Warrior Priest of Dmon-Li

The Morcyth Saga

Book Three

Brian S. Pratt
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Qyaendri Adventures

Ring of the Or’tux
For my **Uncle**, who supplied me with the computer upon which I wrote *The Morcyth Saga*. Also for my **Aunt**, who made my times at their farm ones of happiness and are among my fondest childhood memories.
James walks down one of the many hallways in the Ferdillon Estate which lies in the great trading city of Corillian. Situated at the southern end of the island of Torence, Corillian boasts one of the largest shipping ports in these waters. The trading houses here ship goods to all the known kingdoms, many having offices in every major city and capitol.

He pauses in front of a door he’s entered many times over the past seven days, ever since they were brought here by Nate’s cousin after they’d fled the destruction of the mines.

Knocking, he waits until he hears a ‘come in’ from the other side before opening the door. Inside, he finds Miko sitting in a chair next to Nate who’s lying in bed, recovering from the effects of the poison he consumed when Black Tooth had tried to extract his revenge upon Miko. Miko had been poisoned as well, but hadn’t consumed as much of it as had Nate.

When they’d arrived at the docks of Corillian, the captain immediately took him to the nearest temple where he’d arranged for a priest to purge the poison from his system. Once the poison had been purged, the priest had told them the damage to his insides was far reaching and that it would take a long time, if ever, for him to fully recover from the effects.

“That’s right, Miko,” Nate adds. “We’d be more than happy to have you remain here with us.”

“But…” he says as he looks to Nate, pausing momentarily. Then he continues, “As much as I appreciate the offer to stay here with you and your family, I wish to return to Cardri with James.” He looks to James for his response.

James glances again to Nate and says, “I thought we should at least give him the choice.”

Nate nods in reply.

Turning to Miko, James says, “Then we’ll be leaving in the morning. There’s a trader with whom Nate’s father has arranged to carry us with them as they make their way to Cardri. They have several stops before they get there, but said they should be docking at the capitol within a couple weeks.”

“Tomorrow?” he asks, sad to be leaving his friend so soon. He turns to Nate and says, “I’m sorry to have to leave you.”

Nate lifts his hand and pats Miko on the knee, “It’s okay, Miko. I understand. Remember, you always have a friend in me and if you’re ever in the area, I expect you to stop by for a visit.”

Giving him a sad smile, Miko replies, “I will.” He turns to James, “I’d like to stay here with Nate until we leave in the morning.”

“Sure thing,” James assures him. “Now, I need to go arrange a few things with Jiron before we go.” Getting up from the bed, he goes over to the door. Looking back at Nate, he says, “You get better now.”

Nate smiles at him and replies, “I will.”

Opening the door, he leaves the room and then closes it behind him. He proceeds down the hallway toward the room that he’s been sharing with Jiron.

On the way, he sees Essin coming toward him and he’s wearing the livery of House Ferdillon. As they approach each other, he says, “So you’ve taken service with them then?”

Smiling broadly, Essin replies, “Yes James, both Eril and I have.” Eril was the other slave that had jumped aboard at the last minute when they fled the volcanic eruption which had consumed the slave mines. “Nate put in a good word with his father on our behalf and they’ve made us part of their servant staff. Not a glamorous position to be sure, but better than what we had a few weeks ago.”

Laughing, James nods his head in agreement, “You got that right. I wish nothing but the best for both of you.”
“Thank you,” he replies.
“I don’t know if I ever expressed my thanks for the fair treatment you gave Miko when he was part of your team in the mines,” he says.
“Well, I’ve always believed that if you treat someone with respect and fairly, they’ll work harder for you,” he explains.
“I’ve found that to be true, too,” he tells him.
“I must be off,” Essin says to him. “Can’t afford to make a bad impression with the master of the house.”
“Good luck, Essin” James says as he begins to walk away.
“You too, James,” Essin replies.
Leaving Essin behind, he proceeds down the hallway and admires the hanging tapestries on the way to the stairs leading down to where his room is located. Down the stairs, he turns to the right and comes to his room which is the third doorway from the stairs. He finds that Jiron has already left, probably to find another serving girl to spend time with. Leaving the room, he continues down the hallway past his room in search of him. Jiron often takes the serving girls to the inner atrium at the end of the hallway, where he says the plants growing there helps to ‘get them in the mood’.

The atrium is roughly forty feet by sixty feet with an open ceiling that allows the sun, and at times the rain, to fall upon the many plants growing there. Three benches are placed along the cobblestone walkways that meander their way amongst the plants. It’s on one of those benches that he finds Jiron sitting and talking with Nate’s sister, Miriam.

“…that’s when we took off and left the soldiers far behind,” he says to her.

James can see her sitting there in rapt attention as he relates another tale of their exploits. He’s been wooing several of the serving girls as well as Miriam, much to the chagrin of Nate’s mother. That’s partially the reason why they’ve agreed to expedite their return to Cardri.

“Ahem,” James says, clearing his throat to announce his presence.

Turning to look over his shoulder, Jiron sees him standing there at the entrance to the atrium and gives him a big smile as he says, “Hi James.”

James nods his head to him and then says to her, “Good day Miriam.”

She nods her head in reply and gives him a shy smile as she says, “Jiron was just telling me about your escape from Al-Kur. It’s amazing you both got out of there alive!”

“Yeah, it was,” he says to her. “Luck was definitely on our side that day.” Turning to Jiron he says, “I told Miko we’re leaving and he’s decided to come with us.”

“Thought he might,” he says. “Though if it wasn’t for Tersa needing me there, I’d never leave.” He flashes Miriam a smile and she gives one to him in return.

“I must go,” Miriam says abruptly as she gets up from the bench and rushes past James as she hurries from the atrium.

“Wonder what made her…” he begins to say when he sees Miriam’s mother entering the atrium from the other direction.

As she approaches them, Jiron comes to his feet and gives her a slight bow, “Greetings lady.”

“Flirting with my daughter again, have you?” she says to him with a not too happy look on her face.

“Just whiling away the time before we leave in the morning,” he assures her.

“I’ve spoken to Captain Caril, and he said all is set,” she tells them. “They’ll be leaving at first light.”

“Good,” exclaims Jiron. “Though I’ve enjoyed the hospitality of your house, I am anxious to return and find my sister.”

“Yes,” chimes in James, “you and your family have been most gracious in allowing us to stay here with you.”

She turns a warm smile to James as she says, “It is the least we can do for having our Nate back. I had given up all hope of ever seeing my son again.”

“Miko will be going with us as well,” he tells her. “I told him of your offer to have him stay here, but his mind is set to continue with us.”

“That’s too bad,” she says, “Nate has grown awfully fond of him. We all have to tell the truth, he’s a good lad.”

“Yes he is,” agrees James.

She begins to leave but pauses and turns back toward them, saying, “We’re having a banquet tonight in your honor, to send you off properly. I took the liberty of arranging for suitable attire to be brought to your rooms later this afternoon.”

“Thank you lady,” James says to her graciously.

“You’re welcome,” she replies as she again turns and makes her way out of the atrium the way she’d come in.

James turns to Jiron and says, “You’d better stay away from Miriam until we leave.”
“I don’t intend to do anything with her,” he assures him. “Truth to tell, she was the one who found me. I was sitting here just relaxing when she shows up and starts talking to me. Before I even knew it, she had me relating the tale of our escape from Al-Kur.”

“Be that as it may,” he says, “we’re not out of here yet and an angry mother can screw up our way back to Cardri.”

“I’ll do my best to avoid being around her, okay?” he asks.

“Wonder what ‘suitable attire’ is?” Jiron asks.

“Don’t know,” he replies, “but it’s usually stiff and uncomfortable.”

A groan escapes Jiron as he rolls his eyes upward.

He walks with James back to their room and as they near their door, they see one of the servants coming out of their room. The servant fails to notice them as he shuts the door and walks down the hallway in the opposite direction.

With trepidation, they open the door and walk in. Lying on each bed is indeed a set of clothes, one which has bright green tights and a darker green upper tunic. The other one is light brown tights with a dark brown upper tunic. They both race for the brown set and Jiron cries out in triumph as he gets to them first. “Ha ha ha, my peacock,” he says to James as he’s holding the brown set.

“Oh, shut up,” replies James as he goes over and holds up the other set. “I hate green,” he says miserably. He turns to Jiron and has an imploring look.

“No way, man,” he says and then indicates the clothes James is holding. “I’d rather go naked than wear that.”

He begins taking off his clothes and putting the new ones on. When he sees James hesitating, he asks in all seriousness, “You don’t want to insult our hostess do you?” Then a playful smile spreads across his face.

Resigned to his fate, he replies, “No.” He takes off his clothes and first slips on the bright green tights. When he has them on, he looks down at himself and realizes they are truly tight and forms to his every curve down there leaving nothing to the imagination.

Feeling naked, he pulls on the tunic which helps to cover his nether regions, though not as well as he would want. Despite being rather revealing, they are quite comfortable. Once he has them on, he goes over to look at himself in the mirror standing in the corner. Aside from the fact he’s green, the outfit actually looks pretty sharp on him.

Jiron has his own set on as well and they look at each other, nodding in admiration. “Actually, James,” he says when he sees him, “it doesn’t look so bad once you have them on.” He comes over and joins him in front of the mirror.

“You look pretty good too,” he tells him.

“It’s still another hour till mealtime,” Jiron says. “What say we go and show off our new clothes to some of the serving girls?”

Smiling at his friend, he replies, “You go ahead, I’m going to go and find Miko. He’s probably still sitting with Nate, and I need to make sure he gets ready for the celebration.”

“Alright, then,” he says. Going to the door, Jiron opens it and pauses a moment as he says, “See you there.”

Shutting the door behind him, he heads down the hallway to find one of the several serving girls he’s been ‘impressing’ since they’ve arrived.

Under his tunic, he straps on the belt holding his slugs so as not to be conspicuous. He really hasn’t felt safe anywhere since coming to this crazy world, and he always likes to be prepared. A couple days ago while they were sight seeing in the city, he’d found a store where he was able to restock his supply of slugs. Sitting over in the corner of their room is a box holding a hundred of them. When Miriam had found out why he’d wanted them, she had bought him the box.

Straightening his tunic so it will hide his belt of slugs, he leaves his room and makes his way back up the stairs to Nate’s room. When he gets there, he knocks but receives no answer. Knocking again, he waits but no reply is forthcoming. Opening the door a crack, he peers in and discovers Nate and Miko are no longer there.

Closing the door, he continues down the hallway toward where they’d put Miko. Being Nate’s friend had warranted him a room to himself next door. As he approaches Miko’s room, he hears arguing inside and raised voices. Fearing the worst, he readies a slug and bursts through the door.

Standing in the middle of the room is Miko, bright red tights in hand and a stubborn look on his face. Nate is there sitting in a chair and it seems as if they’ve been arguing. When the door bursts in, they both turn to see James framed in the doorway.

“James,” Miko cries out holding the clothes out to him, “do you realize what they expect me to wear?” Turning to Nate, he says, “If I have to wear this, then I’m not going!”
“Miko,” James says to him as he enters the room, “we’re their guests. And if they want us to wear these things, then wear them we shall. It’s the least we can do for the hospitality we’ve received.”

“But…” he starts to say and then stops abruptly when he realizes just what James is wearing. Breaking into a laugh, he drops his clothes to the floor and sits down in a nearby chair. “Man, would you look at you!” he says as he starts laughing even harder.

Turning a little red, James looks to Nate who says, “You do look good, James. It’s what everyone will be wearing tonight at the celebration.”

“Come on ‘Torchy,’” James says to Miko as he comes over and picks up the clothes from the floor. Handing them to him, he says, “Put them on.”

“Torchy?” Miko asks when he calms down. “Why did you call me that?”

Pointing to the clothes Miko’s holding, he replies, “Wearing that will make you look like a flaming candle.”

Nate breaks out into a smile at Miko’s expense when he hears that.

Looking forlorn, he holds the clothes and says to James with a slight whine in his voice, “Do I have to?”

“Yes, you do,” he tells him. “Now stop bemoaning your circumstances and put them on. Our hosts are expecting it.”

Under James’ glare he gets into his new clothes and sure enough, he looks like a flaming candle. When he looks to James for approval, he does his best to not smile.

“You look good,” he assures him.

“You sure?” he asks as he looks down at himself, not entirely convinced.

James glances to Nate for support, who chimes in, “Miko, you do look fine.”

“Are you coming to the celebration?” James asks Nate.

Nodding, he replies, “Yes. In a few minutes, my servant will come and help me into my attire for the evening. You fellows can go on ahead, I’m sure they won’t be upset if you’re a little early.”

“Alright,” agrees James. “Are you going to need help getting back to your room?”

Nate shakes his head and holds up his walking stick, “I can make it that far on my own.” Getting up, he leans heavily upon his stick as he shuffles toward the door.

James holds it open for him as he passes through, “Thanks,” he says to him as he goes by. Once he’s out, James shuts the door and turns back to Miko, “Relax, you do look nice.”

“So do you,” he replies. “Sorry I laughed.”

Smiling, James says, “Don’t worry about it, I do look somewhat funny in these clothes. I just hope we’re not the only ones to be wearing something like this.”

“Me too,” admits Miko.

“Shall we go?” he asks Miko.

“May as well get this over with,” he tells him.

Holding the door open for him, he says, “After you, Torchy.”

Miko gives him an annoyed look and says, “Would you stop calling me that?”

“Oh, sorry,” he apologizes, not looking the least bit sorry.

They leave the room and head downstairs to the banquet hall where they find the servants still putting up the last bits of decoration. Banners and flowers are everywhere, giving the room a festive and cheerful feel. Over to one side, a dozen musicians are setting up on a stage where they will be performing during the banquet. James is intrigued by the different instruments they have. Shortly, he begins to hear the beginnings of them tuning their instruments, somewhat reminiscent of his own short stint in the school band. He’d played the trumpet.

They see their hostess, decked out in a flowing lavender dress and marshalling her servants like a general on the eve of battle. She continually barks out orders and her ‘soldiers’ snap to obey. Noticing them there in their new clothes, she gives them a nod of approval before returning to the business of getting the hall ready in time.

Miriam walks in through a door on the other side of the hall. A flowing blue dress with intricate embroidery about the chest and bodice, she makes a striking figure. She motions them to follow her as she makes her way to the main entrance. “My, don’t we look fine,” she says when they join her.

“You too, milady,” Miko says as he gives her a slight bow.

“Don’t ‘milady’ me,” she says, flashing him a smile. “This isn’t going to start for a while, why don’t we go outside for a bit? There’s someone that I’d like you to meet, James.”

“Oh?” he asks, intrigued.

“She’s a friend of mine and I’ve been telling her all about your exploits, the ones Jiron has been nice enough to share with me,” she tells him.

Tongue suddenly going dry, his stomach makes with the butterflies as he follows her in trepidation down the hallway to the door leading outside. Meeting new people, especially of the female persuasion, has never been easy.
for him. When he passes through the door to the outside, he sees a girl standing off by herself under a nearby tree, watching them as they approach. She’s a year or two younger than he is and very lovely. Brown hair flowing past her shoulders and wearing a beautiful dress of blue with a stylish design stitched about the hem.

As they approach, Miriam whispers to him, “She’s the daughter of one of the shippers on the island, a family of high standing.” When they come close, she makes the introductions. “James,” she says, “this is Meliana. Meliana, this is James, and Miko.”

She gives him a curtsy and says, “Nice to meet you.”

When he stands there tongue-tied for a moment, Miko elbows him in the ribs which snaps him out of it. “Uh,” he says, his voice barely audible due to the dryness of his throat. He swallows and then says, “Pleasure to meet you too, Meliana.”

“Miriam has told me so much about you,” she tells him as she takes his arm. They begin to walk leisurely around the grounds as she continues talking, “You must be very brave.”

“Well…” he starts but then has to clear his throat to try to keep his voice clear. “Well, I suppose so. But at the time I didn’t feel very brave, you just do what you have to.”

“Oh,” she says as she grips his arm tighter. “I’d love to hear about it.”

What can he tell her that wouldn’t involve telling her about the magic? They walk for a moment before he begins to describe the jail break back at Mountainside. While he is talking, she continues to ooh and aah at all the right times, making him feel very good. Nothing boosts a man’s ego more than a pretty girl hanging onto every word he has to say.

Miko walks along behind him, disgusted at the whole sight.

From atop the estate they hear a musical chime ringing out. Miriam says, “It’s time to go back to the hall, the banquet will be starting soon.”

As they return to the hall, Meliana continues to hold onto James’ arm. As they reach the front doors, a man steps from within the doorway and stops in front of them.

“Papa!” Meliana exclaims happily. “This is James, the one I’ve been telling you about.”

Her father gives a small smile as he reaches out a hand and says, “Nice to meet you young man.”

James takes the hand and says, “You too, sir.”

The father eyes James appraisingly and gives a barely perceptible nod. Turning to his daughter, he says, “It’s time for us to take our places at the table.”

“Nice to have met you, James,” he says as he holds his arm out for his daughter. She releases James’ arm, much to his dismay, and hooks her arm through her father’s. He turns and leads her into the banquet hall, a slight limp in his walk as if his leg is bothering him.

“I think he liked you,” Miriam tells him.

James just shrugs, “Doesn’t matter, we’re leaving in the morning anyway.” He gazes at Meliana as she and her father enter the hall.

Miko tugs his sleeve and asks, “Shouldn’t we go in too?”

Snapping out of his reverie, James says, “Yeah, sure.”

Following Miriam into the hall, they’re led up to the main table where the Ferdillons will sit. Nate is already there at the place of honor and he gestures for them to come and sit next to him.

Miko takes the seat immediately to his left while James sits next to Miko. Shortly, Jiron comes in and makes his way over to sit next to James. “Did you find your admirers?” James asks him as he sits down.

Giving him a big smile, he replies, “Yes, two actually.”

The musicians off to the side begin to play and their music gives the hall a gaiety it had lacked before. The musicians are quite skillful, though perhaps not in Perrilin’s league. James finds himself watching the musicians as they play the unfamiliar instruments, finding it all very intriguing.

From a table further down the hall from where he sits, James can see Meliana looking his way. When she notices him looking at her, she gives him a large smile and a brief, unobtrusive wave. He nods and smiles back to her before turning his attention to watch the other guests arrive.

Many are dressed in similar attire to what he and the others have on, no longer making him feel so conspicuous. From the number of other men wearing similar garb, it truly does seem to be the current fashion trend in the area.

When the tables have mostly filled up, the doors to the side of the hall open up and Nate’s parents walk in. The band strikes up a processional style tune as they enter and approach the head table where James and the others are sitting.

The mother takes her seat while the father continues standing. The band comes to a stop and the hall becomes very quiet. Gazing around at the assembled guests a moment, he then begins to talk.
“Welcome all, to a banquet in honor of the return of our son Nathaniel, whom we never had thought to see again.” He gestures to his son who stands up amidst applause from those gathered at the tables, gives the crowd a short bow, and then retakes his seat.

“We are also here to honor and recognize those who helped bring this about. Miko, who befriended Nate in the mines, as well as James and Jiron who were instrumental in orchestrating his return. We give them our heartfelt thanks and wish them only the best.”

At this, the crowd breaks out into another thunderous applause. At Nate’s father’s direction, James, Miko, and Jiron stand up and give the crowd a bow before returning to their seats. James looks over and sees Meliana giving him a big smile and seems to be clapping harder than the rest of them.

Once the clapping has subsided, he says “Now, let’s celebrate with food, drink, and entertainment.” Signaling a servant standing at the edge of the room, he says “Let the celebration, begin.”

At that, the band strikes up a merry tune and doors begin to open as servants enter bearing trays laden with food. Roast pig, chickens, a veritable cornucopia of food begins to be laid upon the tables in front of the guests. Servants with pitchers begin passing among the tables as they fill everyone’s glass.

One comes and fills James’ with a sweet, smooth wine, reminiscent of the one he’d become plastered with back when he’d first met Miko in Bearn. Memories of the hangover he’d suffered through the following day makes him take only small sips during the meal.

Miko fills his plate to overflowing, much to the amusement of Nate, as he tries to eat some of everything placed before him.

During the dinner, entertainers come and perform within the open area surrounded by the tables. Acrobats, magicians, and dancers come and go as the meal progresses.

Once most of the guests have slowed down on their consumption of the bounty, the entertainers are cleared away and people begin moving toward the center of the floor as the band strikes up a waltz like tune and everyone begins to dance.

The dance is similar in nature to those James had seen in old movies of England, all structured and choreographed. All the dancers move in a pattern, weaving and bobbing in time to the music.

When the first dance had ended and the musicians were preparing to begin the next set, Miriam comes over to James and says, “Why don’t you ask Meliana to dance?”

He glances over to her and sees her looking eagerly over to him. He turns back to Miriam and says, “But I don’t know any of these dances.”

“But don’t be silly,” she tells him. “They’re not hard.”

He feels a nudge in the ribs and hears Jiron says, “Let’s go!” He grabs James arm as he propels him to the dance floor. Meliana sees him leaving his table and when she gets a nod from Miriam, says something to her father before getting up from the table. She makes her way toward him through the crowded dance floor.

When she reaches his side and gets into position to dance with him, he tells her, “I can’t dance!”

“Relax and just follow me,” she says to him. “It’s easy, I’ll show you what to do.”

He stands there nervous with Meliana standing in line across from him and Jiron in position to his right. When the music starts, he tries to follow Meliana’s lead and feels like he’s making a big spectacle of himself out in front of everyone.

But as he begins to learn the steps and the pattern of the dance, he’s able to relax and starts to enjoy himself. By the time the dance is over, he has the pattern figured out and found that he actually likes dancing. Of course, the fact he was dancing with as beautiful a girl as Meliana helped some too.

Once the dance is over, Meliana takes him over to her table where she sits with her family. “Momma,” she says to the woman sitting next to her father, “this is James.”

