled the air as he felt the injured man weaken. Suddenly he got a knee under the man and lifted his leg high, flipping him up and into the air.

Roth rolled over and clambered to his feet. The man rolled in the street moaning, trying to get up. Roth wanted his sword. He whirled around to see Graymist patiently standing there with his bastard sword in his scabbard hooked to the saddle right where it was supposed to be. He reached for its hilt and slipped it out with a "shing" of the blade against the metal guard atop the scabbard. He wheeled back around to see a dark figure in ragged clothing and wild black hair running away between two buildings holding his injured arm with his good one.

Roth started after the man when his boot kicked something hard in the street, and it went flying. He ran to the alleyway, but it was dark and there was no sound except for the handful of people who had gathered at the commotion talking among themselves. He looked around, huffing and breathing hard, no doubt with a gritted determination on his face, which was sweaty and dirty from the fight. That, combined with him holding the sword like he knew just what to do with it, made the curious move back, mumbling excitedly to each other.

He decided there was no need to go after the man. The man was sufficiently injured that he would be no more danger to anyone for now. He looked around to see what he had kicked, thinking it was something of his that had been dropped in the struggle. What he found was a dagger with a black blade and a bone handle. Inset in the handle was a small red gem in the center of an eye carved into the bone. It looked to be a quality weapon, not the sort of thing a common thief would likely be carrying, unless of course it had been stolen. Then he felt the sting of sweat in a cut on his neck and reached up with a finger to feel it. It bled a little, but was not a bad cut. In fact, it felt like little

more than a bad scratch, but it was in a dangerous place. Had the cut been much deeper, he would likely be lying in a pool of his own blood, dead already. He counted himself lucky.

Seeing that the excitement was over, the few onlookers were wandering away now, while Roth checked himself over for any more injuries. He put away his sword and led Graymist down the street to Palomaine's apothecary, wondering why anyone would be fool enough to attack him like that. He was well armed, and riding a horse that was obviously not a plow mare. Roth thought to himself that whoever it was wanted something really badly, or was very stupid. He couldn't decide which.

He was almost to the apothecary when a wave of dizziness washed over him, and he almost stumbled. He caught himself, and grabbed onto his saddle for support. It passed in a few moments, so he continued on until he arrived at the apothecary. Dropping the reins, he walked up to the shop door and tried the latch, but it was locked. Still holding the dagger he had picked up, he knocked several times using the butt of the dagger handle, and looked it over again while he waited. He started to knock again when another wave of dizziness washed over him, followed by nausea. It was worse this time and he leaned against the door. He'd almost caught his breath when it came again. This time his knees buckled, and he fell to the porch planks, unconscious.

When he came to, Dyaganos and Palomaine stood over him. His sight was blurry and he felt deathly sick. He was sweaty, his muscles twitched uncontrollably, and it was difficult to breathe.

Dyaganos looked worried as he said, "Welcome back to the land of the living, my friend," though there was more concern than enthusiasm in his voice. "Just relax now. Here, drink this."

Palomaine lifted Roth's head while Dyaganos held a cup to his lips. His stomach turned at the smell, but Dyaganos unceremoniously poured the concoction into his mouth. Spitting and sputtering, trying to catch his breath, Roth had little choice but to swallow it. Another wave of nausea washed over him and his eyes rolled back as he went under again.

When he came to the next time, he felt exhausted as if he had been fighting in his sleep, but he felt far better than he did the last time he looked up at Dyaganos. The old man smiled down at him this time as Palomaine came over.

"We think you will be alright now, Master Roth," Palomaine said matter-of-factly. Roth reached up and felt his neck, finding a bandage had been applied. He tried to sit up but Dyaganos held him back. "I wouldn't try getting up just yet, Roth. You're not feeling that good. You, my friend, are very lucky to be alive. Had we not found you when we did, and had we not been within arm's reach of some rather obscure medicines, I'm afraid I would be giving some bad news to your uncle just about now. You rest here for a bit. When you feel better, we would like to know what happened."

Roth looked around, realizing he was in a bed in an oddly decorated room. He guessed it was Palomaine's bedroom, since it certainly wasn't his room at the Blue Pheasant. Each of the four walls was painted a different color. One was light blue, one white, one a pale yellow, and the other one light green. None had a window, except that the yellow wall had a window painted on it, with painted curtains and a painted scene of mountains across a grassy plain for an imaginary view. There was even a small bird painted there as if sitting outside the window sill. The other three walls had small tapestries and paintings hanging on them. The paintings had carved frames as detailed as the large wardrobe in one corner. It was elaborately carved, with gold gilt accenting the carved designs. The night stand had a silver bowl, crystal glasses, and a painted ceramic pitcher sitting on it. The room was comfortably lit, much like the room in the cellar the night before during the spell casting. There was no discernible source for the light, but it was bright and cheerful, even if the decor was a bit overdone for a man's bedroom.

"I'll be fine," Roth told the two, though he wasn't really sure of that. "What happened, anyway?" he asked.

"We were hoping you could answer that for us," Palomaine answered. "We found you unconscious in front of the shop clutching a dagger. Would you care to tell us about that?"

"The dagger," Roth repeated. "Well, someone jumped me on my way here. Uncle Zeebak sent me to get you for supper. He said you would be busy and would forget the time. I was just down the street when someone knocked me from my horse and tried to stab me, I guess. I think that was his dagger. We wrestled in the street until I broke his arm, I think, and he ran away before I could get to my sword. I think he dropped the dagger. That's about it. I couldn't figure out why anyone would want to jump me like that."

Then he realized what Dyaganos had said moments ago about obscure medicines and giving Uncle Zeebak bad news, as if he had been about to die or something.

"Wait now," he said, trying to sit up again, but Dyaganos pushed him back down again. "What's this about

giving Uncle Zeebak bad news? You talk like I was dying. It was just a little cut. Nothing to make a fuss over. I haven't forgotten that medicine you gave me back on the trail, you old cow healer. You gave me something to make me so sick you could claim you saved my life again, didn't you?" he asked Dyaganos. "I'm onto your tricks."

"No, Master Roth, I'm afraid that is not how it was. You were very ill, and would truly have died had we not had the right medicine," Palomaine explained. "You see, you were poisoned."

"Poisoned? How do you know that?" he demanded of Palomaine.

"Because of the dagger, my fine friend. Did you see the design on the handle?" the magician asked Roth, holding it up for him to see again. The red gem in the middle of a carved eye caught the light and reflected in his eyes as if it had a glow of its own.

"Yes, I noticed that too. Not very fancy, I'd say," Roth remarked with sarcasm in his voice.

"I've seen an emblem like this only one other time in all my years. I'm afraid you have some very powerful enemies. Very deadly enemies, I might add," Palomaine told him in his matter-of-fact tone, though his face showed concern even if his voice didn't.

Roth noticed the look of concern on Dyaganos' face, and wondered what was so special about this emblem. "I don't believe I follow this," Roth told them. "What is the significance of the eye?"