She gives him the critical once over all mothers give those their daughter’s have an interest in. Then she gives him a warm smile as she says, “Nice to meet you James.”

“You too ma’am,” he replies, blushing slightly under her stare.

“You dance well,” she tells him. “I just wish I could get my husband out there.”

Turning to her, her husband says, “You know I hurt my leg this morning!”

Nodding, she says, “Yes, dear.” She gives James a knowing look and continues, “He’ll do anything to get out of dancing.”

Meliana’s father just gives her an annoyed look and doesn’t take the bait.

The band is in the middle of another dance number and when they finish, Meliana takes James’ arm. With a quick farewell to her parents, she drags him back to the dance floor before the band has a chance to start up again.

They dance all evening, occasionally taking a break for drinks or just to talk. She doesn’t leave his side all night. At the end of one dance, her mother comes over to them and says, “We need to be leaving now.” She turns to
James and says, “Would you be so kind as to escort Meliana home when she’s ready to leave?”

“Yes ma’am,” he assures her. “I’d be happy to.”

“Good,” she replies. Turning to her daughter, she says, “Your father’s leg is hurting, so we must leave. Don’t stay out all night, dear.”

“I won’t mother,” she assures her.

“Good evening, James,” she says to him. “It was good to meet you.”

“You too, ma’am,” he says.

Her mother returns to their table where she helps her father to his feet and they begin to leave the hall.

The rest of the evening is spent dancing and talking as they share past experiences. During one such break from the dance floor, James is amused when he sees Miriam has gotten Miko out on the dance floor. How she did it, he’d like to know. Miko looked positively frightened and lost out there. When the dance was over, he beat a retreat back to his seat next to Nate.

Miriam sees James watching and gives him a mischievous smile. He smiles back and then resumes talking with Meliana.

When most of the guests have left, James figures it’s about time to take her home. He goes over to Miko and says, “I’m taking Meliana home, would you like to come with us?”

Shaking his head, Miko replies, “I’m going to see Nate to his room and then stay there for a while before turning in.”

“Very well,” James says, disappointed. As much as he likes Meliana, he’s just a little scared of being alone with her. He sees Jiron over to the side of the dance floor talking to a couple girls and makes his way over to him.

When he asks if he’d like to go with them, he just says “No.”

“But what will her parents think if she’s with me all by herself?” he asks him.

“They wouldn’t have asked you to take her home if they were concerned about you,” he assures him.

“I suppose you’re right,” he admits. He looks over to where Meliana and Miriam are standing near the front doors, talking.

He leaves Jiron and makes his way over to where the girls are. They stop talking when they see him approaching. As he joins them, Miriam says, “Well, I better go and see how Nate’s doing.”

“Miko is going to see him to his room and stay with him for a while,” he tells her.

“I better check anyway,” she says. She gives Meliana a hug and says, “Goodbye, I’m glad you were able to come.”

Glancing briefly at James, she gives a little smile and says, “Me too.”

She slides her arm through James’ as they walk out into the warm summer evening. “Where do you live?” he asks, feeling good with her on his arm.

“Oh, it’s not too far from here,” she tells him. Pointing down the street to the right, she says, “It’s several blocks that way.”

Turning into the indicated direction, he slowly strolls along the street with her. There are other guests from the banquet walking along the street as well, while others are in carriages on their way home.

“It’s too bad you’re leaving in the morning,” Meliana says with disappointment as she lays her head on his shoulder.

“Yeah, I know,” he replies. “It’s been nice being here.”

“Maybe you could stay longer?” she asks hopefully.

“I wish I could, but I’m unable to,” he tells her. “I need to help get Jiron and Miko out of the Empire and back home.”

“I understand,” she says. “Maybe when things change, you could come back and visit?”

“Perhaps,” he says, “but that is highly unlikely.”

“I suppose you’re right,” she agrees.

Arm in arm, they walk down the street until they come to her house. A light is on in the front room. “Mother is waiting up for me, it looks like,” she says as they come to the front door.

“I guess this is where we say goodbye,” he says to her.

Suddenly, she embraces him and places her lips upon his, giving him a warm and eager kiss. When she breaks off the kiss, James is left breathless and a little flustered. “I’ll miss you,” she tells him.

“I’ll miss you too,” he says when he finally gets his voice working again.

She turns and begins to open the door when she pauses and says, “Goodbye James.”

“Goodbye Meliana,” he replies as he watches her enter her home and close the door.

Feeling all warm and fuzzy inside, he makes his way back toward Nate’s family estate. Visions of Meliana and the way her lips felt on his fill his mind until he realizes he’s already back to the door to his room. He doesn’t even
remember walking back, he must’ve been on autopilot.  
   Opening the door, he finds Jiron snuggled in his bed with one of the serving girls he’s been seeing.  
   “How’d it go?” he asks from the bed, not the least bit embarrassed.  
   “It went well,” James replies. “Want me to leave?”  
   “Don’t have to if you don’t want to,” he replies. “We’re done anyway.”  
   James goes over to his bed and gets undressed in the dark and then slips under the covers. Thoughts of Meliana keep him awake long into the night before he can finally fall asleep.
The next morning after waking up, James discovers the girl who had shared Jiron’s bed with him the night before had already left. Jiron is lying there sleeping so peacefully, he almost doesn’t want to wake him up. Almost. He and his girlfriend had awakened James up twice during the night and he’d found it incredibly difficult to fall back to sleep while ‘that’ was going on in the bed next to him.

He gets up out of his bed and walks over to Jiron’s with a mischievous smile upon his face. Grabbing hold of his mattress, he upends it, spilling Jiron onto the floor with a thud.

After hitting the ground, Jiron gets to his feet quickly with a knife in his hand. Looking around, he sees James standing there with the mattress still in his hand. “Get up,” James tells him. “We’ve got a ship to catch.”

“What did you do that for!” he yells, anger in his eyes.

“For keeping me awake all night,” he says as he replaces the mattress.

The anger quickly disappears and a grin takes its place, “Sorry about that. She was a randy one, she was.”

Returning to his bedside, he begins to get dressed. Jiron follows suit.

James notices him putting his new clothes inside his pack and asks, “Taking them with you?”

Jiron glances over to him and nods, saying, “Yeah, I think Tersa would like to see me in them. You?”

Shaking his head no, he replies, “Green just isn’t my color.” Jiron just laughs.

After they’re both dressed, they shoulder their packs and leave the room. James leaves the box of slugs, he already has enough, what with his belt filled as well as a small pouch of them within his pack. Out in the hallway, they turn toward the stairs and go up to Miko’s room. Finding it empty, they go on down to Nate’s room where they find him saying goodbye to his friend.

“Come on, Miko,” James tells him. “We gotta go.”

“Bye Nate,” he says to him as he goes over and gives his friend a hug.

Patting him on the back, Nate says, “You take care, now. Come back if you can.”

“I will,” promise,” Miko says as he fights back tears forming in his eyes. The last week with Nate had been one of the best of his life. He really feels bad about leaving him.

“You take care of him,” Nate says as he looks to James.

“As best I can, you can rest assured,” he replies.

Jiron shakes Nate’s hand and then the three friends leave his room. Going back down the stairs, they make their way along the corridor toward the main door.

On their way, they’re stopped by Miriam who gives each of them a sack. “What’s this?” James asks.

“It’s traveling money,” she explains. “My parents thought it an ample reward for saving their son.”

“There must be over fifty golds in here,” Jiron says as he feels the sack.

“Actually, each holds seventy five,” she tells him.

“Thanks!” he replies as he puts the sack in his pack.

“You’re welcome,” she replies and then proceeds to give each a goodbye hug. When she gets to James, she says, “You better hurry, Captain Caril won’t like it if you keep him waiting.”

“I will,” he says to her. “Say goodbye to Meliana for me.”

“Next time I see her,” she says as she gives him a hug. She says goodbye to both Jiron and Miko before they turn toward the door and leave.

Walking down the street toward the dock, James says, “I hope this Captain Caril wouldn’t have sailed without us.”

“I doubt it,” replies Jiron. “He’s doing it for Nate’s family, so I think he’d at least give us the courtesy of waiting a little bit.”

“How long do you think it’ll be before we’re back to Cardri?” asks Miko.

“She said probably a couple weeks,” James explains. “We’re not going straight there, but are hitching a ride as they go along their trade route.”

“Oh,” he says.

Sails can be seen on the horizon as they near the docks. Once there, they ask the Harbor Master which ship is Captain Caril’s and he points to a two masted vessel, further down.
“Thank you,” James says to him as they proceed down to the ship. When they arrive at the Foam Breaker, James hollers up to the ship, “Permission to come aboard?” A man, obviously the captain by his dress, comes to the gangplank and looks down at them standing there on the dock. “You James?” he asks.

He nods his head. “That’s me, and this is Miko and Jiron,” he says, indicating the others standing next to him. “Come aboard,” the captain says before turning and moving back away from the gangplank.

As they start walking up the gangplank, he begins shouting orders to his crew and the lines are cast off. Once they’re on board, the gangplank is pulled in. The mainsail gets unfurled and the ship begins to move as the wind fills it. The helmsman turns the wheel and the ship pulls away from the dock on its way to open water.

“We appreciate you taking us on,” James says to the captain. “You’re welcome,” he replies in between barking out orders. Turning his attention back to them, he says, “There’s a room at the stern you can use while you’re aboard. There are some goods stored there, sorry about that, but it’s used as an auxiliary storage compartment.”

“Thank you,” James says. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.” Nodding, the captain adds, “Just stay out of the crews way and we’ll get you where you need to go.”

“Which ways the stern,” Miko asks.

The captain points to the rear of the ship.

They head in that direction and come to a door leading into the raised portion at the end of the ship. Opening the door, they find a small room, half filled with boxes and bolts of colored cloth. “They must keep this stuff here so it won’t be ruined by the rain,” suggests James.

“Probably,” Jiron says as they enter the room. Within, they find three hammocks slung one above the other, between the walls. Miko eyes them suspiciously when James informs him, “They’re for sleeping.”

Miko goes over to them and says incredulously, “You’re kidding!” He takes a hold of the bottom one and pushes it. He just stares at it as it swings back and forth.

“No, seriously,” he says as he sits down on the middle one and proceeds to lie down. “In tight quarters such as are on a ship, this is the only way to maximize space for the crew and still have plenty of space for the cargo.”

Eyeing them dubiously, he sets his pack down in the corner. He comes over to the lowest one and opens it up, sitting down on it. Attempting to lie down, he suddenly flips over and lands on the floor.

Jiron bursts out laughing at the sight.

James flashes him an annoyed look and he soon stops. Turning his attention back to Miko who had gotten up from the floor red faced, he says, “It takes some practice.” Hopping down from his hammock, he holds Miko’s open for him and says, “Here, sit down then lift one leg over.”

Miko hesitates a moment, but then comes over and does as James says. Once he’s straddling the hammock, James says, “Now, lie back and nestle in between the sides. Once you’re secure, bring your feet up together so you remain balanced.”

Nervous about hitting the floor again, Miko takes it slow and lies back until he’s nestled in the hammock. James keeps a firm hold of it while he’s getting in. Then, lifting his feet, he brings them into the hammock until he’s completely settled within it.

James lets the hammock go and it begins swaying with the rhythm of the ship riding the waves. Miko panics and grips the side of the hammock tightly as soon as James lets go, but soon realizes that he’s not going to immediately fall out. After a few moments of not falling out, he begins to relax. His nerves settle down and he starts to enjoy the swaying rhythm the hammock makes with the rocking of the ship.

“Ever been in a hammock before?” James asks Jiron.

Shaking his head, he says, “No, never even seen ‘em.”

“Want me to help you in?” he asks.

“No thank you. I’d just as soon sleep on the deck,” he says as he makes a space for himself over in the corner.

“Suit yourself,” James tells him.

Going back to the door, he makes to leave when he hears Miko holler, “Don’t leave me in here!”

Smiling, he goes back over and helps him to get out of the hammock. Taking Miko with him, he leaves the room and walks out on deck where the salt air whipping off the water almost knocks him over in its intensity. Gaining his balance, he moves to the edge of the ship by the rail where he gazes out over the water.

Back the way they’d come, the land is now only a thin line on the horizon. Everywhere as far as he can see is water, blue-green water with a sky of crystal blue above them. A grin breaks out upon his face, always happens when he’s riding a boat. Taking a ferry back home elicited the same reaction. It just feels good to have the wind whip around you with just the sound of the bow breaking the surf. He stands there mesmerized by the experience.

Miko stands beside him, affected the same way. Coming in on Nate’s cousin’s ship from the mines had been
less enjoyable. He’d been sick plus had the added worry of Nate’s condition on his mind as well. Now, though, he can truly experience it. Ever since Al-Kur when the slave wagon had stopped to pick up several more slaves from a ship at anchor, he’s wanted to do this.

After standing there in quiet contemplation, the captain comes up behind them and says, “We’re making for Maradan, a city on a local island near here. We have some cargo to unload and others to procure before leaving. We’ll be spending the night at dock before lifting anchor in the morning.”

“Maybe we could do some sightseeing?” James asks, turning around.

“Might not be a bad idea,” the captain agrees. “When we leave there, it’ll be four more days until we drop anchor again.”

“Anything worthwhile to see on the island?” he asks.

“Not really,” he tells him. “There are several nice inns if you want to take advantage of them while we’re there. It’s possible you may find something of interest, though my men tend to just stay on the ship while we’re there.”

“Thank you anyway, captain,” James says.

“No problem,” he replies, “just thought you might want to know.” He then turns, and climbs the stairs to the deck over their room where the helmsman stands at the tiller.

James glances to Miko, “Wanna do some sightseeing while we’re there?”

“Sure,” he replies, “better than being cooped up on this ship.”

Just then, a large creature similar in nature to a whale from back home, suddenly crests the water and falls back, causing water to geyser up into the air.

“What was that?” Miko asks, wide-eyed.

“Not sure,” James answers, awed. “Back home it might’ve been called a whale.”

“It was incredible,” he says as he gazes out across the water, hoping to see another.

James looks out over the water too, but he’s more interested in the serenity it brings to him than trying to locate another of the creatures. He’d always found great peacefulness in watching the waves whenever he’d been on a ferry or charter boat back home.

By this time, the island they’d left has completely disappeared behind them. James stays by the rail until he begins to see another island coming up ahead of them. As they approach it, the captain begins hollering orders to his crew as they trim some of the sails to slow their approach.

“Looks like we’re making for the island over there,” Jiron says as he comes up behind them.

“I think so too,” James replies. “Miko and I are going to go exploring on the island while the captain makes some trades. He said we wouldn’t be leaving until tomorrow morning. Want to come along?”

“Sure,” he says.

They stay by the rail as the island ahead of them grows bigger and bigger. It isn’t long before they’re able to make out the docks and other ships at anchor there. The island itself is heavily populated, houses dot the land from one end to the other.

Commands can be heard being shouted by the captain as he makes ready to dock. The sailors begin furling the sails and several go over to the railing at the bow, readying lines to be cast to those who’re waiting on the docks.

With skill honed through years of practice, the captain and his men slow the ship as they approach the dock. The sailors toss the lines over to the men who’re waiting on the dock. With quick speed, the dock workers wrap the lines around mainstays and they can hear the dock groan as the ship pulls against the lines and comes to a stop.

Once the ship has stopped its forward momentum, the ship drifts backward and the dock workers take up the slack in the lines until the ship is securely tied to the dock.

The captain comes over to them and says, “You can disembark now if you like. We’ll be here for some time. Just be back by sunup.”

“Sure thing captain,” James says.

“That sure was something,” Miko exclaims. “The way you brought the ship right up to the docks, at just the right speed.”

The captain smiles at his exuberance and replies, “All in a days work, me boy.” He turns back to his men and begins barking out orders as they start getting the cargo ready to be taken off the ship.

“Shall we?” Jiron asks, indicating the gangplank a sailor had just put in place.

“Absolutely,” replies James as he heads toward it, with Miko just behind.

When they disembark, the first thing that James notices is the lack of soldiers on the streets. There was a reduced presence back in Corillian, but here, there’s a total lack of them.

“Guess the Empire doesn’t feel the need to have soldiers patrolling here,” he observes.

“Probably not,” agrees Jiron. Looking around, he sees not much more than houses and some stores. “Doesn’t look like there’s too much to this place.”
Feeling a tug on his arm, James looks to Miko who’s pointing to a bakery shop. “James, tarts!”
Smiling, he allows himself to be dragged over there where they buy a dozen tarts with a red berry filling. Miko pays for them from the money Miriam had given him and then they leave the shop. James hears Miko licking his fingers and glances at him, one tart had already bit the dust.
They come back to where Jiron is waiting for them and Miko hands him one. “Ever had one before?” he asks him.
Nodding, Jiron says, “Yeah, a couple times. Tersa really likes them.”
Moving along, they proceed down the street to see what there is to see. They come to a woodcrafter who has several wooden ships displayed and James goes over to inspect them. He picks up a small one and says, “This would make a good present for Arkie.”
The woodcrafter, seeing his interest, stops the work he was doing on another of the wooden boats and comes over.
After some half-hearted haggling, he hands over the money and walks away with the small single masted ship. Putting it in his bag, he continues on.
They spend the day sightseeing, nothing real special going on. James begins thinking how nice it would’ve been to have Meliana here with him. As they walk, he sees a craftsman working on ceramic figurines and sees one of a dolphin, at least it looked close enough to one to call it that. After some haggling, he arranges to have it sent back to Corillian and to Nate’s family’s house.
“Why are you having it sent there?” Jiron asks.
“Don’t know where to send it to Meliana, so will send it to Miriam and have her take it to her,” he explains. He writes out a letter and gives it to the man with instructions on where to send it. Handing the man the money, they soon leave his shop and continue on.
As the day progresses, the wind begins to pick up and clouds begin to form on the horizon. “Hope a storm’s not coming,” he says. “It could make for an interesting trip tomorrow.”
Miko looks to the clouds, but doesn’t think too much of them, “They don’t look too bad.”
“Not now, true,” Jiron says. “But they could make the ride choppy tomorrow.”
When the day is almost over, they find an inn and everyone gets their own room. Miko said he was tired of hearing them snore. After settling in, they meet in the common room of the inn for dinner and entertainment. The bard up on the stage is decent but they couldn’t understand all the songs as most of his repertoire was in the Empire’s language. He did sing a few songs in the common tongue for those who spoke it.

The next morning, when James awakens, the rain is being blown hard against the side of the inn by the wind. The floor is wet over by the window from where the wind had blown it in throughout the night. Through the window, he sees the dark clouds that have blanketed the sky overnight. The ships at anchor bob with the motion of the waves rolling in, and he looks with trepidation at the choppy water. Not at all the calm placid scene of yesterday and most likely will make for an interesting ride. He hears a knock at the door and turns toward it just as it swings open.
Miko comes walking into the room, his pack slung over one shoulder. Seeing James at the window he walks over to him and says, “Looks like the storm came in after all.”
“Yeah,” replies James as he again glances back out the window. “We better hurry down to the docks before Captain Caril sails.”
James grabs his pack and then they go out to the hallway where they find Jiron exiting from his room. “You guys see the storm brewing outside?” he asks.
“Yeah,” replies James. “It’s going to make for a fun day.”
Giving James an odd look he says, “Fun? I don’t think so.”
“I was being sarcastic,” he explains.
They make their way out of the inn and the wind drives the rain into them as they hurry down to the docks. By the time they get to the ship, the rain has succeeded in thoroughly soaking them. Racing up the gangplank, they’re greeted by the captain who says, “Bout ready to send someone to go look for you guys.”
“Sorry if we’re late,” James says apologetically.
“You’re not going to sail in this are you?” Miko asks.
The captain breaks into a laugh and replies, “It’ll take more than a little storm to keep us at dock.”
Miko looks over to the sea and sees the choppy waters and swallows hard. He looks to James who only shrugs.
“You boys get on into your room at the stern,” the captain says. “We’re casting off the lines now.” A sailor pulls in the gangplank.
The dockworkers untie the ship and toss the lines back to the crew aboard her. The captain begins barking out
orders as his men hop to comply. The ship begins to turn slowly as it heads once more out to open waters.

Once the ship is away from the docks, the captain hollers to the crew up in the masts and the sails come down about halfway before they’re tied off. The wind fills the half sails and the ship lurches as it quickly picks up speed.

Huddled in their room under the steering house, they begin to feel the effects of the constant swaying of the ship upon the waves. James’ stomach begins to rebel and he says, “I’m going out to get some fresh air.”

“But you’ll get soaked,” Miko says from where he’s swaying in the hammock.

He looks down at himself and replies, “I’m already wet.” He opens the door and a gust of rain comes in before he manages to close it behind him.

Outside along the deck, he sees guidelines are now tied from bow to stern to help the sailors remain aboard in the storm. Grabbing onto one, he makes his way over to the rail and puts his face into the wind, which helps to settle his protesting stomach. Never been seasick before, but then, he’s never been out in this kind of storm before either.

As they continue out to open sea, he searches for other vessels that’ve braved such a storm but doesn’t see any. He looks around to the crew, but they don’t seem too worried, so he stops his worrying about the weather. If the professionals see nothing wrong, then he shouldn’t either.

The captain is standing up by the helmsmen. Using the guide ropes to keep his footing, he makes it to the stairs and begins to climb up to reach him.

When the captain sees him climbing the stairs up to him, he asks, “Everything okay?”

Nodding, he climbs the last few steps and comes to stand next to him, holding onto the rail. “Just out for some air, is all.”

“What’s bothering you?” the captain asks, grinning.

“A little,” he replies, “but the fresh air seems to be helping.”

The captain just nods at that.

“There doesn’t seem to be too many other ships out in this,” he mentions to the captain.

“Most don’t want or need to be out in this, so they don’t,” he explains. “But, if we just sailed in fair weather, we wouldn’t get too far.”

“True,” James replies. Then he looks down and sees Miko making his way along the guidelines. He hollers down to him until he gets his attention and then watches as he makes his way up to where he and the captain are standing.

When he reaches the steerage deck, James notices he’s a little green. “Just take some deep breathes, that should help,” he advises.

Miko goes over to the railing and tries to do just that, but his stomach rebels. Bending over the railing, he loses the contents of his stomach as he retches into the water below. When it’s over, he feels slightly better.

From overhead, a sailor cries out, “Captain! Sails!”

“We’re away?” he hollers back.

The sailor points off to the left of the ship and hollers down, “To the port!”

They all look and see a ship out there, heading in their general direction. “Empirical warship,” the captain says, not too concerned.

“Is that a problem?” James asks.

“Unlikely,” the captain replies. “It’s most likely just on patrol.”

James doesn’t share the captain’s nonchalance about sighting a warship.

“Think it’s looking for us?” Miko whispers as he leans close to James.

“I hope not,” he replies as he continues watching the warship.

As time passes, the warship continues to close the distance between them, heightening James worries.

Suddenly, James hears the captain swear. “What?” he asks.

Gesturing to the warship, the captain says, “They want us to furl our sails and be prepared to be boarded.”

“Is that bad?” James asks as he looks over to the warship. He can see a sailor on the other ship signaling with two flags.

“Bad?” cries the captain. “With the waves crashing as they are, it’s unlikely we’d survive. Our ships would be smashed together.”

“Then why would they want to?” he asks.

The captain gives him an inquisitive look and says, “Why indeed?”

James turns to Miko and says, “Go get Jiron.”

When Miko has left, the captain says, “They know it to be suicide to link ships in this weather. They must want something, or someone real bad and are willing to risk their ship to get it.”

James just stands there silently, as he glances between the approaching ship and the captain.

“Is there something I should know?” the captain asks.
“They want us,” James tells him.
“I thought so,” Captain Caril says. “I’m not going to endanger my crew or my ship. You understand that?”
Nodding, James says, “Yes, captain, I do.”
Just then, Miko returns with Jiron and James says, “The warship means to board, and the captain here says that
would most likely damage if not destroy his ship.”
“Why do they mean to board?” Miko asks. When he sees the look on James’ face, he says, “Oh, us.”
James nods his head.
“What do you mean to do?” Jiron asks the captain.
“I have to think of the safety of my ship first,” he explains. “You have to get off my ship.”
“What? In this storm?” he asks incredulously.
“I’ve got no choice,” the captain tells him. “If you’re gone, they’ll leave us alone.”
James looks over to the choppy seas and says, “That’s a death sentence!”
“We can lower you down in our dinghy,” the captain says. “At least that would give you some chance.”
“But what about the warship!” Miko cries out, realizing they’d be easy pickings sitting in a small boat.
Looking sad, but resigned to the situation, the captain says, “Not my concern, lad.”
“Alright, captain,” says James. “Lower us in the dinghy.”
“James, are you crazy?” Miko exclaims. “We’ll die!”
Turning on Miko, James yells, “If we stay, they’ll all die with us! I’ll not have innocent blood on my hands.”
Then softly, as if to himself he says, “I already have enough as it is.”
The captain hollers to a crewmember standing nearby and he goes over to the dinghy and with the help of two
others, gets it ready to be lowered overboard.
“Good luck to you boys,” the captain says.
“Sorry to have endangered your vessel,” James says to him. The captain just nods his head.
Grabbing a very unhappy Miko, he makes his way down to the main deck where the dinghy is already on the
other side of the rail, ready to be lowered.
Coming to the rail, he climbs over into the waiting dinghy. Once he’s in, he turns back and helps Miko. Jiron
climbs in after Miko and when they’re all settled in on the seats, the sailors begin to slowly lower them to the
choppy water below. A sailor comes to the railing and tosses their packs down to them.
Once the dinghy is resting upon the water, James and Jiron release the ropes and the sea begins to drag them
away from the ship.
The sea quickly takes them, and pulls them away from the ship. Waves crash over the sides of the dinghy as the
wind pummels them with rain and spray. James looks back to the ship as the gap between them widens rapidly and
sees the captain watching them as they drift further away.
The warship must’ve noticed them there in the dinghy for it changes its course slightly as it begins bearing
down upon them.
Chapter Three

The dinghy rocks in the waves, all three holding on and praying they don’t tip over. A large wave crashes into them, causing the dinghy to pitch precariously. Miko screams as the edge of the dinghy dips into the water, but then the wave passes by and it once again rights itself. The amount of water in the bottom is growing by the minute.

“We’re not going to last much longer!” Jiron hollers over the roar of the storm.

“What are we going to do?” Miko cries out. He cups his hands and tries to bail out the water collecting in the bottom of the boat but is having little effect.

“Just shut up for a minute!” James hollers at them. He gazes at the approaching warship and then to the rising level of water in the bottom. Glancing over to Jiron, he says, “Don’t let me fall out.”

Realizing what James is about to do, he nods his head.

Miko sits there as he watches the Foam Breaker moving further and further away. Then his attention comes back to what’s happening in the dinghy as Jiron moves next to James. His eyes dart toward James and watches as he closes his eyes and becomes still.

James concentrates on the storm above and suddenly, a large bolt of lightning flashes down from the clouds toward the ship.

A gasp escapes Miko as he watches the bolt seem to be deflected away from the ship before it even reaches it.

James’ eyes fly open and he cries out, “They have a mage on board!”

“Can you deal with him?” Jiron asks as he watches the warship move ever closer.

“I’m not sure,” he replies. “He feels somewhat different than the others.”

“Different?” asks Jiron. “How so?”

“I don’t know,” explains James. “It just feels different somehow.”

“You better do something fast,” he says. “That warship is getting close.” Another wave crashes over them and Jiron holds tight to James, keeping him from being washed overboard.

Closing his eyes again, this time he searches beneath the waves until he finds what he’s looking for. With a little coaxing, he gets it moving toward the surface.

Suddenly, one of those whale-like creatures they’d seen the day before, lurches out of the water next to the warship. As it comes back down, it slams into the side of the warship and boards are ripped away, creating a large hole just at the water line.

“Yeah!” Miko yells as the creature sinks back into the depths.

James begins to feel the prickling of someone else doing magic. He looks to the warship and sees someone in armor standing at the rail with arms raised. Suddenly, the dinghy begins to crack as the boards holding it together begin to break apart.

“James!” cries Jiron as the dinghy begins to rapidly fill with water. “Do something!”

Thinking fast, he attempts to place a magical seal across the broken boards but it doesn’t stop the leak, just slows it.

“The warship!” Miko cries out.

Turning to look, James sees it’s listing slightly off center. On the deck, he can see the man in armor arguing with a sailor as the ship begins to turn and heads back the way it had come.

“They must be sinking!” Miko cries out jubilantly.

“Looks like it,” agrees Jiron.

James continues to look toward the men arguing on the deck. Suddenly a decision must’ve been reached, the sailor turns away and the man in armor again stares at them as the warship begins to sail away.

Then, the prickling returns again as the man in armor raises his hands once more. With a loud crack, the dinghy completely breaks in two as if it was pulled apart.

“James!” Miko cries as he falls out of the dinghy, into the raging water.

Reaching out to him from where he still floats within half of the dinghy, James almost gets a hold of his hand before a wave crashes into them and knocks him backward out of the remains of the dinghy. The force of the wave pushes him beneath the water and by the time he again regains the surface, Miko has already been pushed away by the crashing waves.
He watches helplessly as Miko is dragged ever further away. He tries to swim toward him but waves continue smashing into him, thrusting him beneath the water. Each time he gains the surface, Miko is further away. Jiron had managed somehow to cling onto a piece of the dinghy, and is desperately trying to stay on it while at the same time move in his direction.

“Miko!” he cries out as another wave crashes into him, pushing him beneath the water. When he regains the surface, Miko is nowhere to be seen upon the churning waters. “Miko!” he screams as loud as he can. Desperately looking around, he begins to fear for his friend when he still is unable to find him.

Jiron is almost out of sight as well where he’s still clinging to what’s left of the dinghy.

Doing his best, he tries to remain above the surface as wave after wave crashes into him. Gasping for air as he fights to stay afloat, he’s repeatedly being pushed under the water by the incessant crashing of the waves.

In a moment’s respite, he looks around and realizes Jiron is no longer visible upon the waves. The warship has disappeared in the storm as well. Alone, frightened, he tries to summon the magic to help stay afloat, but the constant fight simply to remain above the surface makes it impossible for him to focus enough for the magic to work.

He looks up as another wave rolls into him, taking a deep breath, he braces for the impact.

The sound of the surf crashing on the beach wakes him up. Lifting his head, he realizes that he’s somehow been washed ashore. Soaked and miserable, he comes to his feet as the wind continues whipping the rain into him. His arms and legs are leaden and he barely has the strength to move, the effort to stay afloat had sapped all he had.

Moving slowly, he goes further up the beach away from the water and then turns to look out over the waves crashing upon the beach. “Miko! Jiron!” he hollers. Even if they replied, it’s unlike he’d be able to hear anything over the sound of wind and surf.

He looks around at just where he’d been deposited. Many waterways drain into the ocean, stunted trees and grass cover almost every exposed piece of land. Kind of reminds him of a swamp.

Not willing to give the others up for lost, he moves further away from the beach into the vegetation. After searching around for a few minutes, he finally locates what he’s been looking for.

Kneeling down next to the small pool of water, he concentrates on Miko, willing the image of his surroundings to appear upon the water. In his exhausted state, he’s almost unable to focus enough to call forth the magic.

The image wavers and then suddenly comes into clarity. He sees Miko lying upon the beach, unconscious, with the waves crashing over him.

In a panic that he might be washed back out to sea, he quickly forms one of his seeker bubbles and gets up to follow it. The bubble moves back toward the beach and then follows the coastline to the left.

When he reaches his side, he turns him on his back and discovers in relief that he is, in fact, still breathing. Grabbing him under the arms, he begins to pull him up the beach away from the pounding surf. After ten minutes, he sees a form lying in the surf, far down the beach. Canceling the spell, he breaks into a run and races to Miko’s side. He’s lying face down and doesn’t look to be breathing.

Leaning him on his side, he pats him on the back until the vomiting fit is over. James then helps him to sit up as he continues coughing until his lungs clear.

Through red eyes, he looks around at their surrounding and between coughs asks, “Where are we?”

Shaking his head, James replies, “I don’t know. There doesn’t seem to be any sign of people around here.”

“Looking around, Miko asks, “Jiron?”

“I don’t know,” James tells him, “haven’t found him yet.” He then looks into Miko’s eyes as he says, “I was too worried about you.”

“Thanks,” he says just as another coughing fit strikes him. When it’s over, he asks, “Think he made it here like we did?”

Shrugging, James answers, “Hope so.” Getting up, he looks around until he locates another clear pool he can use to find Jiron the way he’d found Miko.

Kneeling down again, he concentrates on Jiron, the magic coming a little easier than it had earlier. Having a brief rest, even so short a one has made a difference.

Miko comes over and sits across from him as he watches the water. The image shifts and then they see Jiron. He has his knives in hand and is fighting off three other people who’re attacking him with spears.

James ends the spell and stands up abruptly. The seeker bubble forms and begins to float away from them, back
the way he’d come when he had been searching for Miko. He moves to follow it.

“Is he close?” Miko asks as he joins James in following the bubble.

“Don’t know,” James replies as he hurries, almost running as he follows the fast moving bubble. His begins panting as he starts using up what reserve of strength he has left. “But the area he was in looks to be similar to what is here, the same trees and grass anyway,” he explains. “If we’re lucky, he shouldn’t be too far away.”

Running along beside James, he says, “Let’s hope not.”

As they run along the beach after the bubble, they suddenly hear a crashing sound from further inland. They come to a halt when a large lizard-like creature the size of a rhinoceros lunges out onto the beach in front of them.

“What the hell is that?” Miko cries out.

The creature must’ve heard him, it turns its head in their direction and lets out a roar. It pauses only a moment before charging toward them. An answering roar comes from behind them as another of the creatures comes out from within the vegetation.

James takes out one of his slugs from the belt around his waist and propels it at the one in front of them with a touch of magic. It strikes the creature in the foreleg and lodges itself beneath the skin.

Crying out in pain, the creature stumbles slightly and then resumes its course toward them.

“You’re going to have to do better than that!” Miko yells to James when he sees the slug did little to slow it down.

Reaching down, he picks up a stone off the beach the size of a baseball and throws it at the creature, tripling the amount of magic he usually uses with the spell.

This time when the stone hits, it strikes the creature in the chest and blasts out the back, spraying bone and gore.

At the sight of what happened to that one, the creature behind them roars and doubles its speed toward them.

James doesn’t have time before it’s upon them to do anything. They jump to the side but the creature grabs his leg with his mouth, teeth sinking into his calf as it lifts him off the ground.

Crying out in pain, James reflexively lets loose a blast of magic that burns into the creature’s side. Roaring in pain, it lets go of his leg.

As he falls back to the ground, he rolls away from the creature, blood welling quickly from the wounds the creature’s teeth had inflicted. He comes to a stop then begins scooting backward along the ground away from the creature, his leg unable to support him enough to get to his feet.

Miko throws sticks and rocks at it to try to divert its attention from James to no avail. It looks around and sees him there on the ground. With another roar, it charges forward, slowed only slightly by the wound in its side.

James takes out another slug and throws it at the charging creature. In panic, he calls forth a tremendous surge of magic which leaves him gasping and dazed. The slug strikes the creature where its neck leaves the main body, and the incredible force of the impact almost completely severs its head from the rest of its body. Attached only by a thin layer of skin and muscle, its head lolls to the side as it falls to the ground, blood spraying forth upon the sand.

Miko rushes around the dead creature to where James is lying with blood pouring out of his leg. “James!” he cries as he comes and kneels down next to him.

“Miko,” he gasps through the pain throbbing in his leg, “give me your shirt.”

Taking off his shirt, he hands it to him. Wrapping the shirt around his wounded leg, he ties it as tightly as he can to stop as much of the blood from escaping as possible.

“We can’t stay here,” he tells him. Gesturing over to the trees, he says, “See if you can find me a walking stick, large enough to help support me. We’ve got to get out of here before the smell of blood draws others.”

Nodding, Miko runs over and returns shortly with a six foot long stick.

Taking the stick, James says, “Help me up.”

Miko takes his arm and helps him to his feet. Once he’s up and stable, Miko let’s go as he leans heavily upon the stick. “You gonna make it?” he asks.

“I sure plan to,” he replies.

He takes some wobbly steps but finds that with the aid of the stick, he’s able to move down the beach as they resume following the seeker bubble. Making their way around the dead ‘rhino-lizard’ as James calls it, they quickly move away from the dead animals.

Leaning heavily upon the stick, he and Miko work their way down the beach. Suddenly from behind them, a cry can be heard as another of the rhino-lizards comes out of the vegetation and commences to tear into the closest dead one.

Miko glances back toward the feasting creature and shudders. “What are we going to do now?” he asks.

“First of all, we need to find Jiron and make sure he’s okay,” James tells him.

“But you’re barely able to walk,” he replies.
James pauses as he glances to Miko. “Be that as it may, I can’t let this stop me from helping a friend. I may not be able to walk well, but I am still a force to be reckoned with.” Turning away, he continues down the beach.

After walking beside him in silence for several minutes, Miko says, “Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I know, we just need to find him,” James reassures him.

They continue down the beach for another half an hour when they come across two sticks stuck in the stand with shells and a skull hanging from a rope tied between them.

“What is that?” Miko asks.

Coming closer, James can tell it was put here by someone. The primitiveness of it makes him think of a ‘totem’. “It was probably placed here by locals to warn trespassers to keep out,” he tells him.

“Maybe we should too,” he says.

“I would if Jiron wasn’t up there, somewhere,” he says, pointing further up the beach.

“He might be okay now,” Miko says hopefully. “He is a good fighter.”

Nodding, James replies, “You may be right. Let’s find a pool and I’ll try to locate him again.”

They move a little inland, away from the pounding surf but not within the vegetation which may hide a rhino-lizard. Looking around they locate a pool that’s shielded from the wind whipping in off the water, so remains fairly flat.

James settles down around it as Miko joins him. Concentrating on Jiron, he watches as the image begins to shift and then suddenly they see Jiron, strapped to a pole as it’s being carried by two of the natives. He widens the image and they see six others carrying spears, traveling with the ones carrying Jiron.

Letting the image go, he turns to Miko and says, “I don’t think he’s okay.”

“No, it didn’t look like it,” he replies. “How are we to get him free?”

“Won’t know that until we get there,” he tells him. Leaning upon his walking stick, he gets back to his feet and then returns to the beach. Continuing down their original course, they don’t travel very much further before they come across a well trodden path extending into the swamp area. James pauses before it as he contemplates what to do. He glances to Miko and shrugs, before turning to follow the path.

After moving several hundred feet deeper into the swamp, the air begins to smell foul. The stench of decay and gaseous fumes permeates the air. “What is that foul odor?” Miko says, holding his nose.

“Some areas, like swamps, give off odors due to stagnant water and other rotting decay,” replies James. “Though I’m no expert on these sorts of things, just something I’d read once.”

The further they go into the swamp, the thicker the swarms of mosquitoes become. Miko is becoming quite slap happy as he continuously kills bugs that land on him. For every one he kills, it seems another dozen or more take its place. The fact that he’s bare from the waist up makes it even worse. “This is unbearable,” he says after killing his hundredth mosquito. His back has dozens of raised bumps from where they’ve gotten to him.

“I know,” agrees James as he kills another one. “Let’s stop for a second.”

He tries to remember the shows he’d seen on the Discovery Channel about bugs and attempts to come up with a spell to help keep them at bay. He formulates his thoughts before releasing the magic and then suddenly, a cool mist settles about their exposed skin. It takes only a second before the smell hits, the most god-awful smell James has ever come across.

Miko begins gagging and tries to move his head to get away from the smell, but it’s all over them. “What did you do?” he gasps, trying to breathe without smelling which is nigh on impossible.

“Tried to keep the bugs off us,” replies James, eyes beginning to water from the stench.

Miko quickly realizes that whatever the foul smelling mist may be doing to his senses, it is in fact keeping the bugs away. No more of those pesky mosquitoes are landing on him, or even coming close for that matter.

“It worked,” James exclaims in satisfaction. “I’d rather have stink than bites, wouldn’t you?” he asks.

“If it just wasn’t so bad,” Miko begins, but then nods his head in agreement. “Next time, try to put some perfume in it, okay?” The rain had by this time all but slacked off and doesn’t seem to be washing the pungent stuff off of them.

“Okay,” agrees James as they once again start following the trail deeper into the swamp. Further along, they come across the skeletal remains of one of the rhino-lizards they’d run into earlier. It’s half sunk in the water, lying next to the trail. The top half of the animal, the part not in the water still has rotting, decaying flesh attached to the bones. The section within the water looks to have been picked clean.

Miko eyes the carcass as they pass and observes small fish swimming in and around the bones. Not paying attention to where he’s putting his feet, he accidentally steps off the trail and into the water.

Suddenly a flurry of activity surrounds his boot as the water begins to churn. Pulling his boot out of the water quickly, he finds three of the small fish are attached to his boot. Appalled, he rubs his boot along the ground, and quickly scrapes them off before running to catch up with James. This time he’s paying much closer attention to
where he places his feet.

From up ahead, they hear the sound someone coming down the trail toward them. James begins to leave the path and enter the water in order to hide in a copse of trees when Miko grabs him by the arm and shakes his head vehemently. Pointing to the small fish swimming there in the water, he warns him quietly “They’ll eat you alive!”

Nodding his head, James turns around and quickly leads them back down the trail to a group of trees they passed just moments earlier. Moving carefully off the trail and making sure not to step into the water, they hide amidst the trees as they wait for whoever is approaching.

A group of four warriors appear out of the swamp as they come their way down the trail. Each is carrying a lethal looking spear as well as wearing a necklace of bones, one of which looks to contain a human ear as well as the bones. They hold very still as the natives come closer.

As they near the trees where James and Miko are hiding, one of them pauses and begins sniffing the air. The bug repellent! James suddenly realizes. He smells the bug repellent. The warrior cocks his head to the side as if attempting to determine from which direction the smell is coming.

James watches as the others suddenly take notice of the smell. After a brief exchange of words, the warriors begin working their way closer to the trees they’re hiding in. They’re almost upon them when a rhino-lizard bursts out of the dense foliage and grabs one of the warriors, dragging him screaming off the trail and back into the swamp. The other three warriors immediately turn, and screaming war cries, give pursuit as they try to rescue him.

“Come on!” James says as he comes out from behind the trees and hurries down the trail as fast as his injured leg will allow. As they rush down the path, screams and roars can be heard coming from where the warriors are fighting the rhino-lizard.

“This is crazy,” Miko announces after they’ve put some distance between them and the battle behind them, “we don’t even know if we’re going in the right direction.”

Pointing off through the marshy wetlands, James says, “Would you rather try to cut cross country?”

Thinking of the little fishes that inhabit the water, he shakes his head no.

“Then we have to stick to the path as best we can and hope that we run across him,” he explains.

The pain in James’ leg continues to throb with every step he takes, perspiration courses down his face. He has to lean heavily upon the stick in order to even remain upright.

Out of the swamp ahead of them, the sound of beating drums begins to be heard. Sure that they’ve found where Jiron has been taken, James hastens along. They soon come to where the trail diverges and he hesitates only a moment as he ponders the best way to go. The one leading left goes more in the direction of where the sound of the drums is coming from and looks well traveled, so he turns that way and follows it.

From up ahead, the beating of the drums become louder the further they progress along the trail. The trees begin to thin and they’re able to make out a village of crude huts sitting upon an island surrounded by stagnant bodies of water. The trail they’re on leads straight to it and he can see several other trails leading away from the island going in different directions.