Dyaganos looked at Palomaine, who in turn looked at Dyaganos. Then Palomaine said, "This eye is the emblem used by the J'Har Harume. They are a society of assassins, almost a religion, though I wouldn't exactly call it that. Perhaps cult is a better word. The one that attacked you probably thinks he has succeeded. If he ever finds out he has failed, he will commit suicide, the penalty for failure in the J'Har Harume. These are very skilled and dangerous adversaries, Master Roth. Whomever sent him paid a lot of money to see you dead, and the cult will not stop until it succeeds."

Dyaganos looked very upset, and Palomaine's tone was deadly serious. "We must find a way to avoid any further trouble with this cult, my friend. Do you have any suggestions?" Dyaganos asked, looking at Palomaine.

"As a matter of fact, I do. You stay here. I shall take care of this myself. Do not try to exit the front door, as it will be warded until my return. If you do, you will be severely injured. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes, of course. We will stay here, but what are you going to do?" Dyaganos asked.

"I am sending for the undertaker," Palomaine answered with a wry grin.

"The undertaker?" Roth squealed. "Wait just a minute. I'm not dead yet."

"Of course not, Master Roth. However, it would be most advisable at this point to make it appear as though you are. So long as the J'Har Harume believe you are dead, then their job is done, and they will not persist in their attempts to kill you." Palomaine smiled broadly. "I assure you, they will persist until they succeed, unless we convince them they have already succeeded."

"Perhaps if you sent for Roth's great uncle at the Blue Pheasant, that would be good. If he were to appear to be in mourning, then that would add to the illusion," Dyaganos suggested.

"Yes, very good. Indeed I will do that. It would save time if I were to use a horse," Palomaine told Dyaganos.

"Then use mine," Dyaganos offered. "He will be far more amiable to a stranger than Roth's warhorse."

"Done," was all Palomaine said as he turned and slipped out the bedroom door.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Old Friends Talk

It was late afternoon when Jobo pulled up in his pony cart at the doors of the stable behind the Blue Pheasant. He had spent the day trying to sell his goods on the street in town, with little success. Most of the festival-goers had left town, and those still about were not interested in leathers or furs. Thoughts of the good evening meal promised to him helped lift his spirits which were, as a rule, not easily dampened. His thoughts all day were centered on what Zeebak was up to. He had decided that he was definitely not sure he was going to like what might be coming. Then there was also a good possibility he might like what could be coming. Mostly though he had decided he didn't quite know yet what to think, so he had tried not to think about it, with not much success. He barely had time to jump from the cart when Zeebak appeared from the stable doors.

"Ahh, Master Thimble, my good friend. Have you had a busy day?" he asked before Jobo could spin around.

"Goodness, sire, I was not expecting you here," he answered in surprise. "Uhh, my day, yes, well sire, it has not been all that profitable. Still, I am looking forward to our supper tonight. I thank you for your gracious invitation this morning."

"I am sorry to hear your business was not good today. I think I may have something to take your mind off of that for awhile, though. Do you think we could talk privately?"

"Certainly, sire, as you wish," he said with a bow.

"My room is quiet. We could talk there. I will have some wine sent up for us."

"Excellent," Jobo said as he tied the reins of his pony to the post by the stable doors.

"I've made arrangements for you to stay here tonight, my friend, if you have no objections," Zeebak told him. "The stableboy will see to your pony and cart."

"Sire, I am afraid I cannot afford such a fine room as the Blue Pheasant provides. I am just a humble trapper and leather worker," Jobo objected.

"Do not worry. I have seen to your expenses already. It seems I am in need of your services again. Please accept the room for tonight as a small advance in payment," Zeebak said smiling. "Besides, we both know you have other skills to aid you when trapping is not good."

"Please, sire," Jobo said in an exasperated near whisper. "Let us not discuss such things here, if you please."

"Of course, Jobo, I would not be so crude. Come, let us sit in my room and have a talk. I have much to tell you. I do believe you will find my proposal most interesting."

"As you wish," he answered, following Zeebak toward the front door of the inn. Zeebak walked briskly, and Jobo's shorter legs worked double time to keep up. He was quite puzzled about what Zeebak could need him for. He knew Zeebak was not the kind to want someone with his 'skills' to do anything illegal, but if it wasn't that, then he was quite curious what Zeebak wanted him to do. Surely he wasn't going to ask him to confront another Red Dragon.

"I was a bit confused today when Master Roth introduced you as Great Uncle Zeebak," Jobo noted as he hurried to keep up. "I did not want to say anything. I suspected you had a good reason for using a different name. I did not know you had a great nephew, sire. I am most confused by all this."

"Yes, of course. Your confusion is quite understandable, but I will explain everything in my room."

Nothing else was said as they entered the Blue Pheasant, walked past the dining room and up the stairs to the second floor. When they reached Zeebak's room they closed the door behind them and Zeebak locked the latch.

"I have arranged for your room to be next to mine. Your belongings will be brought up shortly." Zeebak motioned for Jobo to take the bed. "Make yourself comfortable, my friend. We have much to discuss." Zeebak sat at a small table in the corner of the room, and Jobo sat himself on the edge of the bed.

"You are most gracious with your hospitality, sire," Jobo said. "I am grateful for a comfortable night's lodging," he added, studying Zeebak with his eyes, wondering what this was really all about. "I did not see Roth and his friend about. They will be joining us, will they not?"

"Yes, Master Thimble, but later. I have sent Roth on a small errand to keep him busy while we talk. At supper we shall talk about your adventures, but for now we will discuss something else very important."

He looked over the little man sitting there on the bed. Such a brave little soul, and stout of heart for one so small, as all Halflings were in general, he thought. He felt this courageous fellow would indeed be a good addition to the quest. Now all he had to do was convince Jobo to go along. He weighed his chances, trying to decide just how to go about it. Then he thought perhaps he could find the right thing to say once he saw how Jobo reacted, and so he began.

"I promised to answer some questions first, and so I shall." Zeebak stood up and paced across the floor, hands clasped behind his back, head down staring at the floor as he walked. "You know me as Veldegarr, and you know certain things about me. Shall we say, you know the truth about me."

He looked at Jobo, and the halfling grinned back pleasantly and said "Yes, sire. Of course, I would not speak of it."

"Good, for you must not speak of it. You must also know that Roth and Dyaganos do not know what you know, nor shall they."

Jobo's look of confused surprise was no less than Zeebak expected. "I do not understand, sire. I thought Roth was your nephew, and Dyaganos his friend. How can Roth at least not know?"

Zeebak continued his slow pace back and forth across the room. "Because Roth is not really my great nephew, nor am I really his great uncle."

Jobo's deepening confusion was quite evident on his face.