“Miko, look!” James whispers as he points to a cage sitting on one side of the island. Jiron is lying within the cage, shirt soaked with blood and not looking too good. At first he appears dead, but then he moves and James breathes a sigh of relief.

Looking over to the island, Miko watches as dozens of warriors do a dance with their spears to the beat of the drums. Surrounding them are the women and children of the tribe, all standing and swaying to the rhythm. In the middle of the dancers stands a man dressed in ceremonial attire holding a staff atop which sits the skull of some unknown animal. He looks to James like some sort of witch doctor.

“How are we going to get him out of there?” Miko asks, not liking the odds.

“I don’t know,” replies James. “It doesn’t look as if they’ll be doing anything for a while, though.” Motioning to Miko, they make their way to the edge of the water where several trees grow that will afford them some protection while they observe what’s going on.

Just as they settle into their hiding place, two warriors approach the village from where James and Miko had just come from. They’re carrying two others who have obviously been chewed upon by a rhino-lizard, neither of which look alive. These must be the ones who’d almost discovered them earlier.

When the warriors get to the island, some of the women begin wailing as they see their men folk being carried in. Several of them come and take the fallen warriors away into one of the huts. The witch doctor and the warriors dancing seem not to take any notice of the new arrivals.

The warriors suddenly stop their dance and the witch doctor begins talking to them. Gesticulating wildly and speaking loudly, he begins to work them into a frenzy.

James notices a pile of bones off to the side of the village and points it out to Miko. When Miko sees it, he gasps. For there mixed in with bones of different types of animals are two human skulls.
“Cannibals,” James whispers.
“What?” Miko asks.
Leaning close so Miko can hear him better, he repeats himself, “Cannibals. They eat people.”
“Jiron?” he asks, aghast that that could be his fate.
“Looks like it if we don’t get him out of there,” he tells him.
Shuddering, Miko looks at the cannibals with unmistakable loathing.

While the witch doctor is speaking to the assembled villagers, several of the men begin erecting a large spit. When the spit is fully erected and sufficient wood has been piled beneath it, several warriors go over to where Jiron is being held and open the cage door.

Two go in and grab him, dragging him out of the cage and carrying him over to the spit. “Can’t wait any longer,” James says as he watches Jiron being brought closer. He looks to Miko who nods understanding.

Miko watches as James settles in and begins to work the magic.

The witch doctor stands before the spit, staff held at his side. The warriors carrying Jiron approach and come to a stop before him. With one warrior supporting him on either side, they stand him up in front of the witch doctor. Jiron’s head lolls to one side as if he’s not exactly conscious.

Raising his staff high above his head, the witch doctor begins to sway. He begins chanting as the beat of the drums intensifies. Feet stomping, he continues chanting as he dances his way around the warriors holding Jiron.

He’s gone around them several times when he comes to a sudden stop. The chanting ceases as well as he turns and looks directly over to where James and Miko are hiding. He knows we’re here! Miko suddenly realizes.

The witch doctor shouts something to the warriors near him and points over to where they’re hiding. He’s about to say something else when the villagers as one, gasp aloud. He turns to look behind him and sees what looks like creatures made of swamp mud walking out of the water. Little fishes are wriggling within the mud and occasionally fall out to flop about upon the ground.

Raising his staff, he cries out as a flash of light leaps from the tip of his staff to the nearest mud creature. When the light hits the creature, it looses all cohesion. With a sodden plop, the mud which had formed the creature falls apart and splats with a sickening sound as it forms a pile upon the ground. The light flashes again and again until all the mud creatures have been reduced to a pile of muck.

He turns back toward their hiding place as he points his staff in their direction. A yellowish beam of light flashes in their direction but is deflected by an unseen barrier.

The villagers begin crying out as the women and children get up and run off the island, using paths leading away from where James and Miko are hiding. “James!” Miko says urgently, “they’re coming this way.” He waits a moment but James fails to respond to what he’d said.

As the warriors come closer, a stick flies up off the ground and begins twirling above the path, blocking their way. A warrior comes close and tries to strike the stick, only to end up being struck himself. The force of the blow could be heard even from where Miko sits and the warrior reels backward into his companions.

Miko sees James remove one of his slugs from his belt and watches as it flies toward the witch doctor. Inches before it hits him, it’s deflected away.

The warriors holding Jiron take him back to the cage and lock it before joining the others who’re trying to get past the whirling stick. Miko sees Jiron begin to regain consciousness and stands up groggily, holding onto the side of the cage as he surveys what’s going on.

The witch doctor again let’s loose a bolt of energy which is once more deflected before it even gets close.

A violent tremor suddenly courses through the ground and Miko has to grab hold of a tree next to him in order to remain upright. The warriors trying to get past the whirling stick begin to fall as the shaking of the ground throws them off balance. One unlucky fellow stumbles near the water’s edge and trips over an exposed tree root. Crying out, he falls into the water which suddenly roils with movement as hundreds of tiny fish begin biting him. Miko watches in horror as the water turns red and in less than a minute, the water again grows calm and naught but bones can be seen.

The shaking had rocked the island as well, causing the witch doctor to stumble but had somehow managed to remain standing.

James is beginning to pant from the exertion of maintaining the whirling stick that’s blocking the warriors’ way and in dealing with the witch doctor. The familiar headache caused by too much magic usage begins to make itself known, his vision is starting to blur as well. He’s not going to be able to continue much longer, he needs to finish this quickly before he passes out.

Miko watches as the island stops its shaking and the witch doctor steps closer to the edge of the island. Suddenly, the pool of stagnant water near him erupts, throwing muck and water into the air. A good portion of the
eruption arcs through the air toward the island where the witch doctor is standing.

Trying to get out of the path of the swamp water, he back pedals quickly, but not quickly enough. The water falls upon him and suddenly he starts to scream as dozens of small fish attach themselves to his exposed flesh, their tiny sharp teeth digging in hungrily. He begins trying to tear them off when a hole suddenly opens up in his chest. A spray of gore explodes out his back as one of James’ slugs exits his body.

The witch doctor falls to the ground in a pool of his own blood, the little fishes continue biting and wriggling into his body. The warriors, who’d been trying to get to James, stand in stunned silence upon seeing their witch doctor fall. They begin crying out in fear as they turn tail and run, following the paths the women and children had taken earlier. In short order, the island is clear of everyone except Jiron who’s still in the cage and now more alert.

With Miko’s help, James gets up and makes his way along the path over to where Jiron is being held. When he sees them emerge from the swamp, a big smile breaks across his bloodied face. “Thought that might’ve been your handiwork,” he says to James when they get closer.

“Couldn’t leave you to be their dinner, now could I?” James asks as he begins to unlock the cage.

Nodding, James concentrates and the mist appears. Jiron’s nose wrinkles as it begins settling in upon him. When James sees his reaction to the smell, he smiles and says, “You get use to it.”

“I sure hope so,” he says.

“We better get out of here before they come back and bring friends,” James tells them. “I doubt if this is the only village in the swamp.” He gazes around the island at the many paths leading away.

“We came from the south,” he says, “nothing there but beach. The villagers took the paths toward the east, so maybe we should follow the one to the northwest.” He points to a well used path that leads in that direction.

“As good as any,” Jiron says as he goes over to the mat on the ground near the cage where his knives had been placed. Strapping them on, he turns to leave and notices James’ leg for the first time. “What happened to you?” he asks.

“Big lizard came and took a bite out of him,” Miko replies for him. “But we took care of it,” he says as he glances to James. “Didn’t we?”

Giving him a slight smile, James says, “We sure did.”

Hobbling, James continues to use the stick to aid him in walking as he and the others leave the island on the northwest path.
Leaving the island behind, they set out upon the trail as they keep an eye out for any warriors who may return, seeking retribution for the death of their witch doctor. On Miko’s mind however, are the rhino-lizards who seem to pop out from the trees with little or no warning.

A couple of times they observed one of the natives moving among the trees off in the distance, but none ever came close enough to pose a threat.

“They must be keeping an eye on us,” assumes James.

“As long as that’s all they want to do,” Miko says as he continuously scans the sides of the trail, as well as behind them, for natives and rhino-lizards.

“Think they’ll attack?” Jiron asks.

Shrugging, James replies, “Who knows? I wouldn’t think so since we took out their most powerful person. Though, you never know.”

“They may be out there preparing to attack us at any minute!” asserts Miko.

“If it happens, it happens,” James tells him, annoyed at his negativity. “But until it does, there’s not much we could do in anticipation anyway, so relax.”

Miko is anything but relaxed as he continues to jump at every noise coming out of the swamp.

The trail suddenly begins to run along the banks of a larger waterway that’s moving very slowly, almost like it’s standing still. Large creatures can be seen out in it, cow-like creatures that act an awful lot like hippos, though they sure don’t resemble them very much. They seem harmless, only lifting their heads when James and the others pass by on the trail.

“The fish aren’t eating them,” observes Jiron.

“No, they’re not,” says James. Taking a closer look at the water, he continues, “It doesn’t look as if those fish are in these waters. Maybe they prefer the stagnant water in still ponds.”

“Hopefully we’ll not have to put it to the test,” Jiron says.

“Yeah,” agrees Miko as they continue alongside the waterway.

The trail slowly becomes less distinct the further from the island they go, until it all but disappears. “Did we go the wrong way?” asks Jiron when all traces of the trail finally disappears.

“The fact the trail ended would suggest the natives don’t go into these parts,” reasons James. “Of course that could either be a good or bad thing.”

“What do you mean?” asks Miko.

“Well, it’s good in that we’re unlikely to run across any band of native warriors,” he says to which Miko sighs and smiles.

“However, it would stand to reason that there may be a reason why they don’t go here,” he explains further and watches the smile disappear from his face.

“They’re not coming here,” he asks, a touch of nervousness entering his voice.

“I don’t know,” James tells him. “But relax, it could be as simple as it is far away from their village.”

“I hope so,” he says.

“Where should we go now?” Jiron asks as he takes in their surroundings.

James pauses a moment and considers their options before saying, “Going back the way we came is out, I think we can all agree on that.”

Miko nods his head in agreement.

“Then let’s try to maintain a northerly direction, staying on as firm a ground as we can,” he suggests.

“Sounds reasonable,” Jiron says as he studies the ground ahead of them and then heads out, leading the way. James goes next, still hobbling with his stick. His leg continues to throb and he’s beginning to feel weak and tired from the loss of blood, not to mention the magical exertions during the battle with the witch doctor.

“Ahhhh!” Miko screams from behind them.

Turning quickly, they see him staring at a little furry creature sitting at eye level in one of the trees close to the road. It’s just sitting there, staring at him as he stares back at it.

To James it looks like a little monkey, similar in nature to the one that had enthralled Miko back in Willimet.
“It’s a monkey,” he tells him.

Turning red in embarrassment, Miko turns a sheepish look to James and says, “A monkey, I knew that.”

“Leave it alone and let’s get going,” Jiron tells him as he resumes trying to find a halfway decent way through the swamp.

As Miko catches up to them, he says, “It just popped out of nowhere and startled me is all.”

“I know, we’re all on edge,” replies James as he pats him on the back, trying to reassure him.

They continue for a while, at times having to force themselves through the dense, tangled undergrowth. The stench of decay and stagnant air is at times almost overwhelming, but they cover their noses and press on.

It starts getting dark and that’s when Miko begins to realize that they’re going to have to spend the night here. The thought of being here in the dark totally terrifies him, thoughts of rhino-lizards having him for a midnight snack keep running through his mind.

Jiron brings them to an area that will do for a campsite. It’s not very large, but it’s on dry ground and wide enough to accommodate them.

As he goes out to try to get some food, James and Miko clear a spot for a fire and begin gathering wood. “Let’s make sure we get enough to last the night,” James tells him as he brings in a load. “Try to find the driest pieces you can.”

“It’s all soaked from the rain,” complains Miko, “but I’ll do what I can.” He continues gathering wood and then says, “All the trees in this area seem to be either dead or dying.”

“Yeah,” James replies, looking around at the wilted vegetation. “I noticed that too.”

“What do you suppose happened to them?” he asks as he deposits an armful of wood. Near the edge of their campsite lies a pile of dead wood. He moves the top ones to the side as he tries to see if there are any dry ones at the bottom, but isn’t having much luck. Picking out the driest, he collects another armload before returning and adding it to the pile of wood already collected.

“I don’t know,” admits James. “Several possibilities come to mind, like too much water in the root system causing rot. Who knows?” Taking some of the wood Miko had already collected, he begins stacking several of the smaller pieces together. Once they are set to his satisfaction, he makes a small fire starter spell and catches the wood on fire. Feeding the flames with more of the smaller sticks, he gets a good sized fire burning.

Jiron returns with a trio of animals that James has never seen before. “What are they?” he asks as Jiron brings them into the camp.

Shrugging, Jiron says, “Don’t know, but roasted they should taste good.” He then proceeds to skin them and places each upon a skewer which he fixes upon a makeshift roasting spit over the fire.

The smell of fat dripping into the fire makes their stomachs growl in anticipation of the meal to come. The light from the fire seems hell bent on attracting every bug in the vicinity. Not only that, but the bug repellent has begun to lose its effectiveness. So James redoes it, only this time he coats the entire area; ground, trees, as well as themselves. When the spell is over, the bugs are gone.

“Thank god!” Jiron says when they’re finally left alone. The incessant buzzing in his ear had begun to drive him crazy.

“I know,” says James. “They were getting on my nerves too.”

“It doesn’t smell as bad this time,” observes Miko.

“Probably because you’re used to it,” James explains. “You’ve been smelling it all day.”

“Suppose you’re right,” he admits.

When the critters have cooked sufficiently, each takes one off the fire and proceeds to eat. The only water they have left is the lone water bottle that Miko had attached to his belt when they went into the sea after the breaking of the dinghy. All the rest of their packs and things are sitting at the bottom of the sea. They share the water, conserving it as best they are able.

“How’s your leg doing?” Jiron asks while they’re eating.

“Still throbs something awful,” he replies. “I just hope this swamp doesn’t get it infected or some parasite gets into it.”

“Parasite?” asks Miko.

“Parasites are small creatures that you can barely see that take up residence inside you,” he tells him. “Some are fairly harmless and your body can get rid of most of them on its own. Others will feed off you until you die.”

Shuddering, Miko looks at him and asks, “What can you do if you get one?”

“Here?” James says, gesturing to their surroundings, “not very much. Back where I come from, they have medicine that will remove most of them. But here, you’d have to have them cut out of you, assuming you could even find them. But, if we’re careful, you should have nothing to worry about.” Having finished his meal, he yawns and stretches out next to the fire, getting comfortable.
Jiron says to Miko, “I think we should split the watch and let him sleep. It looks like he could use it.”
Nodding, Miko replies, “You want first watch or should I take it?”
“Can you stay up and keep the fire going?” he asks him.
“Not really tired right now,” Miko says. “You go ahead and sleep and I’ll wake you in the middle of the night.”
Settling down next to the fire, Jiron looks over and sees that James has already fallen asleep. Closing his eyes, he lets the pop and crackle of the fire lull him to sleep as well.
Sitting there by the fire, Miko keeps watch. Throughout his shift, he jumps and starts at every noise coming from the darkness around them. At one point, a roar could be heard coming from far off and he jumped to his feet and was about to wake Jiron but he hesitated. He listened to the roaring for a while longer and realized it wasn’t coming close to their camp. So he settled back down and didn’t wake anyone.
Putting more fuel on the fire, he sits in close and manages to stay awake until it’s time to wake Jiron for his turn. Before falling asleep, he tells him of the roar he’d heard earlier.
Jiron nods his head and steps out of the firelight into the darkness as he does some investigating.
As Miko falls asleep, he can hear Jiron’s footsteps as he walks around the campsite.

The next morning when James is awakened by the lightning of the morning sky, he discovers Miko lying near him still asleep but Jiron is nowhere to be seen. Sitting up, he has a sudden sharp stab of pain from his leg which causes him to gasp. The blood on his makeshift bandage has turned brown and the bandage itself seems to be attaching itself to the wound as it scabs over.
Hoping the pain is just from the trauma of the wound and not something more serious, he grabs his stick and pulls himself up to a standing position. He scans the surrounding area but fails to see any sign of Jiron.
Worried, he hobbles over and wakes up Miko. “Do you know where Jiron went?” he asks him once he’s awake.
Sitting up and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he glances around and shakes his head. “No,” he replies. “He was here when I went to sleep after my watch last night.”
Grimacing, James again looks around but is unable to see very far through the trees and undergrowth.
“Where is he!” he says to himself quietly.
“Jiron!” Miko hollers out.
“Shhh!” James says, shushing him. “You’re going to attract anything wandering around out there.”
Suddenly nervous, Miko looks around fearfully, expecting a rhino-lizard or something else equally nasty to come out of the swamp. When no monster is forthcoming, he gradually relaxes. Turning to James he says, “Sorry.”
“We’ll just have to wait until he returns,” he tells him.
They wait for another ten minutes or so before they hear the sound of someone approaching. Standing up, they turn in the direction the sound is coming from and wait. Soon, Jiron emerges from the trees and makes his way over to them.
“Where did you go?” James asks, accusingly. “We were worried about you!”
“Sorry about that,” he apologizes. “Was just doing a little scouting.”
“And?” Miko asks.
“I think it’d be best if I just show you,” he says, then motions for them to follow him.
Not liking the sound of that, James nods his head as he follows Jiron away from the camp, Miko close behind.
He takes them several hundred feet deeper into the swamp, during which they notice that the state of the trees they pass progressively deteriorates. Where some back at the campsite were dying, here they were positively withered.
“I see what you mean,” James says as he pauses to examine one of the trees.
“This ain’t it,” Jiron says as he continues leading them on. James and Miko look to each other as they continue following him, their apprehension growing.
Leading them a little bit further, he suddenly stops and points to a spot further ahead of them. “That is what I’m talking about,” he says.
James looks to where he’s pointing and sees a pyramid shaped stack of white stones up ahead. He glances to Jiron who nods his head.
Moving closer, James begins to feel the prickling sensation he feels when magic is being worked. He stops suddenly when he realizes that it’s not stones that comprise the pyramid, but human skulls stacked in layers.
Backing up, he motions for them to back away from it as well. Once they’ve backed far enough away that he no longer feels the prickling, he says, “It’s magical in nature, I can feel it.”
“Could this be why the natives don’t come this way?” Miko asks him.
Jiron looks to James who nods his head. “I would think so,” replies James.
“What do we do?” Jiron asks.
“Find another way,” he replies. “I don’t know what it’s doing, but I really don’t think we want to go that way.”

“Alright,” he says. Once again taking the lead, he turns back and tries to find a way around the pyramid. Miko hurries along behind, anxious to put as much distance between them and the pyramid as quickly as possible.

He takes them west back toward the waterway and when they reach it, turns north again. But the waterway curves and brings them back to the area where the trees are withering. “Not this way,” he says, turning again to the south as he back tracks.

Retracing their steps, they find their way back. Taking them to the east this time, he’s able to find a path where they can walk without having to take the chance of slipping into the fish infested stagnant water.

They move a short ways east when a noise can be heard, like something moving through the undergrowth. He has them wait for a moment while he continues down the path and sees what it is making the noise.

He disappears through the trees ahead of them for a moment and then they suddenly hear a crashing sound as he comes running back toward them. Bursting out of the trees behind him is a rhino-lizard, charging fast.

Miko screams as he turns to flee.

James also tries to run, but on his injured leg, realizes he’s unable to move quickly enough to stay ahead of the charging rhino-lizard.

He turns to face it and in a flash, releases the magic.

Crumph!

The ground in front of it explodes upward, startling it. Roaring loudly, it comes to a stop. Taking advantage of its startlement, they move further away and hide behind some trees. They wait for several minutes in their hiding place but fail to hear any noise that might indicate it had come their way. Looking out from behind the trees, Jiron says, “I don’t think it followed us.”

He motions for them to remain there as he gets up and moves back toward where they encountered it. Returning quickly, he says, “I can’t see it anywhere. It must have gotten scared when the ground erupted and ran back to the others.”

“Others?” asks Miko, nervously.

“Yeah, there were several of them over there,” he tells him. Looking to James he says, “We can’t go that way either.”

“Now what?” asks Miko.

“Seems we are faced with several unpleasant choices,” he says as they gather around.

“East are the rhino-lizards, west is the river which may or may not have those flesh eating fish in them,” he says. “South are the natives, and I’m sure they’ll not welcome us back. Finally, to the north is that odd pyramid of skulls that feels like it’s radiating magic in some way.”

“South and east are definitely out,” Jiron says. “We could never survive unscathed if we take either of those routes. Not in our present condition.”

Nodding, James says, “I’d have to agree with you there.”

“Not the water!” pipes up Miko. “I couldn’t go in there!”

Sighing, James says, “Then we must chance the pyramid and whatever lies beyond it.” He glances at each of them before continuing, “This could prove worse than any of the other choices, you know.”

Shrugging, Jiron replies, “We don’t know that for sure. Until we do, it’s our best route.”

“Alright then,” James says as he gets up and readies his stick for travel. “Lead on.”

Taking the lead again, Jiron takes them back toward the pyramid of skulls. Worry and dread fill their hearts as they make their way through the dead and withered trees. The ground around them seems almost grey in the light, the grass and bushes upon it are twisted and warped, just like the trees. When they can at last see the pyramid ahead of them once more, Jiron pauses for a moment. Glancing first to James and then Miko, he gathers his courage before continuing down toward it.

When they are but scant feet away from it, Miko gives James a weird look. This close to the skull pyramid, even the other two are able to feel the magic of it. Miko stays as far away from it as the ground will allow him. Any further and he’d be in the water.

Jiron reaches out to touch it as he passes by, but before his hand can connect with it, James cries out, “Stop!”