"Roth does not know this either. He and Dyaganos both believe I am who I say I am. As far as Roth is concerned, I have always been his great uncle, ever since he was old enough to remember. You see, his parents were killed when he was very small. Dru and Eldemere, who were close neighbors, raised him and treated him as their own. They were kind and caring, and raised Roth well. He knows his parents were killed, and that Dru and Eldemere are his adopted parents. I visited him regularly during his childhood to see that he was properly raised and his education was taken care of. I provided any funds necessary so that his adopted parents always had what they needed for his care. I am a friend of the family, and I feel obligated. His safety is as much my concern, if not more so, than finding his grandfather, Sir Dazman."

"I do not understand sire, I thought., his silver hair, like yours. I, I thought he was..., " the halfling said before Zeebak interrupted.

"No, my friend, he is not like me. He is just as normal as you are." He glanced at Jobo, whose face reflected complete befuddlement. His big round childlike green eyes were affixed to Zeebak, his mouth hanging slightly open. Then Zeebak continued.

"The silver hair, well, that is not so uncommon among certain elves, as you know. Perhaps there is some Elven blood in Roth's family. Who is to say. In any event, silver hair is really not any more than a curiosity among the general population, and does not have any real meaning beyond the coincidence of us both having silver hair. I do admit that it does make it easier to believe Roth and I are family, does it not?" he asked the halfling.

"Well yes, I suppose it does," Jobo replied.

"So, it has never been questioned, not even by Dru and Eldemere. Now, as to what name to use, you may call me either. Just today I revealed to Roth that I have been going by the name Veldegarr and traveling about searching for his grandfather. I had never before told Roth about my quest in an effort to not influence him into adventuring about like myself."

He stopped his pacing and squared off facing Jobo directly. "It is a bit less dangerous for myself adventuring about in strange places than it is for him, as you well know, no matter how skillful he is with his weapons. His level

of skill and competence is something I have yet to ascertain. Gratefully, your level of skill is something I am already familiar with, my friend."

With that Zeebak smiled at Jobo, who returned the smile, beaming with pride at the compliment. Halflings do like to be complimented, and coming from Zeebak it was doubly valued. Then Zeebak continued, turning to pace again.

"Like you, Roth does not have the advantages I have at my disposal."

Jobo responded with a smug but subtle nod of his head. Jobo knew what Zeebak was capable of. He was quite surprised to find out that Roth was as ordinary and mortal as himself, and not at all gifted like Zeebak. He understood all too well the dangers of adventuring. He and Zeebak had themselves slipped from the clutches of death those years ago in the Red Dragon incident. It bound the two as friends, which was a privilege for Jobo that very few others in this world would ever have.

"I have been searching for Roth since he left home some years ago, which has diverted me often from my quest to find Sir Dazman. Just days ago I received information on Roth's likely location and trailed him here. I only arrived late yesterday, and have already received even more revelations since arriving that will aid in my, uh, I mean our search for Sir Dazman. You see, I have found out Roth has been about his own quest to find his grandfather."

Zeebak stopped his pacing by the table and sat down again, stroking his short pointed silvery beard with one hand as he continued.

"I have my reasons for my quest, as does Roth, I'm sure. It appears that we are working toward the same goal, however unlikely a coincidence that seems. I suppose it's quite reasonable that all the stories Roth heard as a child about the deeds and fame of his grandfather may have engendered a desire in him to know more about the man. He did mention something to that effect to me today when we talked. I can understand his interest and desire. As for his companion Dyaganos, well, he is only a recent acquaintance of Roth's. Not long ago they met and decided to go adventuring together in a search for Roth's grandfather, Sir Dazman." Zeebak grinned at Jobo and added, "Just to avoid confusion, Sir Dazman is his real grandfather, I might add. So you see my connection to him, because as you know, I am on a quest to find Sir Dazman also."

There was silence for half a minute as Zeebak waited for his little friend to soak in all he had been told thus far. Zeebak could see by Jobo's expression that the brave little dragon slayer was buying into his story. Perhaps it would not be so difficult to convince Jobo to go along after all. Then Jobo spoke up.

"I think I can follow all this, sire, but I do not understand what Dyaganos has to do with anything. Why is he traveling with Roth? Is he not a bit old for that?"

"Do not be fooled by his appearance. Dyaganos, like myself, is not as old as he appears."

"He is not like..., I mean, uh, I did not mean to pry, sire. Forgive me," Jobo sputtered, not only embarrassed but afraid he had nearly said something he shouldn't have.

Zeebak grinned reassuringly. "No, my friend, he is not like me. He is quite normal. He goes about making his living as an herbalist, and is quite competent at his profession from what I hear. He has even taken to making dragonberry wine of all things," Zeebak added, twisting up his face in disgust thinking about how badly it affected him. He shook his head and continued.

"He is also a magician of sorts, and does possess a very powerful magical gem which is another wondrous coincidence, I must admit. He seems to have acquired the great red stone that belonged to the Red Dragon, the great Red Dragon that Sir Dazman defeated. You are familiar with the story, are you not?"

"Yes, sire, I am," Jobo said nodding. In fact, he had heard the story from Zeebak himself after he helped save Zeebak from a different Red Dragon.

"As to his interest in this quest, it seems providence put he and Roth together, one looking for Sir Dazman, the other realizing he possessed a magical stone that was part of the legend behind Sir Dazman. The old man is apparently hoping to find out what magic Sir Dazman used to defeat evil creatures, and especially one in particular, the great Red Dragon. That appears to be his desire in all this."

Just then there were footsteps in the hallway and a knock at the door, followed by a feminine voice calling, "Master Zeebak, I have brought the wine you requested."

Jobo jumped up saying "I will get the door, sire."

Zeebak said, "No, wait. I'll get it. Make yourself scarce, quickly now. I'll get the door."

Jobo did as he was told, making not a sound in his bare feet as he stepped around the bed and backed into a corner. He pulled the hood of his plain gray cloak over his head and seemed to fade into the woodwork, like a vague

shadow, impossible to see, even knowing he was there. Zeebak stepped to the door, unlocked it and pulled it open.

"Ah, yes, my wine. Just put it on the table please," he said, stepping back to let the dark-haired serving maid enter with a tray. She was slim, and plain faced, but had a pleasant smile.

"As you wish, sire," she said with a curtsy, placing two mugs and a pitcher on the table where Zeebak had been sitting. She looked around, her eyes passing right over Jobo without the slightest recognition. Seeing only Zeebak in the room she asked, "Have I brought a mug too many for you, sire?"

"No, no, that's quite alright. I was expecting a friend to stop by, but he must be delayed. If he comes, I will need the extra mug yet."

"As you wish, sire," she said again and curtsied politely once more. "Is there anything else you wish, sire?"

"No, this will do for now. Thank you," Zeebak answered with a smile, ushering her toward the door. He closed it behind her and locked the latch. Jobo melted from the corner, pulling his cloak hood down, and stepped back around the bed.

"Is something up, sire?" Jobo asked.

"Not really, Master Thimble. I just take precautions that others do not know my business. Besides, you know how serving maids talk. They have little else to do. If we were seen here talking, surely word would get back to Roth and Dyaganos, and they would be curious about our talk. Too many unnecessary questions will just complicate things."

Jobo nodded in agreement. Zeebak poured them both a mug of wine and handed one to Jobo.

"Thank you, sire. Your hospitality is as warm as that of my Halfling brothers." Zeebak understood that as a compliment, knowing how Halflings are famous for their hospitality.

"I trust you will keep my secret, since Roth and Dyaganos would not understand, and frankly, would not believe you if you did tell them about me. In either event, I would not be very happy if you were to say anything, and it would ruin my family ties to Roth. I do consider him family now, though as I said, I am not really his great uncle. It is good to have someone who cares for you, is it not, my friend?" he asked, raising his mug to the one Jobo was holding.

"Of course, sire, I understand. I would not be so careless as to say the wrong thing. To friends then," Jobo offered as a toast.

"To friends," Zeebak echoed. They both took a long drink. Then Zeebak smiled again and sat down in the chair by the table.

"Please, sit, my brave and talented friend," he said, motioning for Jobo to make himself comfortable on the bed again. "We still have some things to discuss. Now, about your talents. It seems that I am in need of them again. How would you like to undertake a little job for me?" he asked, smiling broadly. Without waiting for an answer he added, "I believe your talents could be put to very good use."

Chapter Twenty-Nine



News of Roth's Death

Palomaine rode up to the Blue Pheasant at a gallop. He climbed from the horse almost before coming to a full stop and ran inside. His hood covered his head, half hiding his face. He rushed to the front desk in a whirlwind of robes, attracting stares from the guests entering the dining room for supper.

"Clerk, clerk," Palomaine called in an excited voice, even though a pudgy young clerk with red hair already stood there at the desk. "Ah, yes, there you are," he said in a voice loud enough to be heard all the way into the dining hall. "I must see Master Zeebak at once. I am told he is staying here. It is important. I'm afraid something terrible has happened. Where might I find him?"

"I, I don't know, sire. He might be in his room. He could be in the dining room for supper. Shall I inquire for you?"

"No time, no time. Oh, this is terrible. Which room is he in? I will see to it myself."

"Uhh, just a moment, sire. I will check." The clerk looked at his register and said, "He is in number seventeen. Up the stair, to the right, about half way down the hall, sire."

"Thank you, son," Palomaine said. Then he added, "Oh my, this is terrible," as he rushed up the stairs. Guests now peered out from the dining room, and two linen maids whispered with each other on the stairs as Palomaine rushed by them. As soon as Palomaine cleared the top of the stairs and turned down the hall, the two maids made their way quickly up the stairs to see what they could see. Obviously something was going on and they wanted to be the first to know.

Palomaine rushed down the hall with footsteps as loud as he could make them, and stopped in front of room seventeen. Catching a glimpse of the two maids at the end of the hall, he pounded on the door with his fist and called out, "Master Zeebak, are you there? Master Zeebak, something terrible has happened to Master Roth. Please, let me in. I must speak with you."

Suddenly the door opened, and a dire faced Zeebak looked out to see who was pounding on his door. He recognized Palomaine even with the hood.

"What is wrong?" he demanded. "What is the matter with Roth?"

"Please, sire, may I come in? It is most urgent."

"Come in, quickly now. What has happened. Tell me," Zeebak insisted, sounding very worried and tugging on Palomaine's robe to pull him into the room. Palomaine stepped in and Zeebak slammed the door behind him.

Zeebak appeared to be alone, but there were two glasses of wine on the table. Palomaine pulled his hood back, took a deep breath and tried to smile, though it was a forced smile. Knowing what he knew about Zeebak's friend, Ondra, he had checked his ring the first time he met Zeebak. His ring indicated something very magical about Zeebak too. Suspecting what he suspected about Zeebak, he was a bit nervous about having upset him when there was actually nothing so urgent happening. It took him a moment to catch his breath and decide just how to go about explaining himself.

He suspected there were two ears belonging to linen maids pressed to the door about now. He was caught between telling Zeebak the truth and hoping the maids did not hear it, or telling him Roth was dead, speaking loudly

enough to be sure they did hear it. Then a solution came to him. He reached into his robes and pulled out his ever present scroll tube of parchment and a small writing box. Then he sat town at the table, pushing the wine glasses aside.

He began writing furiously as he spoke aloud. "I don't know quite how to tell you this, sire. I have some bad news for you."

"Well, what is it. What is wrong?" Zeebak demanded, quite confused as to what Palomaine was doing. Palomaine furrowed his brow, shaking his head slightly from side to side, and put his finger over his lips signaling silence to Zeebak. He pointed to the door with the other hand. Then he motioned for Zeebak to come look at the parchment. It read "I think someone is listening at the door. Say nothing. You must trust me. What I will say is a lie meant to deceive the ears of others. Roth is fine."

Zeebak read the words and looked at Palomaine in utter confusion. Then Palomaine began, speaking loudly again.

"I am very sorry sire, but I must bring you bad news. Your nephew, Roth, has been killed." All the time he was frantically shaking his head "no". "I found him at my door a short time ago. His throat had been cut. I did what I could for him, but it was of no avail."

Palomaine was waving his hands in a gesture of 'no', and pointing to the door, and making faces trying to make Zeebak understand what was going on.

Zeebak's face slowly changed from one of horror to one of confused but accepted understanding of Palomaine's gestures. He understood now that Palomaine, for some reason, wanted someone else to hear what was being said, but that his words were obviously not true. The reason for all this was totally beyond him at this point, but his fear and worry drained away the more he realized what Palomaine's frantic gestures meant.

"Please, sire, I am very sorry. I did everything I could, but I was too late. I think perhaps a thief attacked him, and robbed him. I just don't know. I am most distressed to have to bring you this news."

By now, Zeebak was trying to hand the parchment back to Palomaine, motioning for him to write something. Palomaine sat down again and began writing. In a few moments he was done, and handed the parchment back to Zeebak. It read: "Roth is perfectly fine. You must act distressed at this news. Get your horse and come with me back to my shop. I will explain everything."

"I have already seen to the undertaker, sire, but you must come now to make arrangements," Palomaine said aloud, facing the door to be better heard. Then he made deliberately loud footsteps, walking toward the door. He thought he heard a little squeal, and footsteps running down the hall, and he grinned. He looked back at Zeebak again and whispered "I'm sorry, sire. I know this is very confusing, but I have a good reason for doing this. Please, trust me. You will understand soon. You must appear distraught when we go downstairs, and make a show of it as we leave."

"I shall do as you ask," Zeebak told him in a whisper also. "I hope you have a very good reason for all this."

"I do, sire, I do. You will see."

"Jobo, please follow us as discreetly as you can, at least until we get outside the inn," Zeebak whispered over his shoulder. To Palomaine's surprise, a halfling stepped from the shadows in the corner of the room.