Startled, as though he didn’t even realize what he was doing, Jiron snatches his hand away and quickly hurries past. “Thanks,” he says. The others step lively as they too pass the pyramid. As the pyramid disappears behind them, the vegetation slowly begins to regain some life, but none of it looks remotely healthy.

The telltale prickling of magic subsides, but doesn’t disappear altogether. Even when they’ve put distance between them and the pyramid, far enough so he shouldn’t have been able to feel anything, still the sensation remains with him. James comes to the conclusion that there may be other sources of magic here other than just that lone pyramid. Keeping his eyes open, he follows Jiron as he continues his way north.
Everyone is on edge while they make their way through such a desolate locale. “Something’s not quite right here,” says Miko in a hushed whisper.

“I agree,” states Jiron.

James begins to notice that there are no animals here, not even birds high in the trees. Never in all the time since being washed upon the shore have the trees been silent, there has always been a bird or some other kind of animal calling out. This eerie silence just makes his anxiety grow.

Jiron suddenly comes to a stop ahead of them.

“What’s wrong?” James asks when he and Miko come to where he’s standing. Looking over Jiron’s shoulder to what lies before them, he says, “Oh.”

The gnarled and withered trees end a short distance ahead at a large clearing. In the middle of the clearing sits a large complex of buildings which have long since fallen into ruin. Portions of some of the buildings remain intact, while others have collapsed completely. Several of the buildings look to have once stood over two stories tall, sections of some still do. The buildings form a semicircle around a weed infested courtyard. All the vegetation within the clearing and bordering it show the worst signs of the withering.

Within the center of the courtyard sits a larger pyramid of skulls, two, maybe three times the size of the one they’d encountered earlier. Looking at it makes James’ skin crawl. “Looks like we may have found what’s killed all the trees,” he says.

“What should we do?” Jiron asks him, not once taking his eyes off the scene ahead. Unconsciously, he’s drawn a knife and is holding it ready in his right hand.

“Can we skirt around this place?” James asks.

Jiron looks around and then nods his head as he begins to move to the right.

James and Miko stay right with him as he slowly makes his way around the area, remaining within the vegetation.

Miko suddenly trips on an exposed root and looses his balance. Trying to remain upright, he ends up stepping out of the vegetation and finally falls upon the ground within the clearing, coming to land a couple feet from the edge of the vegetation.

As soon as Miko’s foot first steps into the clearing, the prickling sensation suddenly spikes. James’ attention is drawn to the large pile of skulls and it almost seems as if he can see an enormous pulse of energy suddenly erupt from the pyramid. Moving fast, the wave washes over them as it moves away into the swamp.

“Miko!” he cries. “Get out of there!”

Getting up lightning quick, Miko scrambles back over to them as he quickly looks around for the reason for James’ warning. “What’s wrong?” he asks, not seeing anything threatening.

Both he and Jiron look to him as he replies, “When you stepped into the clearing, I felt and I think, saw, a pulse emanate from the pyramid.”

“A pulse?” Miko asks, eyes widening in fear.

Nodding his head, he says, “Yeah. It seemed like it fanned out, moving out into the swamp.”

“What does that mean?” asks Jiron, nervously.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I’ve never encountered anything like this before.”

“Well, let’s not wait here and find out,” Jiron says, as he looks around. “Let’s move!” Without waiting for a reply, he heads out and they make it around the complex, everyone taking extra precaution not to step within the clearing.

Upon reaching the far side of the clearing, they put it behind them as they move quickly away from it and the ominous pyramid of skulls. As they leave it behind, the vegetation begins to improve slightly, though only for a while.

Soon, the vegetation once more begins to show drastic signs of withering and decay as they see another of the smaller piles of skulls appear before them. The prickling sensation grows as it did before when James approaches it. As Jiron begins to pass the midpoint of the pyramid, he suddenly cries out as he falls backward into James, knocking them both down.

“What happened?” James asks as he picks himself up.

“I ran into something,” he says.

“Let me see,” James says as he cautiously approaches the pyramid of skulls. Holding his hand out, he walks slowly toward it. He moves around the skulls to the right, still holding out his hand. When he comes next to the pyramid, his hand touches a barrier.

Stopping, he places both hands upon it and pushes. It feels solid, smooth. He runs his hand along it as he walks several feet to his right. Pausing, he takes his hand and moves it along the barrier as high as he can reach. Unable to find an end, he turns back to the other two. “I think when Miko tripped and fell into the clearing, it activated some
kind of barrier,” he explains.

“What do you mean?” Miko asks, confused.
James places his hand against it and says, “Come here and feel it.”
Hesitantly, Miko comes and places his hand upon it, eyes widening. “What is it?”
“Some kind of force field I’d imagine,” he explains. Then he turns to Jiron, “Kind of like the dome I used to keep the sandstorm out, remember?”
Nodding his head, he says, “Yeah, I remember.”
“What does it mean?” Miko asks.
“It means we’re trapped inside,” explains James.
Chapter Five

Miko and Jiron have been sitting back from the little pyramid while James has been attempting to breach the barrier. After standing motionless in front of it for several minutes, he cries out as he stumbles back away from it.

Coming to him, Jiron worrily asks, “What happened?”

Losing his balance, he sits down abruptly. James shakes his head as he tries to clear it and then says, “There’s too much power here.” Resting his head in his hands, he tries to still the aching in his head.

“Can you get us out?” Miko asks.

James glances over to him and says, “Not like this. Every time I try to do something, a surge of magic would come and counter whatever I tried.”

“What now?” Jiron asks.

Thinking a moment, he says, “I suppose there’s a chance there could be a spot where the barrier isn’t working, where we could slip through. But I doubt it.”

“How would we know?” Jiron asks him.

James thinks a moment before replying, “Only one way to find out. Someone has to walk along the barrier all the way around and feel it with their hand as they go.”

Getting up, Jiron says, “Then I better hurry, it’s going to be getting dark in a couple of hours.” Then he walks over to the skull pile and places his hand against the barrier. Moving slowly, he begins walking along the barrier, away from the skull pile. He moves his hand up and down the barrier in the hopes a breach may be found.

“No telling what could happen here when night falls,” James mumbles to himself.

“What?” Miko asks as he continues watching Jiron until he disappears in the withered vegetation.

“Nothing,” he replies, not wanting to give him anything more to worry about.

They move back a ways from the pyramid, finding a spot where they can sit and wait for Jiron’s return. A half hour later, they hear him approaching from the other direction. As he nears the pyramid of skulls, he begins looking around. When he sees them there waiting for him, he leaves the barrier and makes his way over to them.

“Well?” James asks.

Shaking his head, he says, “It’s solid all the way around. There were two spots I had to leave to avoid entering the water, but other than that, it’s solid.”

“What?” Miko asks as he continues watching Jiron until he disappears in the withered vegetation.

“No telling what could happen here when night falls,” James mumbles to himself.

“How?” Jiron asks.

Getting up, James says, “I haven’t the faintest idea. But there’s only one place where I might be able to figure it out.”

“Back at the clearing?” Miko asks voice quavering.

James nods his head as he says, “Back at the clearing. Maybe getting a closer look at that pyramid will give me some idea on how to bring it down. Or perhaps there may be something in one of the buildings that will do it. Won’t know for sure until we look.”

“Let’s get going then,” Jiron says. “We’ve only got a couple hours left until dark.”

As they walk back, James asks, “How many pyramids were there along the barrier?”

“Five all together,” he replies. “Why?”

“Just curious,” he explains. “I doubt if that would have any bearing on anything though.”

Upon reaching the clearing, James grabs Jiron’s arm before he leaves the trees and indicates that he should be the first to enter. More than happy to comply, Jiron steps back as he allows James to precede them.

Stepping slowly into the clearing, he braces himself for another energy pulse from the large pyramid. He’s quite relieved when another pulse fails to materialize. With Miko and Jiron right behind, he makes his way over to the large pyramid. It’s similar to the other one at the barrier, a tiered pyramid of human skulls. He closely examines it, but doesn’t see anything that might help in bringing down the barrier. The thought occurred to him to smash the pyramid, but was afraid of the repercussions that might ensue.

He glances over to the other two and shakes his head, “Better try the ruins.” Turning his attention to the
collapsed structures for a moment, he starts walking over to the one on the far right.

“Something there?” asks Miko hopefully when he sees their destination.

James glances back at him and replies, “No, just being systematical is all. It’s as good a place to start as any.”

This building had been a single story structure at one time. The roof had fallen in so long ago that small trees have begun to grow among the rubble. He walks through an opening in what’s left of the wall and looks around.

He gives the interior a quick once over as he moves around within the building. Poking through the rubble, he finds nothing but stone and a wooden crossbeam, which looks to have once been used to support the ceiling.

Glancing at the other two, he shakes his head then leaves the building. He then makes his way the short distance over to the next one. It’s a two story building, half of it having collapsed, leaving a section still standing. He goes up to the opening where a door once stood, though is now long gone, and looks inside.

The floor is choked with rubble, but off to one side, he sees the remnant of the stairway leading up to the second floor. It’s not in the best of condition, but he figures it’ll hold his weight. Making his way through the room over to stairs, he begins climbing to the second floor. Two small sections of the stairs are missing and he has to stretch across them in order to continue.

When he finally reaches the top of the stairs, he comes to a hallway. The entire right side has fallen away leaving only a foot and a half span still attached to the left wall. A room lies further down, and the only way to get there is by walking upon the broken section of the hallway.

He looks down to see Jiron and Miko there looking up at him. “Be careful!” Miko hollers.

Waving back in response, he steps out gingerly upon the narrow section of hallway still usable. Cautiously setting his weight upon it, the board creaks but he finds that it will hold up under his weight. One step at a time, he slowly makes his way across.

He begins to think that maybe he shouldn’t be doing this, what with his leg in the shape it’s in and all. But he’s only a dozen feet away from where the collapsed section ends and the hallway once more is whole.

Taking it slowly, he makes it to the other side. Pausing a moment as he glances briefly down to the others waiting below, Miko gives them a smile and a thumbs up. Turning his attention back to the hallway, he quickly moves down to the only room left intact on the second floor.

He comes to the doorway and enters the room. Over upon one wall is a large bronze plaque. Crossing the room to where it hangs on the wall, he realizes that it’s engraved with a picture of the five small pyramids along the outer perimeter and the larger one with the buildings next to it.

There are lines coming from the smaller ones leading directly to the larger one in the courtyard outside. _Must be showing a power grid or some such_, he reasons.

He looks around further, but doesn’t find anything else of interest. Casting another glance at the bronze plaque, he leaves the room and comes back to the broken section of hallway. This time he steps out upon the broken section with more confidence.

When he’s almost across, a section of the floor cracks and falls away beneath him. Crying out as he falls, he reaches out and manages to catch hold of a section of the broken floor. Hanging there, he tries to keep his hands from slipping and dropping him down to the floor below.

“Hang on!” he hears Jiron yell as he bolts up the stairs, easily jumping the missing sections as he comes to his aid. Coming to where he’s hanging precariously, Jiron kneels down and holds out his hand. “Take it!” he says as he stretches his hand further toward him.

Afraid to lose his grip with the other hand, James shakes his head and says, “I can’t!”

“Yes you can,” Jiron assures him as he tries to stretch his hand even further toward him.

James tries letting go and grab Jiron’s hand but in so doing, causes his other hand to slip. With a cry, he plummets ten feet down to the rubble below. Landing awkwardly on the broken stone, his side is punctured by a sharp rock and severely cuts open his side. Crying out with pain, he grabs the wound as he tries to stop the blood from flowing.

Jiron gets up and rushes down the stairs to his side, but Miko is the first to reach him. “James!” he exclaims when he sees the blood oozing from under the hand he has clinched to his side. Not knowing what to do, Miko stands there in indecision.

He lies there, holding his side as best he can until Jiron approaches. Looking to him he says, “I knew I couldn’t hold on with one hand.”

“Sorry,” Jiron says as he kneels next to him. “Let me look at it.” Lifting his shirt, he sees scrapes going from just under his armpit to his waist. One cut looks deeper than the rest and is oozing blood, but it is already beginning to stop.

Putting the shirt back down, he says, “I don’t think you’re going to bleed to death, but it’s going to hurt for a while.”
“Feels that way,” James says as he puts his hand back on the wound, continuing to apply pressure.
“Did you find anything?” asks Miko.
“There was a bronze plaque in the room up there,” he says, gesturing to the room. Grimacing from the pain, he
gingerly puts his arm back down. “On it was a diagram showing the five pyramids and how they’re linked to the
main one here.”
“And?” Jiron asks, urging him to continue.
“And, there may be another plaque, hopefully, that may tell us something else,” he explains to them.
“You’re in no shape to be searching for some plaque that may not even exist,” Miko says.
“No,” agrees Jiron, “but I am.” Getting up, he looks to James and asks, “Just what am I looking for?”
Shrugging, James says, “I don’t know, but you’ll probably know it when you find it.”
“Alright,” he says. Then to Miko, “Stay here and keep an eye on him until I get back.” When he sees him nod,
he turns and hurries from the room.

James starts to get up and says, “Help me up, will you?” He reaches a hand to Miko who grabs his arm and
helps him to his feet. Grimacing with pain as his side is stretched and pulled with the effort to stand, he finally gets
to his feet. Then, as he stands there, he has Miko go over and retrieve his walking stick for him.
He takes the stick and begins to carefully move through the rubble choked room to the doorway leading outside
the collapsed building. “Let’s move outside while we wait for his return,” he says.
Miko helps him along and once they’ve left the building, they find a block of fallen stone to sit on.
They’re not waiting long before Jiron returns in a hurry. The look on his face indicating he may have found
something.
“You find it?” James asks.
“I think so,” he replies. “In a building over there,” he says as he points back the way he’d come. “I found a
bronze plaque similar to the one you described.”
“What was on it?” James asks.
“I couldn’t really make it out,” he explains. “There were lots of lines and boxes, I’m not sure just what it was
trying to show.”
Leaning heavily upon the staff, he gets up off the stone and says, “You better take me there.”
“Is it on the ground floor?” Miko asks, worried about James having to climb unstable stairs again.
Nodding, he says, “Yeah, it is.”
“Good!” Lending James a hand, Miko helps him as they follow Jiron over to where he’d found the plaque.
The building wherein it lies looks to have been but a single floored structure and still to be in fairly decent
shape. Jiron leads them up three stairs to the entrance of the building where they enter through the doorway.
“It’s over here,” he says as he takes them through another doorway into an adjacent room.

When James enters the room, he immediately sees what Jiron was trying to describe. Having designed many
dungeons for his role playing games, he instantly recognizes what he’s seeing. It’s a layered map of different levels.
“This is showing the layout of an underground complex,” he explains to them, as he steps up closer to the
plaque. “Here,” James says, pointing to a set of squiggly lines, “this looks like it could be stairs leading down.”
“Does it show what’s in there?” Jiron asks, not able to see it for what it is.
Shaking his head, James says, “No, this is just a map of the layout, nothing more.” He turns his head to look at
Jiron and says, “We’re going to need to get in there.”
“How?” he asks. “I found no entrance to a lower level during my search.”
“Hmmm…” James says as he turns back to study the plaque some more. He points to a section and says, “This
here looks to be where the entrance lies.” He points to a pyramid shaped symbol and continues, “And I bet this is the
main pyramid over there in the courtyard.”
He studies it some more as Jiron and Miko watch him. Suddenly he turns to Jiron and asks, “Did you find what
looked like an empty pool or possibly a fountain while you were searching?”
“Yeah,” he says. “It’s over there a ways,” he explains as he points to where it lies.
“That is the entrance,” he states.
“You sure?” he asks, not really believing him. “How can you tell?”
“Practically one hundred percent,” James replies. “Here, look,” he says as he points to a circular formation near
where he said the entrance is.
“I see,” Jiron says, still not convinced.

James turns from the plaque and says, “Show me where it is.”
With Miko helping James along, Jiron leads them out of the building and over to where the dried up pool is.
The outer edge of the pool stands two feet high and about six inches thick. The interior is bare, just the flat
stone of the bottom showing.
James slowly walks around the pool as he examines it. “Here, look,” he says as he points out five triangles evenly spaced on the top of the outer edge. “I’d bet anything that these are the five small pyramids.”

Excited, Miko cries out, “And look in the center, that must be the main one.” They look to where he’s pointing, and sure enough, there lies a pyramid that’s proportionally larger to the ones on the outer wall of the pool, as the main pyramid is to the ones on the perimeter.

“But what do we do now?” Jiron asks.

“Not sure,” he replies. He begins to closely inspect the designs, pushing and pulling at them but nothing happens. Then suddenly, the plaque he’d seen in the upper room flashes to mind. What if it wasn’t showing the skull pyramids at all? What if it was in fact showing the designs on the edge of the pool?

What did it show exactly? he asks himself, as he pauses a moment to recall the details. A power grid, that’s what it reminded me of. Maybe it’s a lock only a mage can open.

He turns to the others and says, “I think I may know how to gain access to it, but you both better step back, just in case.”

“What are you going to do?” Jiron asks.

“Not sure,” he says, “just watch.”

After they’ve moved back, he turns again to face the pool and begins to concentrate. In his mind he pictures a sphere of magic hovering above each of the outer triangles. He opens his eyes when he hears Miko gasp behind him.

Five red, pulsating spheres are hovering above the five triangles. Nodding in satisfaction, he again closes his eyes in deep concentration. He needs to get this just right and when he’s ready, he completes the spell.

Opening his eyes, he sees a thread of energy shoot out of each of the spheres and connects simultaneously above the triangle in the center of the pool. When they connect, the combined beam seems to be drawn down to the larger triangle engraved in the bottom of the pool. The ground begins to shake slightly as the pool slowly begins to rotate.

Maintaining the spell, he watches as it continues to turn and is startled when a bottom section of the pool drops down into the ground. At regular intervals, more sections drop down into the ground as it continues to turn. After turning halfway around again, the pool stops. Where the bottom of the pool had been, now lies a spiral staircase descending down into the complex beneath the ground.

James releases the spell, halfway expecting the pool to begin closing again, but is relieved when it remains still. He creates his glowing orb and steps over the edge of the pool. “Shall we, gentlemen?” he asks over his shoulder as he begins to descend the stairs. Miko and Jiron come over and follow him closely as he descends the stairs down into the darkness below.

Nervous, he continues down until he reaches the bottom where a corridor extends away from them. The air is stale, as if it has been bottled up here for a millennium. The light from the glowing orb reveals carvings upon the walls, people going about unknown tasks.

The first room they come to is on the right and a brief glance within shows it to be empty, the walls having the same designs as the corridor had.

“What was this place?” Jiron whispers, nervous about disturbing the silence.

“I don’t know,” replies James as he continues further down the corridor. “But we better be careful. Whoever set that trap that ensnared us might have others down here as well.”

Miko looks around nervously as he continues following James closely.

At the end of the corridor they’re following, they find another one running perpendicular to the one they’re in. The light from the glowing orb reveals carvings upon the walls, people going about unknown tasks.

The first room they come to is on the right and a brief glance within shows it to be empty, the walls having the same designs as the corridor had.

“Looks like a meeting room,” guesses James as he enters and comes over to the table.

“Or a war room,” suggests Jiron.

James nods his head and says, “Maybe.”

Miko stays close to James as he walks around the room, looking at everything. “What are you looking for?” he asks.

Shrugging, James says, “Not really sure. I’m hoping to find something or some way to turn off the barrier so we can get out of here. This place gives me the creeps.” And the constant prickling of magic has become decidedly annoying.

“What’s in that other room?” Miko asks, indicating the doorway they haven’t gone through yet.
“Let’s see,” he says as he moves in that direction.
A solid wooden door stands open and they pass through into another room, this one having shelves of books upon them. When James touches one, it crumbles into dust.
“Must’ve been here a long time,” Jiron says when he sees the book crumble.
“Perhaps,” James says, “or it could be the result of being exposed to magic for a long time.” He turns to Jiron and admits, “I’m not sure.”
Not finding anything of use here, they return past the ‘boardroom’ and hurry along the hallway until they come to the intersecting corridors. Continuing straight this time, they follow the section they haven’t been in yet.
Forty feet down, they come to a door on the left while the corridor continues past. James tries the door but it doesn’t open. He turns to Jiron and says, “Locked.”
Moving out of the way, he watches as Jiron comes and inspects the lock. Pulling out a knife, he sticks the point within the lock as he begins manipulating the locking mechanism. Suddenly, a ‘click’ can be heard and he swings the door open.
On the other side is a flight of stairs leading down. He starts to move down them when James stops him. “Let’s continue with the search of this floor first before we continue down,” he says.
Knowing James to be the expert here, he nods his head as he follows James further down the corridor.
Another fifteen feet and the corridor turns to the right and the prickling sensation begins to grow. James slows his speed as he moves cautiously closer.
“What?” asks Miko when he sees him slow.
“I feel magic ahead,” he whispers back to them.
“Bad?” Miko asks fearfully.
Shrugging, he replies, “Don’t know.” A little further more and the corridor again turns to the right where it ends after another ten feet. It opens upon another room.
As they move closer to the room, the prickling becomes more intense, like ants crawling all over his skin in spiky shoes. When the light from the orb illuminates the interior of the room, they can see another of the pyramid of skulls, similar in size to the ones on the perimeter.
James catches his breath for he can almost see the magic moving upward from this pyramid. “I think we’re under the main pyramid of skulls that was in the courtyard.”
“What makes you think that?” Jiron asks.
James steps into the room and replies, “I can feel, almost see, the magic flowing upward from this pyramid. It would just make sense for the magic to be going up to the other one.” He turns back to them and adds, “My guess would be that this is the source of the magic keeping the barrier in place.”
“This pyramid here?” asks Miko.
Shaking his head, he says, “Probably something further down, I would imagine. Though, who knows?” He reaches his hand toward the flow of magic and pulls it back suddenly when his hand begins to burn like he’d stuck it in a fire.
“Damn!” he curses.
“What?” asks Miko excitedly.
“That burned,” he says as he looks at his hand but doesn’t see anything out of the ordinary.
“Let’s go back to those stairs leading down,” Jiron says.
Nodding, James turns and follows him back. Once at the stairs, he again takes the lead as they proceed down to the next level.
At the bottom of the stairs, a corridor runs to the left and right. Pointing down to the right, he says, “My guess would be another pyramid like the one we just saw lies down there.” Turning right, he follows the corridor as it turns right and then after thirty feet, right again. Sure enough, they come to a room containing another pyramid.
“Why would they have another one here?” Jiron asks.
“Maybe to help in the flow of magic from its source below,” he offers. “Won’t be able to fully understand it until we get there.”
As they turn to head back down the corridor, Miko asks, “Do you think it’s dark outside yet?”
“If it isn’t, it’s not far off,” guesses Jiron.
Following the corridor, they return to where the stairs go back up and then continue on down the corridor in the other direction. Not very far, they come to a junction of corridors and James turns to follow the left one.
Twenty feet brings them to another room, this one larger than any so far. The room looks to have been a barracks of some sort, six beds are lined up in two rows of three. The bedding has long since deteriorated and at the foot of each is a chest.
As Jiron goes over to the chests, James says, “Be careful, they may be trapped.”
“I realize that,” he replies.