"I will, Master Zeebak. Do not worry. You will not see me, but I will be following." With that, Jobo opened the window and climbed out of it into the night.

"Who was that?" Palomaine asked in a whisper, and then caught Zeebak's eyes. "Forgive me sire," he added. "I did not mean to pry. I saw no one."

"Shall we go now?" Zeebak asked, motioning to the door.

Palomaine simply nodded and opened the door. They both pulled up their hoods as they left, locking the door behind them. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, a lot of hush-hush mumbling followed them as they passed people in the front room. They went outside to the stable. Zeebak saddled Roth's extra horse and rode with Palomaine to his shop. Jobo was nowhere to be seen, but Zeebak knew the halfling would arrive not long after they did. Not a word was spoken as they rode along the dark streets, quickly slowing the horses as soon as they were out of sight of the Blue Pheasant so Jobo could easily keep up.

When they arrived, they tied the horses behind the shop and walked around to the front. Before they entered, Palomaine mumbled something and made a sign with one finger on the door. Then he opened it and went in, followed by Zeebak. They left the door open, and moments later a short shadowy figure slipped inside. Then the door closed. A single candle lit the front room of the shop, casting eerie shadows around the room as they all three

pulled back their hoods. Palomaine was the first to speak.

"It is safe to talk now, sire. Follow me, please, and I will explain my actions. You will see that they were necessary."

No one else spoke as Palomaine led them through the dark curtain and down the hall. Where previously there had been a dark passage leading down stairs to the underground corridor there was now a solid stone wall. Where the end of the hall had been before, there now was an archway on the left. They continuing down the candlelit hall coming to two doors on the left and one on the right. Palomaine opened the door on the right, and led them into a well lit room where stood Dyaganos pouring water into a mug. Roth sat on the side of the bed in his breeches, shirtless, and looking tired but well, except for the bandage on his neck.

"Roth, my boy," Zeebak exclaimed, taking Roth's shoulders in both hands and shaking him a little, "you are all right?"

"Yes, yes, Uncle Zeebak, I am just fine. It is only a scratch, but they have me bandaged up like I've been butchered by a farmhand."

"That is for the poultice, Master Zeebak," Dyaganos explained, "to draw out the poison."

"Poison?" Zeebak piped up.

"That is correct. From this," Palomaine stated matter-of-factly, holding out the black dagger in the palm of his hand for Zeebak to see.

"J'Har Harume," Jobo exclaimed, as did Zeebak, almost in unison. Until then Roth had not even noticed Jobo standing behind his uncle.

"Jobo, what are you doing here?" Roth asked.

"I asked him to come," Zeebak answered before Jobo could speak up. "What do you know of the J'Har Harume, Master Thimble?" he asked with obvious concern in his voice.

Jobo stepped out from behind Zeebak to stand next to the bed where Roth sat, and looked up at the three old men staring down at him. "I know they are master assassins. I know they are very skilled at what they do. I know that they seldom fail in their assigned tasks, and that they are relentless as hounds after a rabbit." His face changed to a wry grin and he added, "I have other opinions of them, but I will keep those to myself, since you asked me what I know, not what I think."

"That is as much as I know of them myself," Zeebak noted. He turned to Palomaine. "At least I see why you were so agitated when you came to see me," he told the magician. "Still, you did not explain what has actually happened here."

"Maybe I can best do that, Uncle Zeebak," Roth jumped in. He went on to recount the attack and struggle on his way to the apothecary, and how he woke up to find Dyaganos and Palomaine standing over him.

"We still don't know why the J'Har Harume would have attacked you," Dyaganos puzzled. "What would make them do that? Do you think they made a mistake and attacked the wrong person?"

"Not likely," Palomaine offered.

"Nigh on next to impossible," Jobo added. "They do not make mistakes like that. They were after Master Roth, alright. They stalk their prey like a cat, waiting for an opportunity to strike. They do not waste their time stalking a skunk while the rabbit gets away." He looked up at Zeebak with a questioning gaze, half expecting him to come out with some suitable explanation.

Zeebak turned and paced across the room, "I still do not quite understand why I was told he was dead, and then brought here," he said, turning to Palomaine. "Can you enlighten me on at least that mystery?"

"Certainly, sire," he replied. "I thought that perhaps if we maintained the appearance that he had been killed, the assassins would believe it to be so. It is my understanding that they will not quit until they have succeeded. By making a great show, and pretending he was killed, the word would soon get around and people would..."

"Yes, yes, I see now," Zeebak broke in. "That is good. Yes, that is very good. You are a wise man, Palomaine."

"Thank you, sire. I am grateful that you approve. I did not mean to upset you, but I thought it was the best action at the time."

"Certainly, you did well. I think it just might work, so long as we can maintain the appearance he was killed."

A loud knocking interrupted him, and a muffled voice called from somewhere.

"Ahh, that would be the undertaker at the front door," Palomaine told them.

"The undertaker?" Zeebak repeated.

"Why, yes, sire. I stopped by there on my way to get you. I thought that would be the ultimate proof that

Master Roth was dead, to have the undertaker come."

"What are we going to do for a body?" Zeebak interrupted.

"Has anyone considered the city guards will likely be alerted that someone has been killed?" Jobo asked the group. "They will be at the door next asking questions. What will be done about that?"

"I'm hungry," Roth said, right in the middle of this serious discussion of his death and burial plans. It only took a moment for the humor to sink in as they all looked back and forth at one another, and all five of them broke out into laughter. Then the laughter broke off suddenly when the knocking at the front door began again. They were reminded that they had to come up with some sort of plan quickly.

"I will handle the undertaker," Palomaine told them. "I will tell him the family is still grieving, and just give him some instructions for the size of the coffin and send him away. I will tell him to bring the coffin in the morning and see that a grave is dug, and the family will handle everything else themselves."

"Good. That should buy us some time," Zeebak said. With that Palomaine left for the front door as the knocking began again.

"Dyaganos, I think it would be good if you could return to the Blue Pheasant, suitably distraught of course, and have some food sent here, for the family and mourners," Zeebak suggested. "If they ask any questions, tell them it is the usual custom where we come from, or some such excuse. I think we could all use some food, seeing that we will be held up here, at least for the night." Then he added, "While you are at it, listen for any gossip about this. Perhaps we will find out if this deception is working, or if we must plant more rumors to see that it is spread around."

"That I can do," Dyaganos said, putting one hand to his stomach. "I am realizing just how hungry I am. I did not stop talking with Palomaine today to eat a noon meal. We were discussing technique. You can't imagine how much I learned from him today, with just the few hours..."

"That is fine, Dyaganos, but we have more urgent matters at hand just now," Zeebak interrupted.

"Of course, of course," Dyaganos said as he pulled the chain with the great red gem on it from within his robes. "I suppose this is no secret to anyone here except Master Thimble, and I suspect someone would tell him soon enough anyway." He cast an accusatory glance at Zeebak. "I will just pop out to the horses to avoid the front door and I will return shortly." He closed his eyes and mumbled some strange words that made no sense and within one second had faded away from view. To Roth, it seemed a little different than the last time he saw Dyaganos pop away on the road where they were attacked. It seemed smoother somehow. Roth didn't notice, but Jobo showed no outward reaction to this at all.

"Magic," Roth said, sounding a little disgusted. "I do not understand it, but I suppose it is useful at times."

"That it is, Master Roth," Jobo said, smiling the big friendly smile that made his face look even more boyish than it normally did. Even with Roth seated on the edge of the bed, Roth's head was slightly higher than Jobo's. "Master Dyaganos seems to have acquired a very interesting ability."

"Don't tell me you are a magician too, Master Thimble," Roth said, smiling back at the little man with the boy's face and the strong masculine voice that seemed so incongruous to him.

"Oh, no, I am not a magician. However, I do not object to taking advantage of magic when it can help me. Oh, and please sire, call me Jobo."

"Well then, you may call me Roth," he said.

Zeebak began pacing the floor now. He looked puzzled and lost in thought, but apparently was still conscious of what was happening around him. He took advantage of the moment to break some news to Roth. "I am glad you are getting along well with the newest member of your party, Roth."

Roth jerked his head around in surprise to look at his great uncle and said, "Newest member of our party?"

"Yes, my boy. Jobo is going to assist you in your quest," Zeebak answered without breaking his stride in his pacing.

Roth turned back to look at Jobo who was still smiling at him, his hands clasped behind him, but now he was rocking back and forth on his heels.

"Is that not grand, Roth? It is not often a humble halfling, such as myself, has the chance to join a great adventure such as yours."

Roth looked back at his great uncle, then at Jobo, then back again. "Jobo is just a trapper, a...a leather worker." Then he looked back at Jobo. "Oh, but, I mean, well, I am sure you are very talented at what you do, of course. Do not misunderstand me, Jobo. It is just that I don't see what..."

"Obviously, you do not see, dear Roth," Zeebak broke in. Roth turned back to look at his great uncle, still

pacing as he talked. "Have you forgotten what I told you about this most amazing fellow? Did I not relate to you how he and his companions saved my life when a great Red Dragon attacked me? I think all you see is a little man with a boyish face whom you do not take seriously. You are blinded by the obvious, but you do not know Master Thimble as I do. Believe me, you will come to admire him soon enough for his abilities."

"Well, might I ask just what ability...," Roth started saying as he looked back at Jobo, but the little man wasn't there. Roth stood up and looked around to find Jobo on the other side of the bed, arms crossed, and a bit of a frown on his face. Roth sputtered, "How did you...? Oh, I see. A bit of magic. Is that it?"

"Not necessarily, Master Roth," Jobo answered, obviously upset. "I do not need magic to do what comes naturally, or what can be mastered with practice and skill, and a bit of courage and determination when necessary."

"You must be more observant, my son," Zeebak told Roth. "Had you been more observant, perhaps the incident this evening could have been avoided."

Roth turned on his uncle, a little red showing on his face. "I was looking around, Uncle Zeebak. Graymist was acting nervous, and I looked around to see if I could see why, but I saw nothing. The man just came out of nowhere."

"Perhaps a bit like Jobo did?" Zeebak asked him, stopping his pacing long enough to look squarely at Roth to emphasize his question.

Roth suddenly looked a little sheepish. "I suppose, but I just do not see how he did it. I had just looked in the direction he must have come from. Do you think it was some kind of magic, like Dyaganos does with his popping about?"

"I do not believe so," Jobo told him. "The J'Har Harume are assassins, not magicians, although they can often afford the price of magical items, and undoubtedly use them sometimes. I think the one that attacked you was just using his honed skill, and a poisoned dagger. He was counting on killing you even if he managed only a scratch. That was all it should have taken."

"It would have been enough too, had you not fallen at the door of an apothecary with two skilled herbalists and plenty of supplies at hand," came a voice from the hallway. Roth turned around to see Palomaine standing in the doorway, returned from his talk with the undertaker. "Had you been anywhere else, you would have died before you could have been brought here, even if someone else had realized what the problem was."

"I take it you were able to put off the undertaker," Zeebak said to Palomaine. Zeebak had resumed his pacing.

"It is taken care of. I had to do a lot of talking, but he will just bring the coffin in the morning. I had to pay him for his usual services, even though we were not going to take advantage of them."

"Very well," Zeebak mumbled. "It is little expense for making this deception work."

"It seems you are lucky to be alive, Master Roth," Jobo said, a bit sarcastically.

"He was very lucky," Palomaine reiterated.

"Then my good luck charm really is working," Roth told them, as he reached for the chain with the tiny silver dragon carving and the trinket dangling from it to give it a kiss for luck. A moment later he jumped from the bed and stood up.

"Where is my chain?" Roth demanded when he realized it was not around his neck.

"I don't recall you wearing any chain," Palomaine told him.

"Well, I was. A silver chain with a silver dragon and a trinket on it."

"Ah, yes, the one you were wearing last night. The one I used in the spell casting. Perhaps you lost it in the scuffle when you were attacked," Palomaine suggested.

"Perhaps I should look for it, sire," Jobo offered, looking questioningly at Zeebak.

"I will look for it too," Roth told them.

"No, Roth, you will stay right here," Zeebak ordered as he stopped his pacing. "You cannot be seen out. You are supposed to be dead. Remember?"

"I must find my good luck charm. It is special to me. I don't want to lose it."

"Yes, we must find the necklace, or at least Roth's trinket," Zeebak told them. "I believe it will be important in this quest. I just have a feeling about that."

He turned to Jobo. "Master Thimble, I think it would be best if you were to look for it. Your eyes have the best chance of finding it in the dark."

"Yes, sire. Right away," Jobo said as he stepped for the door. "Which way should I go?"

"East, up the street several buildings," Roth told him.

"Be careful out there, my friend," Zeebak added.

"I will, sire." As Jobo reached the bedroom door he suddenly had a thought, and stopped. Turning around he asked Zeebak, "Do you think there is any chance the assassin took it?"

Zeebak looked back at Jobo with a puzzled expression. He had not thought of that. "Well, I suppose he could have. I have been trying to imagine what reason the J'Har Harume would have for doing this, and absolutely nothing has come to mind. I do suppose that is a possibi..."

Zeebak stopped in mid sentence as a flash of worry washed across his face. Jobo caught the look, though he was sure Zeebak had tried to hide it. Jobo could hardly imagine Zeebak worrying over a necklace and some small trinket. If this missing trinket caused Zeebak such visible concern, he knew it was no trifle. There was much more to this than met the eye. He also knew if the J'Har Harume had taken an interest in such a simple thing, it certainly was no simple thing after all, and doubly worrisome.

Jobo made a nervous bow to the group. Then flicking his eyes at Zeebak as he backed out of the room, he said, "If you will excuse me, I will see if I can find your trinket, Roth."