James moves around the room and discovers a mural painted on the wall. Though faded with time he can still make it out. Several figures stand around a dark pool, they look to be executing someone. He takes a closer look at the pool and sees headless bodies floating within.

Barely perceptible lines are drawn, as if some invisible force rises from the pool.

_Crash!_

Turning around suddenly, he looks to see Jiron removing his foot from a crushed chest. Coming over, he can see something sparkle from within. Ten gems lie upon the bottom, Jiron reaches down and scoops them up.

Smiling, he holds one up and says, “Not bad, these will fetch quite a bit.” Nodding to James, he places them within his belt pouch.

Seeing the treasure that Jiron had found, Miko goes and smashes one open too and is disappointed when he finds his to be empty.

“I thought we were going to be careful,” reminds James as he stands there next to Jiron.

“Couldn’t get it open,” Jiron explains, “so I kicked it. I really didn’t figure there to be a trap or anything bad.”

Shaking his head, James says, “There may only be one in a group. One on the edge that, once everyone is lulled into complacency by not finding any in the others, the would-be robbers will rush headlong into.”

“I don’t really think there’s any reason to…”

Just then they hear Miko kicking in another chest when… _Kaboom!_

They turn to see Miko sailing through the air as he smashes into the far wall. Rushing over to him, James can see one of his feet is smoking slightly as he lies there unconscious.

Kneeling down next to him, he gently shakes him, “Miko!” he cries.

Eyes fluttering open, Miko looks at them standing over him. “What happened?” he asks, dazed and confused.

“You okay?” Jiron asks.

“I think so,” he says as he starts to sit up. “Ah!” he says as he reaches back and feels a goose egg sized knot on the back of his head from where he’d hit the wall.

“Let me see,” James says as he closely examines it. “It doesn’t look too bad, there’s no bleeding.” Coming back in front of Miko, he says, “It’ll probably hurt for a while.”

Turning to Jiron, James is about ready to say something when Jiron says, “Okay, okay, I understand now.”

“Next time be careful, someone could’ve been killed,” scolds James.

Miko gets up and goes over to the chest that nearly killed him and says, “Hey, look at this!”

They turn to see him reaching in and pulling out a handful of clear crystals. Coming over to Jiron, he says excitedly, “How much are these worth?”

Taking one, Jiron examines it closely and says, “Nothing. They are just common crystals.” As Miko’s excited smile begins to fade, he adds, “You could probably get something for them at a market, but they really are not that spectacular.”

Looking upset, he says, “Then why did they have an exploding trap that almost killed me?” Throwing them down, he says, “Stupid crystals.”

James comes over and bends over, picking one up. Inspecting it, he says, “Why indeed?”

“Are they magic?” Miko asks, seeing James’ curiosity.

Shaking his head, he says, “No, thought they might’ve been, but there’s not a trace of magic about them now.”

Tossing the crystal back down, he says, “Let’s go. It’s almost night outside and I’d like to get out of here by then.”

“I’m with you,” agrees Miko.

Leaving the room, they go back to the juncture of corridors, and take the one to their right, leaving only the one across from them unexplored.

The corridor quickly ends at a barren room with a mural of what looks to be a depiction of the swamp and the surrounding area.

James brings the orb closer for a better look and points to a spot, saying, “I think we’re here.” Indicating another area to the south, he says, “This looks like where the cannibals’ village had been.”

He puts his finger on the waterway running near where they are and says, “If we can get out of here, it looks like if we follow this river north, it’ll lead to a lake in the mountains.”

“Do we want to go there?” Jiron asks.

“As good a place as any,” replies James. “Elsewhere would put us in cannibal territory or close to the Empire’s forces, I would imagine.”

“Then let’s get out of here!” insists Miko.

They leave the room and return to the juncture of corridors and turn right. Following the passage, it winds first to the left, then the right. After a long straight section, they come to another closed door, locked of course.
Jiron works at the lock and soon has it open. Within are shelves and shelves of crystals of varying sizes. All are the common crystals that Miko had almost been killed over.

“What would they want with these?” James asks as he picks one up. It’s three inches long and one inch wide, well crafted. He puts it in his belt pouch to examine later.

Further examination of the room reveals nothing of interest. James stands there with a confused look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” asks Jiron.

“I thought for sure that there would be another level beneath this one,” he says.

“Maybe there is,” says Miko. “Could there be a secret door? Like the other ones we’d found?”

Nodding, he says, “You’re right, I don’t know where my mind is.” Suddenly, a bubble forms in front of him and begins floating out of the room.

They follow the bubble as it moves down the corridor. Upon reaching the corridor junction, it floats to the left, back toward the stairs to the upper level. Ten feet before reaching the stairs up, it stops and hovers by a section of wall on their right.

“This is it,” announces James as the bubble disappears.

“Where?” asks Jiron. “I don’t see anything.”

Glancing at him, James says, “That’s the whole point of a secret door.”

Smiling, Jiron replies, “Sorry.”

Turning back to the wall, he begins to examine it but is unable to ascertain how to open it. There are no indentations, no markings, nothing that would indicate a way for it to be opened.

Pausing a moment to consider the situation, he paces back and forth and then an idea hits him. Turning back down the corridor, he shuffles along and turns left back at the junction. The others follow behind him.

Entering the room with the beds and chest, he goes over to the mural on the wall. He runs his fingers over it and smiles when he finds a groove. Using both hands, he pushes upon the dark pool and it sinks a quarter inch into the wall.

“Jiron,” he says, “take the orb and run back to see if anything happened.” Continuing to press upon the pool, he waits while Jiron runs back the way to where the bubble had indicated a secret door.

“A doorway is open!” they can hear from down the corridor.

Releasing the dark pool, James turns and makes his way through the dark to where Jiron waits by the opened secret door.

Even before reaching it, the stench coming from the opening hits him like a hammer.

“Gah!” says Miko. “What’s down there?”

All James can do is shrug as he takes the orb from Jiron and begins to descend down the stairs.
The stench only increases as they descend, making their eyes water and bringing them almost to the point of gagging. The bottom of the stairs comes out in a large cavernous room. From the looks of it, the ones who built this place left the cavern just the way they found it with only minimal alterations.

The prickling increases to an almost painful degree as James reaches the end of the stairs. He pauses a moment before entering the cavern, gasping from the effect the area is having on him. Five feet from the end of the stairs, a dark pool begins, the same as had been depicted in the mural upstairs. The light from the orb doesn’t illuminate far enough for them to see to the other side of the dark water.

“This looks just like the pool you pushed in the mural to open the secret door,” Miko says when he enters the cavern.

James nods his head and replies, “That’s what gave me the idea. When I saw the mural, I figured we’d eventually find this.”

“What is it?” Jiron asks as he approaches it for a closer look.

“Don’t get too close,” James warns him.

Stopping a few feet from the pool, he wrinkles his nose as he turns back and says, “It’s the source of the odor.”

James just nods his head as he gazes around the cavern. Increasing the luminosity of the orb, he’s soon able to see to the other side of the cavern where the pool ends. Mirror black, it sits in the center of the cavern without even a ripple. The light from the orb isn’t reflecting off its surface either, more like it’s being absorbed.

Plunk!

A ripple begins to form in the middle of the pool where a stone had been cast into it. James quickly turns and grabs Miko’s arm as he’s about to throw another one. “Are you crazy?” he shouts at him.

Looking guilty, Miko drops the rock and says, “Sorry.”

“James, look!” Jiron exclaims as he points to the ceiling of the cavern, directly over the pool.

A crystal, enormous in size, hangs suspended several feet from the ceiling. It pulses a soft white light, almost like a heart beating.

“What is it?” Miko asks.

“That,” James explains, “is the source of the magic maintaining the barrier.”

“You sure?” he asks.

“Not entirely, as I didn’t create it,” James replies in exasperation. “But I can’t imagine it being anything else.”

“Now what?” he asks.

Turning to him, he says, “Miko, stop asking me questions. I can’t think of what to do with all of your interruptions.”

“Sorry,” he apologizes.

He begins to move around the dark pool as he tries to consider his next course of action. There’s nothing here but the pool and the crystal.

Coming back to where the others are waiting, he says, “Jiron, do you think you could hit the crystal with a stone?”

“Maybe,” he replies as he bends over and picks up a fair sized rock. “Isn’t this going to be dangerous?”

“I hope not,” he says. “I just want to see what will happen.”

He takes aim and then throws the rock toward the crystal with all his might. They watch as the rock soars upward and then is suddenly deflected away by a barrier when it nears the crystal.

“Thought so,” James says when he sees it being deflected.

“Then why have I do it?” Jiron asks.

“Now I know for sure,” he explains.

He stands there, staring up at the crystal as he considers his next course of action. Then from the corner of his eye, he catches a glimpse of a ripple out near the center of the pool. Turning to Miko he glares at him and says, “Stop throwing rocks in the pool.”

“I didn’t,” denies Miko.

Looking to Jiron, he sees him shaking his head. “Then what…?”
They all turn and look out to the pool. Four separate rippling formations can be seen in the water. “James,” says Miko with fear in his voice, “what’s going on?”

Staring out at the ripples, he replies, “I don’t know.” He gestures for everyone to begin backing toward the stairs as the ripples begin moving in their direction.

“James?” asks Jiron.

“I don’t know!” he replies vehemently, never once removing his eyes from the pool.

They pause a moment at the base of the stairs as they continue watching the ripples approaching the edge of the pool. When the ripples are a mere three feet away from the shore, something begins to emerge from the water.

In growing horror, James watches as a headless torso makes its way out of the water and begins shambling toward them. “Run!” he yells as he turns and shoves them, propelling them up the stairs.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs, he pauses as he looks back down and sees the torso, along with others, reach the base of the stairs. Without pause, the lead torso steps onto the bottom step and begins climbing up after them.

“Up to the surface!” he yells as they turn as one and break into a mad dash for the next set of stairs.

They race up them to the upper level and then run down the corridors to the winding stairs which lead to the courtyard above.

Jiron is the first one to reach the stairs and takes them two at a time, Miko follows close behind. James reaches the stairs and begins to follow them up when Jiron stops suddenly and crouches down near the top. As Miko nears him, he grabs him and pulls him down as well.

“What’s wrong?” James asks as he comes up behind them.

Jiron motions for him to move up and join him at the top of the stairs.

He moves past a shaken Miko and settles down next to Jiron. Outside is dark, night had fallen while they were down below.

“Over there,” Jiron says as he points off to the right.

Looking in the indicated direction, James sees a ghostly apparition moving among the ruins. And then he sees another one. Scanning the entire courtyard he sees a dozen or more ghostly apparitions moving about, both men and women.

“What do we do now?” he asks.

Suddenly from behind them, Miko screams, “James!” as he shoves his way between them.

Looking at the bottom of the stairs, James sees one of the headless torsos from the pool. It steps upon the bottom step as it reaches for Miko.

James lets loose with a blast of power which knocks it back but fails to stop it. Blasting it again, he motions for the others to follow him back down. “If there’s only the initial four we saw coming out of the pool, we’ll have a better chance with them, than out there,” he tells them.

Jiron stands up as his knives appear in his hands. He moves down to meet the headless torso where it’s returning to the bottom of the stairs. Fear and revulsion war within him as he strikes out at it.

His knife strikes it, cleaving a long, deep wound across its chest. To his horror, he watches as the wound rapidly closes itself back up.

“They’re healing themselves,” he shouts back to James as he presses on with the attack.

Three more of the torsos come shuffling toward them from down the hallway. “Get back here!” James hollers to him.

Jiron back peddles as he hurries back toward the stairs, just as James lets loose with another bolt of energy which practically sizzles as it passes through the air.

When it strikes the torso, it’s blasted apart. Pieces fly back down the corridor covering a good six feet with torso chunks.

“Yeah!” hollers Miko.

The other three continue to lurch their way toward them. James is about ready to let loose with another of the bolts when he notices the pieces of the blasted torso begin to work their way toward each other. It’s almost like iron being drawn to a magnet. When two pieces touch, they come together and make one larger piece.

“There’s no way to stop them!” he cries, letting loose with another blast that takes out another one. But as with the first one, the pieces begin to work themselves together.

From behind James, Miko screams as he sees a ghostly apparition at the top of the stairs staring down at him. James turns and sees the man there, his mouth moving as if he’s trying to say something. The apparition reaches out to try to grab Miko.

Miko screams again and loses his balance. He falls and begins rolling down the stairs, knocking both Jiron and James off their feet.
As James falls, he twists and lands on his back with a thud. The medallion bearing the Star of Morcyth slips out of his shirt.

Suddenly, a bright light erupts from the medallion. The shattered pieces of the torsos begin to smoke and then dissolve into nothingness.

Realizing the effect the light from the medallion is having, he grabs it and holds it up high as the light from the Star fills the corridor with a blinding light. The torsos moving toward them down the corridor begin smoking when the light from the Star touches them. Continuing to shamble toward them, the torsos begin smoking more and more. The corridor begins to fill with a nauseating smoke as they dissolve. When the last piece of the last torso has dissolved into nothingness, the light goes out.

“What did you do?” Jiron asks.

“I didn’t do anything,” James replies, staring in wonder at the Star he holds in his hand. “It happened all on its own.”

Miko looks up to the top of the stairs, but the ghostly apparition is gone.

“Follow me,” James says as he gets up and turns to head back into the complex. As he starts to move, Miko asks hysterically, “What’re you doing?”

“If this worked on the torsos,” he explains, “maybe it’ll work on the pool.”

“Will that get rid of the barrier?” Jiron asks.

Shrugging, James says, “I don’t know. Let’s worry about one thing at a time.”

As they proceed through the levels back down to the pool, they come across several other torsos shambling their way along the corridors. Each time, James holds up the Star and each time it blazes forth with life, returning the torsos to nothingness.

Growing in confidence, James hurries toward the cavern. Upon leaving the stairs and entering the complex with the pool, he again holds the Star up high. Blazing forth with the most intense light it has yet produced, it infuses the entire cavern with its blinding brilliance. As the light touches the pool, the water begins to writhe backward, as if it was trying to get away from intense light. James walks slowly closer to the edge of the dark water, holding the Star out in front of him.

The water of the pool begins to roil and bubble, steam comes off of it, filling the cavern with its horrid odor. The stench, as bad as it was before is nothing compared to what is coming off of it now. Rot, decay, and death seem to fill the cavern as the steam continues erupting from the pool.

The light from the Star seems to keep the steam at bay, dissolving it as it did the torsos. Jiron and Miko stand shoulder to shoulder with James as the lake continues to hiss and boil wherever the light touches it. The steam soon becomes so thick that it’s as if they’re standing in the middle of a fog bank.

Suddenly, a torso lurches out of the fog and reaches out for them, but quickly dissolves into nothingness when the light from the Star touches it.

The Star continues to work its effect upon the pool, the level slowly dropping as more of it steams and dissolves away.

When the pool is close to being empty, from overhead they hear a high pitched noise which is increasingly growing in volume. Looking up through the fog, they see the crystal begin pulsating wildly. And then suddenly, a shattering crack as the giant crystal overhead explodes into a million shards that rain down over the entire cavern.

With the shattering of the crystal, the resistance from the pool vanishes and the light from the Star quickly destroys the rest. Once every last drop has been eradicated, the light abruptly stops and the cavern is once again plunged into darkness.

They stand in the darkness and James is about to make his orb when lights begin to appear all over the floor of the cavern. Ghostly apparitions begin to take shape.

Miko screams and James holds aloft the Star, but nothing happens. The ghosts all look to him, give him a slight bow and then begin to fade away. After the last ghost had faded away and the cavern is once more plunged into darkness, James creates his orb.

“What was that?” Jiron asks, referring to the ghosts.

“I think they were the souls of the people who had been sacrificed here long ago,” he reasons. “Though we may never know for sure.”

“Let’s get out of here!” Miko says, not wanting to spend another moment within this cavern.

“See no reason to stay,” agrees James. “I don’t feel anymore magic being worked here, the barrier may be down now.”

“Then what are we waiting for,” exclaims Miko as he shoves past James and moves quickly up the stairs to the level above.

Turning, James follows him up the stairs and they make their way back through the complex to the winding
stairs that lead up to the surface. He pauses at the top and cautiously peers out into the courtyard. When no apparitions are apparent he motions for the others to follow him. “Looks like the spirits we saw were the ones who had been up here,” he says.

“I hope so,” Miko exclaims. “I don’t want to stay here any longer.”

“I agree,” Jiron says as he moves to the fore and leads them toward the northern skull pyramid they’d attempted to get around earlier.

They glance over to where the large skull pyramid had stood as they make their way through the courtyard. With the shattering of the crystal, it had collapsed and is now only a jumbled pile of skulls. When they reach the northern pyramid, they find that it too had collapsed, the skulls lying in a heap.

Jiron moves cautiously to where the barrier had been and holds his hand out, just in case. When he gets to where it once had been, his hand continues on through. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief and quickly moves to leave this area.

Hurrying on past, they travel through the swamp for an hour before deciding they’ve put enough distance between them and the ruins. Tired and exhausted they make camp and rest. They take turns keeping watch, and manage to make it through the night with no disturbances.

When Jiron wakes the following morning, he finds James sitting by the fire, staring at the crystal he found in the underground complex. “What are you doing?” he asks.

“Just thinking, is all,” he replies. “The ones who built that place had these everywhere, as well as the main crystal above the pool.”

“And?” he prompts him to continue.

“And there must be a reason, something about the crystals that made them important to whoever had lived there,” he explains. “I intend to figure it out.”

“I’m sure you will,” he says as he gets up off the ground. “I’m going to see if I can’t scare up some food for breakfast.”

“Don’t bother,” James says as he motions over to several dead animals with holes in them. “I already got something, if you wouldn’t mind preparing them?”

Shaking his head, Jiron says, “No problem.” He goes over and begins skinning and preparing them for the fire. As he prepares them, he continues glancing over to James as he stares at the crystal.

When the animals are over the fire and roasting, the smell awakens Miko. “Finally up I see,” Jiron says to him.

Miko doesn’t reply, just goes to the edge of camp and answers the call of nature. Upon returning, he says, “James, why did your medallion act the way it did?”

“Maybe it’s no ordinary medallion,” Jiron says from where he’s turning the spits over the fire. “Just where did you get it, anyway.” When James hesitates to answer, he says, “I think we have a right to know, after what we’ve been through.”

So James relates the events after he’d come to this world. Miko is astounded that James claims to be from another world and has had dealings with gods or whatever Igor is.

“He had said not to lose it, that I might need it,” he tells them. “I guess he was right.”

“I incredible,” Jiron says. “And you still don’t know why you were brought here or what you should do?”

Shaking his head, he says, “No, but I’m figuring it to have something to do with the god Morcyth.”

“That makes sense, since you were given his medallion,” Jiron says as he nods his head. “And that’s why you were in the City of Light?”

“Yeah, I was there looking for the last high temple to Morcyth, which we found as we fled,” he says. “But that didn’t answer any of my questions. When I talked with Ollinearn, he’d said that the last high priest had been born in Saragon. I had thought maybe to go there next, but it’s currently in the hands of the Empire. So I’m not really sure what I’ll be doing next.”

“I’m sure something will come up to tell you,” Jiron assures him. “They’re not going to have brought you here just to let you cool your heels.”

Smiling, James says, “Probably not.”

“Well anyway, breakfast is ready,” he announces as he hands each of them a skewer. As they take the offered food, James sits back and relaxes, unable to get the events of the last few days out of his mind.

They sit in silence as they eat, just happy to be out of the complex and on their way again. Jiron wonders
what’s going on with his sister and the others they’d left back at Al-Kur. He’s anxious to meet up with them when they reach Trendle, and is sure she’ll make it there safe. The pit fighters had given their word to see her safely there.

As he eats, he also contemplates James and what he’d just been told. Fantastic to say the least, the story would hardly seem plausible but for the events he’d been party to since joining with him. What happened back in the underground complex lends credence to it all.

“What are we to do now?” he asks James.

“Remember that mural we saw back in the ruins?” he responds. “The one showing the countryside?”

Jiron and Miko both nod their heads, and Jiron says, “Yeah, I remember.”

“It looked like the main waterway that flowed near here will lead to a lake nestled up in the mountains,” he says. “I figure if we go that way, we might avoid any Empire forces which may be on the lookout for us.”

“Maybe,” he replies. “At least it’s going north.”

James nods, “That’s what I was figuring too. Since the swamp has been free of their patrols thus far, if we stay within it then we should be able to make it north without detection.”

“Then what?” he asks.