Whatever was going on here, Jobo now knew this quest Zeebak had talked him into joining was going to be more serious than he was led to believe. Still, a Halfling's promise is as good as the sun coming up. He had promised to go, and he would. As he walked hurriedly down the hall to the front door he mumbled quietly to himself, "Heavens and stars, I hope I find it. I hope I can find it. For all our sakes, I hope I find it."

Chapter Thirty



Halfling on the Run

Once outside, Jobo searched almost frantically in the street. It was pitch dark now, but his Halfling eyes with their night vision could make out shapes and patterns in the dark from heat sources. What he could see was the difference in warm and cold materials. The metal of Roth's chain would cool quickly in the night air. Against the sun-warmed ground, which would cool more slowly, it would stand out to his eyes.

His problem was that he didn't know exactly where along the street to search. He had only been told east, a few buildings up. So he began in front of the apothecary, working his way east toward the north road entrance to town. His eyes scanned the street from the anonymity of the buildings and doorways.

Like all Halflings, Jobo had an innate ability to make himself inconspicuous, which he had taken to an art. In situations where even his skill could not make him nearly invisible to anyone not paying close attention, he relied on his cloak. The plain gray cloak he wore was far more than it seemed, for it was magical in nature. It was a gift from someone whom he had helped many years ago. He was not using its magic now, as there was no need, not in this darkness. No one would notice him out here unless, of course, it was another halfling, or an elf, or maybe a dwarf who also possessed night vision to varying degrees. He had not seen any of those races in town, even during Festival. Even if one did happen to see him, he could use his cloak to mask his body heat from them, though there was no need tonight. The street was quiet.

Where there was an occasional lighted window, he avoided looking at it to keep from temporarily blinding his night vision. Once his eyes adjusted to night vision, a full moon would have been like daylight to him, but there was no full moon tonight. The J'Har Harume would never operate by moonlight, nor even by half-moon light, for they only did their evil deeds on a New Moon.

Every so often he would stop and just listen for a minute. He often relied on his ears as much as his eyes, even more so when he was in the forest trapping, tracking and hunting. Those same skills were just as applicable in the city. It was a pity, he thought, that so many humans blundered about in their self-confidence without using the skills even the youngest Halflings possessed and nurtured. Of course, when you are half the size of Humans and Elves, it takes every bit of one's skill and wit to survive. He was afraid though that he had gotten himself into an even bigger mess with this quest of Zeebak's than he found himself in the last time he saw the man. Zeebak had shown much the same concern at the sudden appearance of that Red Dragon those years ago as he had shown tonight. Whatever thought had come to him had obviously shaken him. That thought was in the back of Jobo's mind as he slipped from doorway to alleyway down the street, scanning the ground for Roth's chain.

He also thought about the J'Har Harume. They were nothing to be trifled with, not even by someone with his considerable skills. In fact, many of his skills were the same as those of the J'Har Harume. It was his heart that was different. Halflings are a peaceful, patient, and lighthearted race. They enjoy their families, their friends, the comforts of home, and nature. Jobo could no more turn his skills to the pursuit of evil than a rock could swim. His good nature could not endure such an existence. However, because of his abilities, he would be the best match against any further attacks by the J'Har Harume, whatever their reason for trying to kill Roth. He was afraid Zeebak had realized why the J'Har Harume tried it. He was afraid the chain with its trinkets had something to do with it, but for the life

of him he could not imagine why.

He came to another alley, and stopped to listen, peering down its length in the darkness. He heard something, maybe a cat. No, it was a weak moaning sound, but he saw nothing. There was no heat signature at all. He listened more. The moan came and went, and was very weak. He scanned the edges of the roofs along the alley. It would be an easy ambush from up there if he wasn't careful. Roth had said he thought the man's arm was broken, but Jobo did not discount the assassin's ability to find a way to climb to the safety of the rooftops, even with a broken arm.

He eased along, his back to the wall against the building with the widest overhang. He listened for sounds, alert for movement from the roof's edge along the other side of the alley. As he slipped silently down the dark corridor the moaning became easier to discern. He was getting closer.

He came to a tee where the alley joined perpendicular to another alley. He listened around the corner. The moans came from the alley to the west, back toward the apothecary. Prudently scanning both ways before proceeding he moved slowly toward the sound. There were broken crates piled here and there, and a damp trickle of water ran along the center of the alley. He moved carefully around the piled crates. The smell of a stable and horses filtered up the alley in the cool night air. He heard a horse whinny up ahead, and he soon made out the shape of a slatted gate, hanging open, swung out into the alley half blocking it.

He slipped closer until he was next to the gate opening. He could tell now it led to a small stable with two stalls. The moan came again, much stronger now, and he realized it was coming from inside. He peeked through the slats, and could make out the warm shape of a horse silhouetted against the cooler back wall of the stable. There was another moan, sounding like it originated in the other stall, but he couldn't see past the stall divider wall from this angle. He turned and looked back along the roofs again to be sure there were no surprises behind him. He slipped like a cat across the gate opening to the hinged end and silently peered around the divider into the second stall. There on the ground was the warm shape of an adult, lying slumped against the back wall of the stall. The figure moaned again, but moved little. Jobo could tell it was a man, and that his eyes were closed. His breathing was slow. A spot on his chest showing warmer than the body indicated a wound, probably bleeding.

This could be a trick, he thought. It might be the assassin, too weak to continue, but lying in wait for whomever found him. Jobo pulled his dagger, readying it against any attack. He scanned the area once more, then stepped through the hay to the front corner of the stall, and pressed himself against the wall. He waited, but the man made no indication he was aware of anything. Jobo took one step forward and carefully nudged the foot of the man with his foot. There was no reaction at all. The muscles felt limp. Jobo decided the man was nearly unconscious, and posed no threat. It might even be that the assassin had attacked him. Maybe the man had surprised the assassin while he was caring for his horse. The J'Har Harume were known for not leaving witnesses behind.

Still holding the dagger, Jobo relaxed his guard and started to put it away when he heard the click of a latch. Totally surprised, he froze, looking toward the sound. A door squeaked open from the back of a building across the alley. The light from inside poured through the doorway and streamed across into the stable. Before his night vision was blinded, Jobo saw a plump woman carrying a bucket step from the door into the light and heave its contents into the alley. Then he could see little more than a silhouette as the light stabbed his eyes, spotlighting him there holding a dagger and standing over the injured man in the stable.

The woman glanced up and saw him. Her scream sounded deafening to Jobo. The horse in the other stall bolted, and ran out the open gate. The woman fell backwards into the doorway to avoid being trampled, bucket flying. The horse struck off eastward down the alley at a gallop, kicking the bucket hard. The metal bucket flew down the alley, clanking and bouncing off two walls before it stopped, making enough noise to wake the dead.