“Then we just see what our choices are as they present themselves,” James says. “Not much else we can do.”

Miko sets his skewer and what’s left of the carcass on the ground as he gives out a large belch.

James glances to him and smiles, “Ready to go?”

Patting his stomach, Miko says, “Yeah.”

Jiron takes a few more bites of his and then tosses it off to the side as well. Standing up, he begins kicking dirt upon the fire until it’s smothered.

James looks to him and says, “Lead on.” Grabbing his walking stick for support, he shuffles along after Jiron with Miko right beside him. His leg and side still hurt considerably but he manages to maintain a quick pace.

They begin to head toward where the waterway flows past the complex and shortly arrive next to its bank. Jiron turns to follow it as he leads them north, keeping the river to their left.

As they move north, the state of the vegetation quickly improves until there’re no signs of the withering that had been evident nearer the complex, much to everyone’s relief. Having to forge their way through the undergrowth, not to mention maneuvering around stagnant pools of water, doesn’t allow them to make great time and they soon have to stop for the night.

James’ leg and side are hurting abysmally bad, and it’s all he’d been able to do the last few hours just to stay upright. When they finally stop to make camp for the night, he collapses. The others allow him to rest as they go about building a fire and acquiring some food for dinner. After he’s eaten his fill, he promptly falls into an exhausted sleep.

Jiron and Miko take turns that night in keeping watch, allowing James to sleep the night through.

When morning dawns, they have to wake him up once they’ve gotten breakfast ready. His leg and side are still throbbing badly, and he’s afraid they’re becoming infected. But when Jiron examines them, he says they’re healing fine. Relieved, James takes the offered food and begins eating ravenously. He’d been worried about infection, not having any antiseptic or anything.

Even after eating, he’s still feeling weak, tired and hurting badly. But somehow he’s able to bring himself to his feet though he still leans heavily upon his walking stick. With Jiron taking the lead, they continue moving north along the waterway.

Ever since the morning, James has noticed how the life of the swamp has begun to return. Back when they were by the complex, there’d been no birds or any other sign of life. But since they’ve left it far behind them, the sounds of the swamp have begun to return. Off in the distance, they can hear the cry of the rhino-lizard. James is glad that it is far off, they’re not in any shape to defend themselves from an attack.

When the bugs and mosquitoes become unbearable again, he coats them with another dose of the noxious bug repellent. The stench doesn’t bother them nearly so much, now that they’ve been around it for so long.

Much to everyone’s displeasure, they’re still in the swamp when night falls. They find a suitable stretch of land to make camp upon and Miko begins to build a fire while Jiron goes in search of food.

James feels a little better than he did earlier in the morning, the day’s walk seemed to have worked out most of the kinks.

After dinner, when Jiron and Miko begin talking about standing watch, James offers to take the first couple of hours.

“Are you sure?” Jiron asks him. “If you need rest, then rest. If something should happen, we’ll need you strong, not weakened from lack of rest.”

“Yeah James,” Miko adds. “Your leg needs to heal, so rest.”
“I appreciate your concern,” he tells them, “but I’m not really that tired right now. So I’d just as soon take a turn. I feel bad when you two stand watch and all I do is rest.”

Jiron looks at him a moment and then shrugs, “If you feel up to it, alright. You take the first watch.” Turning to Miko, he says, “You take the midnight watch and I’ll finish it off.”

Miko nods his head as he lies down and says, “Sounds good enough to me.” He glances over to James and says, “Be sure to wake me when it’s my turn.”

“I will,” James assures him. Then he makes himself comfortable as his fellows settle down to sleep.
When James awakens in the morning, the sun has already begun to lighten the day. Miko is snoring peacefully off to the other side of the campfire and he finds Jiron walking around the outer edge of the camp in amongst the trees. He looks over to James as he sits up and comes over when he waves at him.

“Good morning,” Jiron says to him as he approaches.
“Everything okay?” James asks.
“Oh yeah,” he assures him, “just walking around a bit. I hate sitting in just one spot for very long. How’s your leg?”

James straightens it and says, “Better. I think it may not hurt as much today.”
“Let’s hope not,” he says. Sitting down next to him, he asks, “How far do you think it is to Cardri?”
Shrugging, James says, “I couldn’t even begin to guess. It took us over a week to make it to the mines, and that was on good roads with horses. Trudging through this,” he continues as he gestures to the swamp, “who knows?”
“Would like to see Tersa again,” he tells him.
“So would I,” agrees James. “I’d really like to find some place to just rest and not have to worry about being eaten by some damn rhino-lizard, or have to sneak through an area filled with the Empire’s forces.”

From across the campsite, Miko’s voice says, “I’d like that too.” Sitting up, he glances over at them. “I hate the swamp, give me a good old city any day.”

“If we keep forging on through to the north, eventually we’ll get out of here,” James assures him.
“I hope so,” he says as he gets up and comes over to them. Sitting down, he asks, “How much longer are we going to be in this damned swamp anyway?”

“Like I was telling Jiron,” James says, “I don’t know. All I do know is that they don’t last forever.”
“Then let’s stop sitting here talking and get going,” Miko says as he gets back up.
James reaches over and grabs his walking stick. Using it for support, he gets to his feet without nearly the amount of pain that maneuver had caused him the day before.
Holding the stick loosely, he waits for Jiron to get up and lead the way.
“You feeling better?” Miko asks as they continue on their way.
Nodding, James says, “Much better, actually. Don’t think I could run any distance, but the constant pain and throbbing seem to be easing.”
“That’s good,” replies Miko. “I was worried about you.”
“I was worried about me too,” he says with a slight smile.
They travel for several hours before they hear Miko’s voice coming from where he’s lagging behind, “I’m hungry.”

“Might be a good time to stop and eat,” James says to Jiron who’s up a ways trying to find the way through.
Jiron stops and comes back to them. “I was hoping to find a clearing where we could build a fire,” he tells them. “We’ll stop then, okay?”
“Sure,” James says to Miko’s dismay, “we can wait a little while longer.”
Just then, Miko’s stomach lets out a loud growl.
James and Jiron turn and stare at him, then break out in laughter.
“Well,” he says, “I’m starving. We haven’t eaten all day!”

“Just a little while longer,” Jiron says, “and then hopefully we’ll run across a spot where we can build a fire without worrying about setting the whole area aflame.”
He glances to James and they both smile when they remember the last time they’d set the woods on fire.
Miko sees them and asks, “What?”
“Oh, nothing,” James replies.

Taking the lead again, Jiron once more makes his way through the trees and undergrowth, searching for the way out. With the waterway on his left for a guide, he’s able to maintain going in the correct direction. Without it, they’d soon be turned around and lost.

After trudging through the swamp for a while, they begin to see another waterway off to their right. As they continue moving north, the other waterway moves closer to the one they’re following until they join where a larger
river has split into two branches.
To their dismay, they find themselves on the inside of the fork. In order to continue, they’ll have to cross one of
the waterways. The area on the inside of the junction of water is relatively flat and clear, so they decide to stop there
and find something to eat while they consider how they’ll get across.

James picks up some small rocks from the ground and quietly goes into the brush to hunt for lunch. Jiron and
Miko begin building a fire while he’s gone. He returns several minutes later with three dead animals that Jiron takes
from him and begins preparing for the fire.

Miko walks over to the water and says, “How are we supposed to cross this?”
From where he sits by the fire, James hollers, “Swim, it’s not that far.”
Turning back to him, Miko exclaims, “But what about the fish? They’ll eat us for sure.”
“We’re not even sure if they’re in the main waterway,” he says.

Jiron picks up some of the innards of the animals and gets up. Walking over to the river, he announces, “Only
one way to find out.” He throws the bloody mess into the water.

They watch it for a second and he says, “See, nothing to…”

Then suddenly, the water starts to broil as the fish begin consuming the innards.
“See!” Miko cries out.

Jiron glances over to James and says, “That’s going to be a problem.”
“You know, I was hoping they’d not be in the main river,” he says.

While the animals are cooking, they continue pondering the situation.
“Could you get us there with magic?” Jiron asks.

“I don’t know, maybe,” he says. “But if something should happen to break my concentration, we would fall to
the river below.”
They sit there in silence for a while longer until the animals are fully cooked. When they’re ready, Jiron hands
each of them one and they set to with a hearty appetite.

During the course of the meal, Jiron suddenly asks, “How about a bridge?”
“That would take too long to build,” James tells him.
“No, no, no,” he says. “I mean a natural one.”

Jiron glances toward him and says, “But you could make one.”

“Could you knock it down with magic?” Jiron asks.

“Not working,” he says. “We don’t have any axes or anything.”

Nodding toward James, he says, “He could knock it down with magic. After what I’ve seen you do to
buildings, this shouldn’t be too hard.

Looking at the tree in the distance, he slowly nods his head and says, “Maybe you could make one.”
The other watching, he walks over to the tree and begins to figure out the particulars of what he’s going to do.

It definitely looks tall enough to span the water after it falls, providing it falls in the correct direction. That
shouldn’t be a problem, he just needs to direct the magic to steer it that way. Ready to try, he motions the others to
stand back several yards behind him as he begins to concentrate.

Miko watches him as he stands there, five feet from the base of the tree. Suddenly, the base pops as bark flies in
different directions. He sees into the water and watches as the fish consume it. Then, with the
other two watching, he walks over to the tree and begins to figure out the particulars of what he’s going to do.

It definitely looks tall enough to span the water after it falls, providing it falls in the correct direction. That
shouldn’t be a problem, he just needs to direct the magic to steer it that way. Ready to try, he motions the others to
stand back several yards behind him as he begins to concentrate.

Miko watches him as he stands there, five feet from the base of the tree. Suddenly, the base pops as bark flies in
all directions. The top begins to topple and at first it looks to be falling more along the river than across it. But then,
as if a giant hand grabs it, the tree swings more toward the opposite shore. With a loud crashing, it lands with the top
of its branches well on the other side of the river.
They come over to where he’s standing, congratulating James as he watches the water passing just under the trunk of the tree. “Good job!” exclaims Miko.

“If we’re careful, it’s unlikely we’ll fall in,” Jiron says as he climbs up onto the trunk. “Let me go first, and if it’s safe, you two can follow,” he tells them.

Miko and James stay next to the trunk while he makes his way across the water to the other side. The trunk is fairly stable, the branches beneath it forming a secure contact with the riverbed.

They watch as Jiron makes his way through the limbs to the other side and finally comes to stand on the opposite shore. “No problem!” he shouts back to them.

“Wanna go next?” James asks Miko.

Nodding, he climbs up onto the trunk and makes his way to the other side. Once he’s there, James begins his way across and finds carrying his stick with him will be impossible. So he tosses his walking stick into the water and goes on across. The multiple branches extending away from the tree give him ample handholds with which to maintain his balance, even with his injuries. There was one heart stopping moment when his injured leg lost its balance and he almost fell. But by grabbing a couple branches in a death grip, which renewed the pain in his side, he was able to right himself and continue on.

Reaching the other side, he climbs down from the trunk and joins them by the river. Miko hands him another walking stick he’d found while James was crossing. He takes the stick and says, “Thank you.”

“Should we continue following it?” Jiron asks, indicating the main river from which the one they’d been following had split off.

“I would think so,” he says.

Without another word, Jiron turns and begins looking for the best path to take. With the river flowing steadily on their left, they continue on through the swamp. By nightfall, the swamp had begun to change from an area filled with stagnant pools to a more pleasant, forest type area.

“I think we may be finally getting to the edge of the swamp,” Jiron announces when they stop for the night.

“It looks like it,” agrees James. “The air is fresher and there’s not nearly the amount of annoying bugs to deal with.”

They make camp at the edge of the river and James goes into the woods, soon returning with several animals for dinner. By this time, the others have a good fire going and they relax around it as their dinner is cooking. The evening passes uneventfully, each taking their turn at watch.

When the sun rises in the morning, James is happy to find his leg beginning to itch. Knowing that’s an indication of healing, he tries not to scratch any of the scabs off. His side is doing better as well, some of the scabs are beginning to flake off around the edges. The strain he put on the wound when he almost fell into the river seems to have had little lasting effect.

His leg barely aches when he rests his weight on it when they’re ready to go. Not bothering with a walking stick any longer, he’s able to keep up with Jiron. They make better time than they had the day before.

As they continue on throughout the day, the swamp gradually disappears and a forest takes its place. Not having to worry about backtracking around pools of water where those flesh eating fish might be living, they’re able to cover more distance.

Maintaining a northerly course as they follow the river out of the swamplands, they continue on for several hours. The ground becomes firmer and soon the only water they find is that of the river next to them and the few small streams that flow into it. They all become more relaxed as they continue on, more comfortable in the more familiar setting of the forest.

James is feeling so good in fact, he breaks out in song, “Zip a de do dah…”

After several choruses, Miko asks him, “What’s that song about?”

Smiling, James explains, “Just a fun song from where I come from. It basically means happy to be alive, or at least that’s how it’s always made me feel.”

“Could you teach it to me?” he asks.

“Sure,” James says and then launches into another round.

Miko has trouble at first, but then he catches on fast and by the third iteration has the words and tune down fairly well. Jiron even manages to join in after the second time around and they go through the forest singing.

They’ve managed to make good speed through the rest of the day. When it begins getting dark, they again make camp, with James hunting for food while the others get the fire going.

Once he’s returned with a couple animals and they’re sitting around the fire, he says, “This is nice.”

“What is?” asks Jiron from where he’s turning the spit.

“Just being in the forest, no one trying to kill you,” he says wistfully. “I’ve always liked being out among the
trees, it’s always brought me peace.”
   “Not me,” says Miko. “The forest gives me the creeps.”
   Laughing, James replies, “That’s because you’re a city boy. Spend more time out here and you’ll come to
   appreciate them.”
   Miko looks at him doubtfully and says, “So far, they’ve been nothing but trouble.”
   “I suppose it could seem that way,” Jiron joins in. “If we weren’t here in the Empire, at least I think we’re still
   in the Empire, then it would feel different.”
   “Maybe,” he says, still not convinced.
   When the meal is over and they’re getting ready to settle down to sleep, Jiron offers to take the first watch.
   Miko turns to him and says, “If the woods are such a great place, why are we bothering with a watch?”
   “Can never be too careful,” he replies.
   Figuring he’d made his point, Miko turns over and eventually falls asleep. James and Jiron sit up for a little
   while longer, talking.
   “He sure can be negative sometimes,” Jiron says quietly to James.
   “I know,” he replies. “Has to do with his life I would imagine. Being alone on the streets where everyone tries
   taking what you have, doesn’t tend to build trust.”
   “I suppose,” Jiron says. “I was on the streets too and am not that way.”
   “True,” replies James. “But what would you have been like if Tersa hadn’t been alongside you, or if that guy
   hadn’t gotten you started in the fight pits.”
   “I see what you mean,” he says. Then he smiles and laughs quietly.
   “What?” James asks him.
   “Oh, I was just remembering a time after I’d been in the pits for a while,” he explains. “Kehlan, that was his
   name, was on his way to get me for another fight. He said he always wanted to take me to them, not for us to just
   meet there. Anyway, he was coming toward me when from out of nowhere, a tomato sails toward him and hits him
   right in the side.”
   Starting to giggle a little more, he says, “You should have seen him, he was mad and was looking around to see
   where the tomato had come from. When he saw who it was that had ruined his blue vest, he starts yelling at them
   and ran toward them. Most likely intending to beat them up or something, but he never got the chance.”
   “He didn’t take three steps before he slips in a mud puddle.” Beginning to laugh more, he continues, “He gets
   up, mud all over him and looks around for his hat. He sees it sitting in the road a few feet away. Just as he was
   getting up to retrieve it, a horse comes along and puts his hoof right on the hat and begins walking away, with the
   hat still stuck to his hoof.” Laughing so hard now, tears begin running from his eyes.
   James begins laughing too as he continues, “Finally the horse puts its hoof in a mud puddle and the hat doesn’t
   come back out. Kehlan gets up, covered in mud and goes over to retrieve his hat. When he pulls it out of the mud
   puddle, the hat is completely ruined. There’s a hole in it, not to mention the mud and other stuff stuck to it that had
   been in the mud puddle.”
   “He actually put the hat back on after shaking it and getting most of the mud off,” he says, laughing more. “He
   looked around but the kids who had thrown the tomato were no where to be found.”
   Laughing, James looks over to where Miko is sleeping and is happy to find that their merriment hasn’t awoken
   him. He sits there a while, listening to the fire crackle and pop as he continues thinking about Kehlan. The picture of
   him walking around in a dirty, soaked hat and a blue vest with a big red stain on it keeps him chuckling for a while.
   Then suddenly, it all stops. Blue vest? And a hat? He looks to Jiron who’s poking the fire absentmindedly with
   a stick. Could it have been? “Just what did Kehlan look like?”
   Looking up from the fire, he says, “Oh, not much to talk about really. Looked sort of ordinary, he might’ve
   come from one of the kingdoms further north, I think. He was short though, didn’t come up to my shoulders as I
   recall. But that didn’t affect his fighting abilities, never saw anyone who could fight like him. He used to say, ‘It’s
   not the size of your opponent, but his skill that will take you down’. And he was right.”
   Sitting back, again lost in thought, James considers what he’d just heard. It had to be the little guy! But why?
   He stares over to Jiron as he tries to think things through. He fights like no other I’ve ever seen. Maybe Igor
   arranged it so I’d have help along the way? Or is there something more to it? Whatever the reason, I’m glad to have
   had him with me. I doubt if I could ever have survived if I hadn’t.
   He settles down to sleep for he’s taking the mid watch which is the worst one for getting enough rest. You
don’t get enough before your shift and you have a hard time going back to sleep afterwards.
   Finally though, he does manage to fall asleep.
“James! Wake up!”
Startled out of sleep, he awakens to see Jiron running toward the camp. “What?” he asks as he sits up, suddenly alarmed. Night had fallen and the woods are dark, the dim glow of the dying fire is all that keeps it at bay.
Miko wakes up and still half asleep says, “Is it my turn?”
Jiron runs to the remnants of the fire and begins kicking dirt on it, putting it completely out.
“What’s going on?” James asks as he gets to his feet.
Miko comes fully awake when he sees Jiron putting the fire out. Realizing that something’s not right, he quickly gets to his feet.
In the last light of the fire before it’s covered by Jiron, they see him pointing to the north as he says, “There’s a road not fifty feet further ahead.”
As the last dying ember is covered and they’re thrown into darkness, James can hear voices coming their way from the direction of the road. He begins to see torches moving their way in amongst the trees as well.
Leading them away from the camp, Jiron whispers, “Soldiers, lots of ‘em.”
As they hurry through the brush away from the river, James asks in a hushed whisper, “Were they looking for us?”
“I don’t think so,” he replies as he continues leading them further away from the river. “I had been scouting ahead of us for when we leave tomorrow and had found the road. They were simply marching this way, coming over the bridge that spans the river we had been following. Then as I was heading back, I heard one of them say something and a smaller group broke off from the main force. They began making their way to our camp. I think they must’ve seen the fire and were going to investigate.”
They hear Miko mumble in the dark, “I knew the forest was a bad place to be.”
Suddenly, they hear a horn sounding from back at their campsite. “Damn!” curses James, “they’re going to be combing the woods for us for sure.”
Jiron slows them down in the hopes they’ll make less noise as he continues to lead them further away from the soldiers.
Suddenly, the woods open up and the moon above shows they’ve come out on the road. Five feet in front of them, a horn sounds, ripping through the stillness of the night as a soldier spots them coming out of the forest.
They stand there frozen for just a moment as two torches burst into life along the road, one across from them and another further to the west. Two dozen soldiers stand on the road between them and the forest to the north, their attention now turned directly to them. The soldiers draw their swords as one of them steps forward and says something in a commanding tone to them in their language.
“James,” Miko begins to say when the group of soldiers between them and the other side of the road are suddenly thrust aside like rag dolls by a blast of magic from James, clearing a path through.
“The sound of pursuit is very close behind them. James concentrates as he runs and…”
Crumph!
…the ground under the pursuing soldiers erupts, tossing them like rag dolls. When they slam back to the ground all but a few lie still. The explosion slows the pursuit and allows them time to move further into the trees.
“Come on!” Jiron hisses to Miko who’s falling behind. The trees and bushes continue getting in his way as he tries to keep up. The faint light from the stars above gives insufficient light to navigate the forest quickly.
From out of the forest ahead of them, three soldiers appear, one of them raising a horn to his lips. Jiron draws his knives and rushes to intercept. He moves to take out the one about to sound the horn when the soldier abruptly flies backward as one of James’ slugs takes him in the chest.
The other two soldiers draw their swords but are no match for Jiron. The first one to close with Jiron thrusts at his poorly armored chest. Deflecting the thrust skillfully away from his body, Jiron strikes with his other knife and sinks several inches into the soldier’s chest, piercing his heart.

He strikes out with his knee to aid in removing the dying soldier from his knife, while at the same time twisting to avoid a slice from the man’s comrade.

The remaining soldier attacks again, this time with an overhand hack and Jiron catches and stops the falling blade between his knives. While holding the sword immobile, he kicks out and catches the man in the knee. The sound of bones snapping can be heard as his knee breaks, causing the soldier to cry out as he falls to the ground.

Not willing to take the time to finish him off, they skirt around the fallen soldier and continue into the forest. James notices that Miko has acquired a sword from one of the fallen guards, its scabbard secured around his waist.

As they follow Jiron through the trees, they can still hear the soldiers in pursuit not very far behind them.

“We’re not going to lose them,” cries out Miko.

James abruptly stops and turns toward their pursuit. 

Crumph! Crumph! Crumph!

Three more explosions, spaced fifty feet apart, erupt under the leading edge of the advancing force. Men scream as their bodies are flung up into the air only to fall back, slamming into the ground with bone shattering force. Many fail to move again while others weakly call out for help. Several trees in the explosion area begin to topple, men cry out as they run to avoid them. Some are crushed by the falling trees while trying to rescue their companions who’d been injured in the explosions.