The woman continued to scream from inside the doorway. Jobo decided to make a run for it. He didn't think he would be able to explain away what the woman thought she saw if the local guards caught up with him. He knew he was a halfling on the run. Instantly putting away his dagger, he pulled the hood of his cloak over his head and faded from sight. Still half blinded, he felt his way out the gate, and then along the walls of the alley to the west, hoping to find his way back to Palomaine's apothecary.

He heard the screams continue, and horse's hooves pounding off into the distance. Windows lit here and there, casting light up and down the alley. The light was more of a blessing now than a hindrance. Until his vision came back he would need the light to avoid falling and tripping on junk in the alley. Easing himself along the wall he heard footsteps from inside the building he was up against, and suddenly a door opened not three feet from him. He froze. An old man's face peered out into the alley, holding a lantern. The man looked up and down the alley, his eyes passing right over Jobo standing there like a statue. The magic of his cloak prevented the man from seeing anything

but a slight waver in the flatness of the stone wall Jobo pressed against.

Now there were voices in the alley back in the direction of the stable. The screaming had stopped, but he heard running footsteps and men's voices talking excitedly. The old man ducked his head back in and the door slammed shut.

Jobo took the opportunity to slip further west along the alley, until he came to the first smaller alley leading back to the street where he had been searching. He slipped up the alley toward the street. The noise of voices faded as Jobo reached the street. His night vision was thankfully returning, but it was not yet back to normal. Still shielded by his cloak, he peered around the corner in the direction of the apothecary. He could see some men standing in front of the apothecary talking. From the warm and cool patterns, the men appeared to be wearing armor and helmets, and carrying weapons.

Only moments later yells came from the other direction down the street. Jobo heard a man calling, "Guards, guards, there has been a murder. This way, quickly. Guards, guards," he called. Jobo turned to see three people running down the street toward him from the direction he had been. He looked back to see the guards leave the apothecary and run up the street in his direction. He ducked back into the alley and waited. The guards yelled back at the men as they passed the alley and continued up the street. Jobo looked out again to see the guards join the three men and turn down the alleyway where he had originally explored. He turned back in time to see someone going back into the apothecary.

He knew there was a narrow alley next to the apothecary that led back to the shed Palomaine used for his stable. He decided to try his luck at going the back way down the alleys again to Palomaine's shed, hoping Dyaganos had not yet returned. He could relay his plight to Dyaganos and hopefully wait until things quieted down to gain entrance back into the apothecary with the rest of the group. He was sure they would help him hide.

Jobo had no trouble working his way silently to Palomaine's shed. When he arrived, he saw that the horse Dyaganos rode was still gone. He decided to wait here until Dyaganos returned from getting food at the Blue Pheasant, so he climbed up into the small loft. He found himself a comfortable place and curled up in some straw, listening quietly to the sounds of the night, waiting.

It seemed things were going from bad to worse. He was late heading for his trapping, hoping the weather north didn't get too bad before he arrived. He didn't know where this quest was going to take him. The J'Har Harume had nearly killed Roth. That in itself was enough to make him want out of the quest. Worse though, he would now be a hunted halfling, accused of murder. With his luck, somebody would say he was the one that attacked Roth and killed him too. It would be the height of irony to be accused of killing the man he was trying to help prove was actually dead, when he really wasn't dead at all. He decided life could sometimes be cruel to a halfling.

He waited quietly for what seemed an hour, when he heard a strangely familiar sound. He thought he must be half dreaming, so he sat up and listened. It still sounded the same. It sounded just like his cart, with that same peculiar creak his cart had in the spokes of the left wheel. It couldn't be his cart, for it was at the Blue Pheasant, or was it? Dyaganos went there to get them some food, but what in the world would he be doing with his cart? Jobo almost climbed down from the loft, when suddenly he remembered why he was there and decided against it. The sound came closer and he waited. He heard the sound of horse's hooves too.

Very shortly the noise stopped and light came into the shed. Jobo peeked down from the loft to see Dyaganos with a lantern, leading his horse inside. Then he went out and led in Roth's spare horse. The next time he came in he led Tinker, pulling the cart full of blankets, sacks and other stuff that were not Jobo's. Dyaganos began unsaddling the horses and Jobo decided it was safe. He called down to Dyaganos before climbing down.

"Dyaganos," he called in a loud whisper. The magician wheeled around, looking but not seeing. "Up here," Jobo whispered as loud as he could. Dyaganos looked up to see the halfling's smiling face peering down from the loft.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked before Jobo could shush him.

"Shhh," he hissed, with his finger over his lips. "Are you alone?"

"Well, except for you I am. What are you doing up there?" Dyaganos insisted.

"I am hiding, sire. Is it safe to come down?"

"Hiding from who?"

"From the city guard."

"What kind of drivel is that, Master Thimble? What are you talking about?"

"It is a long story, and I do not think we should discuss it out here. I have to get inside. We have more

problems than you can imagine, I am afraid. Close the door and lock it and I will come down," Jobo told him.

"Very well, Master Thimble, but this had better be good," he told the halfling as he went outside to be sure they were alone. He came back in and closed the door, laying the wooden bar across it to lock it.

"Now, what is this all about?"

Jobo climbed down the ladder on the wall, straw raining down as he came. Halfway down the ladder he hopped to the floor and brushed himself off.

"I could ask you the same thing. What are you doing with all the horses and my cart, and Tinker. What is all this stuff in my cart?"

"It is all our gear — mine, Zeebak's, Roth's and yours. I decided to go ahead and bring it back since we were going to have to stay here anyway. The food is here in these two sacks. We can take it in and eat. I'm starved."

"We must get in without being seen" Jobo insisted. "Maybe you could use your, uhh, magic gem, like when you left earlier."

"Why would we not want to be seen? Are the guards here?"

"They were, but they are gone," Jobo answered. "Right now they are not inquiring into Roth's supposed death, they are looking for me."

Dyaganos laughed. "Looking for you? Why would they be looking for you? They don't even know you are here?"

"You are right, they do not, but they are surely looking for me. I think they believe I killed someone."

"Why would they think that, my friend?"

"Can we discuss this inside, please?" Jobo pleaded. "They could be swarming this area before long. I will explain it when we are all together. I would really like to only go through it once. Besides," he added, sniffing the air, "I am getting very hungry too. Can we hurry?"

Dyaganos blew out the lantern, and said "Alright, Master Thimble. I suppose it is time you were inducted into the group. Take this sack with one hand and hold the gem with the other."

Jobo did as instructed, and Dyaganos took the other sack. He put his hand over Jobo's on the stone, mumbled something unintelligible, and the whirling started. When the lights and smoke and spinning stopped, Jobo found himself catching his balance in a hallway, standing next to Dyaganos, each of them still holding a sack. Dyaganos opened his eyes and said, "I forgot to tell you to close your eyes. It helps keep you from being so disorientated and dizzy." He smiled an innocent grin that Jobo didn't catch. "This way, I believe," he added, motioning toward the door just down the hall.