“That should slow them down some,” James says as he rejoins the others. Setting a quick pace, they race through the trees to put as much distance between themselves and the soldiers.

As they continue on, the sound of pursuit becomes more distant. Jiron continues to lead them northward, though he soon loses exactly which way north is. Not being a woodsman, he’s now using the sound coming from their pursuers to determine their course. His main goal is simply to just stay ahead of them.

Suddenly, the trees open up and the river appears before them. Without hesitation, he immediately turns to follow it upstream. “Won’t they think to follow it?” James asks him.

“Most likely,” he says, “but that mural indicated this river comes from a lake nestled in among some mountains. I think we’d be better able to lose them in the mountains than in here.”

“Good thinking,” James replies approvingly.

When the sound of pursuit all but disappears, they slow their progress, giving everyone a break from the relentless pace. They pause near the river for only a few moments to allow everyone to have a quick drink and to catch their breath before continuing on.

“Let’s go,” Jiron announces as he makes ready to resume following the river to the mountains.

Miko gets to his feet with an exhausted groan. Jiron grins at Miko but then his grin disappears when he sees James beginning to limp on his wounded leg.

Coming over to James, he says, “Leg bothering you again?”

Nodding, James replies, “Yeah, a little. All this running is putting a strain on it.”

“You going to make it?” he asks.

“I have little choice,” James says, resigned. Then he indicates Jiron should proceed as he says, “Go on, I’ll be fine.”

Worried about his leg, Jiron again moves out. Following the river enables them to maintain a consistent heading that forging through the forest hadn’t allow.

The moon appears on the horizon, giving them some light with which to make their way. Though it’s merely a lightning of the shadows after it filters its way down through the canopy of leaves above them. Miko continues to jump at every sound around him, the shadows playing tricks with his eyes, making him see enemies around every tree.

For the next hour, they continue moving quickly through the forest, staying close to the river. Soon the sound of pursuit completely disappears behind them. They stop for another few minutes by the side of the river where everyone takes a moment’s rest.

Miko plops himself down on the ground, exhausted. “Don’t get too comfortable,” Jiron tells him from over by the river. “We’re not staying very long.”

“I know,” he replies, sounding very tired.

James hobbles over and sits down with his back against a tree near Miko, glad to have the opportunity to rest. His leg is starting to burn and when he looks at it, can see that blood is beginning to ooze again from the cuts. He brings his head down to lay on his arms resting on his knees just as a crossbow bolt embeds itself into the tree where his head had been but a moment ago.
“Jiron!” he yells as he rolls to his side, avoiding another bolt as it strikes the tree. Pain erupts in his side as he feels the barely healed wound rip open. Suddenly, the entire area is illuminated by a bright light as he creates an orb of light in the air above them. He quickly looks around and sees several soldiers coming toward them out of the trees. He lets loose with blasts of energy that lifts two of them up and slams them into the trees behind them.

Miko is getting up, trying to get his sword out of its scabbard when a soldier appears in front of him. Screaming, he lurches away from the attacker just as a slug strikes the soldier in the chest, propelling him backward as it blasts out of his back.

He at last gets the sword out as Jiron joins the battle, engaging two of the remaining soldiers. Taking the sword in both hands, Miko edges backward, away from the battle knowing he’d be little use against them.

The ground erupts and five soldiers are thrown into the air. Miko looks around and sees a soldier coming up behind James who looks to be lost in concentration, oblivious to the approaching danger.

Miko breaks into a run to engage the man before he can get to James. The soldier hears him approaching and turns, a smile on his face when he sees Miko.

Coming closer, Miko cries out as he swings the sword with all his might. The soldier easily deflects his inept attack and returns with a slash. Before it has a chance to connect, the soldier is struck with a slug and thrown off balance. Miko is sprayed with gore from the exiting slug as the man falls to the ground dead.

Miko turns to see James looking toward him another slug in his hand. He gives him a brief nod of thanks as he wipes some of the man’s blood off his face, then brings his attention to the remaining soldiers battling Jiron. Knowing he’d be worse than useless there, he goes over to James and stands with sword ready as he watches his back.

Jiron deflects one soldier’s blade while at the same time elbowing the other in the side of the head, causing him to stagger dazed for just a few seconds. He sidesteps away from the dazed man as he engages the remaining soldier.

The man holds him at bay with his shield while striking out with his sword. Jiron deflects the soldier’s sword rather than taking the brunt of the attack by blocking, and returns with a slice from his other knife, opening up a long wound down the man’s forearm. He severs several tendons which causes the soldier’s hand to release the sword. Without his sword, Jiron is able to knock aside the shield and get inside his defenses. A quick strike with his knife and he connects with a mortal wound to the man’s neck.

Blood spraying forth as the jugular is severed, he sees the soldier fall and then turns his attention back to the man who’d been staggering dazed and kicks out with his foot. Connecting with the man’s knee, he hears a satisfying ‘snap’ as the soldier cries out and falls to the ground.

Moving away from the fallen man, he quickly glances around the area and realizes there’re no more soldiers to deal with. “Come on!” he cries as they resume their flight through the forest. He notices that this time, Miko has acquired a crossbow as well as a brace of bolts which is slung across his back. The sword is back in its scabbard hanging at his hip.

As they hurry along, James asks, “How’d they catch up to us so fast?”

“Moving silently,” Jiron replies. “They’re trained for that, whereas we plow through the brush announcing our position with every move we make.”

“No time to rest then,” James announces.

“I wouldn’t advise it,” Jiron says and then hears a groan from Miko. Glancing back to him, he asks, “Tired?”

He just gets a nod from Miko as he tries to keep up with them. The added equipment he’s acquired burdens him more than he’s willing to admit.

After another hour, the sky begins to lighten and they can see that they’re finally approaching the foothills of the northern range of mountains where that lake is suppose to be. When the sun begins to crest the horizon, they locate a somewhat hidden spot and stop for a rest break. Miko immediately collapses to the ground, James hits the ground not too far behind as well. “You guys rest,” Jiron tells them, “and I’ll have a look around.”

Getting a nod in reply, he moves out and soon disappears in the trees. “Think we lost them?” Miko asks James. Shaking his head no, he says, “I doubt it. I’m sure they have trackers and we’re probably leaving a trail a blind person could follow. It’s just a matter of time until they find us.”

“What are we to do then?” he asks worriedly.

“Keep going, try to stay ahead of them,” he tells him. “That’s about all we can do.” He leans back against the bole of a tree and closes his eyes. The pain in his leg throbbing and he knows he really needs to get off it for a while so it can have a chance to heal. His side has stopped burning from where he’d agitated it earlier. He’d looked at it after the sun came up and found some blood had begun oozing again.

Just then, Jiron returns and says, “I don’t think they’re very close behind us.”

“Good,” says Miko as he stretches out on the ground.

Jiron comes over to him and says, “We aren’t going to have time for you to take a nap.”

“I know,” he replies. “Just let me know when we’re leaving.” Then he closes his eyes as he lays there trying to get some rest.

“We’re not going to be able to keep this pace up,” James tells him from where he’s resting, not even bothering to open his eyes.

“Your leg?” he asks. He can tell James is in pain and the fatigue they’re all feeling is apparent in his face.

“It’s getting bad,” he admits. “Not sure how much longer I can keep going. I also opened up the wound in my side during that last battle.”

“Can you use a puddle or something to find out where they are?” he suddenly asks him.

“Perhaps,” James says as opens his eyes. He gets up and walks over to the river. Using some stones and dirt, he makes a small pool at the water’s edge and then settles down next to it.

As the image in the pool begins to change, they see them sitting by the pool and then he begins to expand the image. It’s quickly apparent that the trees are going to hide everything and that this isn’t going to work here.

“Afraid not,” James says as he cancels the spell.

“Then we’ll just have to trudge on as best we can and hope for the best,” Jiron says.

From where Miko is lying down, they begin to hear snores and they just smile at each other. “Hate to wake him up but we need to get going,” says Jiron.

James groans as he gets up and limps over to him, nudging him with his foot. It takes some doing, but he manages to get him awake. Jiron sets a quick pace, following the river north as they pass deeper into the forested hills. It’s not too much longer before they are able to see the sun glistening off of a large body of water through the trees ahead of them. It’s the lake that the mural back at the ruins had depicted.

It’s not nestled in among the mountains like they’d thought, but rather sits at their base. They can see how the foothills hug its southern shore and turn into mountains on its northern side. The lake itself is quite large and has a large island situated out in the middle of it. The island is wooded and looks deserted.

They turn and follow the shoreline east as the river coming out of the lake is too wide to cross to the west. After walking over a mile along the shoreline, Jiron points behind them.

Coming out of the woods where the river leaves the lake are dozens and dozens of soldiers. When they see them ahead on the shoreline, they begin moving in their direction.

James pauses for a second to watch them as they pour out of the forest. It looks like nearly a hundred men are behind them. “Dear god!” he exclaims as he watches them.

A whimper escapes Miko and Jiron says, “Move!”

Moving quickly, they leave the shore and enter the forest. “We’re going to have to do something,” he says to James. “We’ll never make it with all them behind us!”

“I know,” replies James as he works to keep his tired feet moving. His leg is on fire and feels as if it’s about ready to buckle. Somehow his leg continues to keep going as he keeps up with the hurried pace of the others.

As the hills become more pronounced, he begins to get an idea of how to deal with their pursuers. He keeps an eye out for a suitable spot for his plan, and when they come to where a ravine passes through between two hills, he says, “Let’s stop.”

“Why?” asks Miko.

“I intend to discourage any more pursuit,” he tells them.

“How?” Jiron asks.

“First of all…”

From where Miko lies at the crest of the hill where the ravine ends, he watches as the first of the men enter the ravine and make their way toward him. Getting his crossbow ready, he takes aim, and as they near the middle, he lets fly.

The bolt misses the lead man and strikes the ground in front of them. The line halts as they search for where the bolt originated from. While they’re doing this, the rest of the men behind them continue to enter the ravine, creating a tight packed crowd.

When enough of them have entered the ravine, Miko suddenly stands up and turns around as he races back over the hill. “I hope this works,” he mumbles to himself as he hears cries of the soldiers behind him when they see him running away.

Suddenly, he’s knocked off his feet by a deafening explosion behind as the ravine rocks with an enormous explosion. Glancing back, he sees a cloud of dust rising to the sky.

He moves around to where James said to go and meets up with him. He’s sitting on the ground, head cradled in his hands. “You okay?” Miko asks, worried.

James just shakes his head as he sits there.
Miko moves around to the hill where Jiron was suppose to be waiting and watching what happens in the ravine. He comes up behind him and asks, “Did it work?”

“Looks like it,” Jiron replies from where he’s lying on top of the hill looking down into the ravine.

When Miko crests the hill where Jiron lies, he can see the ravine is no more. The hills on either side have exploded outward, coming together and crushing all that had been between them. He looks to where Jiron points and can see maybe ten men who are hesitantly approaching what used to be the ravine. Only ten of the force behind them survived.

From the ravine, they can hear the cries of the soldiers who hadn’t died in the initial explosion. The ten move cautiously toward the ravine and when they realize nothing further will be happening, speed their approach as they move to rescue the survivors.

“Think they’ll continue after us?” Miko asks Jiron.

“Doubt it,” he says. “They’ll have all they can do just to get the survivors out of there.” Turning around he begins to head back to James and says to Miko, “Let’s go.”

Miko glances back at the men coming to the rescue and then follows Jiron down.

When James sees them coming, he says, “Well?”

“Looks like you got most of them,” Jiron replies. “Less than a dozen remain and they’ll be too busy helping their fellows to come after us.”

Shaking his head at all the death and destruction, he says, “Why can’t they just leave us alone?”

“They will now,” Miko says.

Saddened to have once more caused so many deaths, James sighs, “Alright, lets go.” He gets up and Miko comes to help him as he starts to waver a little bit. “Thanks,” he says once he regains his equilibrium. Limping, he has to lean on Miko to even walk, the pain in his leg is so bad.

Jiron angles them away from the scene of the explosion and they make their way back toward the lake shore. From there, they continue following it for several more hours until James states that he just can’t make it any further. Jiron moves ahead and returns shortly saying he’s found a spot along the shore they can spend the night.

As he brings them back to the camp site, he sees a small animal at the edge of the water. Stopping, he whispers, “James, can you take him down?”

Removing a slug from his belt, he leans on Miko to steady himself as he prepares to throw. When he throws the slug, his leg gives out and he loses his balance, falling to the ground. Despite falling, the slug flies true and strikes the animal, killing it.

“You got him!” Jiron hollers jubilantly as he moves over to the dead animal.

Miko helps James to his feet and then over to a tree where he aids him in sitting down. Once James is settled in, Miko sits down next to him and then passes out from exhaustion.

Bringing the animal over, Jiron says, “You just rest. I’ll gather some wood and we’ll have this cooked in no time.”

James just nods his head before resting it back against the tree. Closing his eyes, fatigue takes him and he quickly falls asleep.

The smell of roasting meat wakes him up. Glancing over to where Jiron is cooking the animal, he asks, “Do you think it’s risky to have a fire?”

“Maybe, but I’m not eating this raw,” he replies. “Besides, I really doubt if anyone will be coming after us so soon after the beating they took back there.”

“I hope you’re right,” he says.

They have a hard time waking Miko when dinner is ready. But once the mouthwatering aroma reaches him, he perks up and readily joins in.

James wishes for more than just meat to eat. He was never much into salads or vegetables when he was back home, but he sure misses them now. Looking around, he’s sure there are edible plants and roots out there somewhere, if he only knew what they looked like. Oh, well, at least he has the meat.

When they’re done eating, they toss the carcasses into the water and Miko is surprised when nothing comes and eats them. “Where are the little fish?” he asks.

“The water’s probably too cold for them,” explains James. “They most likely prefer the warmer water back in the swamp area.”

Miko just looks curiously out at the water and when still nothing happens, nods his head and realizes that James is probably right. Again.

James and Jiron decide to keep watch through the night, they don’t dare trust Miko to do it, not in his tired state. James decides to take the first watch since he’d already taken a short nap.
It was several hours into his watch when he first notices it. At first he thought it was just his imagination, it was so subtle and quiet. Then it became increasingly more pronounced. Singing. A woman’s voice, singing a quiet song.

He quickly realizes it’s coming from the direction of the lake. Pulling himself to a standing position, he looks out over the water. Barely perceptible in the moonlight, he’s able to make out a small boat coming toward their camp. A small figure is sitting in the middle of the boat, facing his way.

The singing continues as the boat approaches closer and James is able to see that it is indeed a woman sitting within the boat. James begins to feel the pricking which always indicates magic being used in the vicinity. Must be what’s powering the boat.

When the boat reaches the shore, he grabs it and pulls it further up onto the beach. The lady inside says, “Thank you,” as she gets up and steps out of the boat.

Standing only about four and a half feet tall, she walks over to James and stops several feet away. Her blond hair glistening in the moonlight, she looks James up and down.

“Hello,” James greets her.

“A good evening to you sir,” she replies.

“My name is James,” he tells her.

“You may call me, Lyria,” she says to him, giving him a small smile.

“Would you care to come and share our fire?” he asks.

Shaking her head negatively, she says, “No. I had come to offer you and your companions shelter and the hospitality of my home this night.”

Beyond all reason, he feels he can trust her. Something about her puts him readily at ease. “Where?” he asks.

She nods over to the island and says, “My home.”

Jiron suddenly sits up and sees him there talking with Lyria. “James?” he asks coming quickly to his feet.

Turning toward him, he says, “This is Lyria and she’s invited us to her home out on the island.”

“Why?” he asks not nearly as trusting as James seems to be.

“Because you are in need,” she tells him. “And I get so few visitors.”

“Are you afraid of being alone with three strangers all by yourself?” he asks her.

Laughing, she says, “No. I fear not that you will harm me.” She glances over to where Miko is sleeping and says, “If you will but wake up your friend there, we can be going.”

Jiron says, “James?” and then indicates with a nod of his head that he wants to talk with him away from her.

When James comes over, he says, “What?”

“What?” he asks.

“Can we trust her?” he says. “It seems odd for a woman to be all alone in these parts, wouldn’t you think?”

“I don’t get any ill feelings from her,” James says. “Besides, she’s magical in nature, possibly a magic user of some kind.”

“How can you tell?” he asks, and then says, “Oh, right.”

“She’s offered us food and shelter,” James tells him. “I say we take her up on it.”

“How?” he counters.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “I just feel like we can trust her.”

From the camp, they hear Miko cry out when he wakes up and sees her there standing near him.

Coming back over, they reassure him all is okay and make another round of introductions. When they tell him of her offer, he looks dubious at best.

“I’m going,” James says as he looks at the other two. “Who’s with me?”

Reluctantly, they agree to come and they all pile into the boat. Once they’re all situated, she begins her song again and the boat pulls itself off the beach and turns to head back toward the island.

Miko gasps at the boat moving all by itself, but then settles down when no one else seems to be upset by it. Her song is soothing and it seems to melt all their worry and cares away.
The boat makes the crossing in quick time and they can soon make out a wooden cabin on the island, sitting a couple hundred feet back from the water's edge. A soft light shines out of the window by the front door. Down at the edge of the water lies a dock of sorts and the boat is heading straight for it.

Jiron takes the rope lying in the bottom of the boat, and when they near the dock, jumps out and secures the boat.

He holds out his hand to Lyria who takes it as she steps out of the boat, and receives a smile of gratitude. Then he helps James out of the boat, whose leg makes it difficult for him. Miko hops out once James is securely on the dock and then they follow her as she leads them up toward the house. Along the way she says, “This is my home, you are welcome to stay here as long as you like.”

Coming to the front door, she opens it and precedes them inside. A small house, with but two rooms, the main front room and a back bedroom separated by a door. She goes over to the fireplace and coaxes the remaining coals there to life, quickly getting a fair sized blaze.

James and the rest take seats at the table while she’s getting the fire going.

“Why live so far away from everyone?” Miko asks once she’s done with the fire.

“I like solitude,” she tells him as she comes over and takes a seat at the table. “It provides me with quiet for thinking and reflection. I do get some visitors, but none for some time now.”

“How did you know we were there?” he asks.

James gives him an annoying look for asking so many questions.

She sees his look to Miko and says, “I don’t mind, really. After all, how are we to learn if we don’t ask?”

Turning back to Miko, she says, “I saw your fire.”

“Do you invite everyone to your home who camps on the shores of your lake?” Jiron asks.

“Good heavens, no,” she says to him with a laugh. She gives them each a searching look before continuing, “Actually, I’ve been waiting for someone.”

A chill runs down James’ back, “Waiting?”

She turns her attention to him and says, “Yes.”

“For whom?” Jiron asks her.

“For he who bears the Star,” she tells him.

James looks to Miko and Jiron who both give him a startled glance as well. He reaches into his shirt and pulls out the Star of Morcyth. Holding it up, he shows it to her.

“I thought as much,” she says as she nods her head. “After I felt the power of the spell that had been used earlier, I thought it might be you.”

“And that’s why you invited us here?” Miko asks.

“A month ago, I had a dream that a star had fallen from the sky and landed on the shore,” she explains. “In my dream I had gone and picked it up.” Laughing, she says, “That’s more or less how it went.”

“What else did you dream?” James asks, almost holding his breath.

“That when the star left, it would be bigger than when it had arrived,” she replies.

“What does that mean?” Miko asks.

She shrugs but doesn’t answer the question. Getting up, she says, “Please, make yourselves comfortable. You may rest here in safety, naught will disturb you.” She gestures to a corner of the room where several bedrolls and blankets are neatly stacked.

“Thank you,” James says, coming to his feet as well.

“You’re welcome,” she says. She begins to move to the other room when she pauses and turns around, saying, “Until morning.”

“Good night,” Miko says as he goes over to where the bedrolls are and grabs one. He unrolls his by the fire and lies down. Taking several of the blankets, he settles down and quickly falls asleep.

The others get theirs as well. From the other room, they can hear her gentle singing coming through the door, lulling them. Unable to fight off exhaustion any longer, they all fall asleep.
James wakes during the night and can hear her soft singing coming from outside. Getting up quietly so as not to disturb the others, he goes to the window and sees Lyria outside sitting on an old tree stump. His eyes open in amazement when he sees little creatures, three altogether and no more than a foot tall, sitting before her. They seem to sway to the music as she sings.

They remind James of garden gnomes his grandmother used to have in her flower bed. These were dressed nothing like them, but the height and general resemblance is close.

He moves to the door and opens it as he walks out. As soon as the door begins to open, the singing stops and when he is again able to see her, the little creatures are gone.

She turns her head to look at him and flashes him a slight smile. “Hello James,” she says. Coming over to her, he looks around to try to see the little creatures but they’re no where to be found. “Where are they?”

“Are they?” he asks her as he comes to sit by her.
“Spirits of the earth,” she explains. “You’re fortunate, very few people have ever seen them.”
“How can I get them to come out?” he asks her, still looking about.
“If they want to, they will,” she replies. “And they rarely want to.”
“They come out to you,” he says.
She gives him that smile again and says, “I’ve been here a long time, they’ve learned to trust me. I think they like my singing too.”
“So do I,” he says before he even realizes it. Blushing, he turns his head away and looks out over the lake.
“Thank you,” she tells him and then reaches out and pats him on the arm.
“It’s peaceful here,” he observes when he at last has found his voice.
“Yes, it’s the reason I’m here,” she says. Then she continues, “Partly, anyway.”
“Partly?” he asks.
“We needn’t go into that now,” she tells him.

They sit there for awhile, enjoying the tranquility of the night when he says, “Have you had any other dreams foretelling the future? Like the star falling?”
“Oh, many,” she says. “Dreams are very important if you just know how to interpret them.”
“Do gods ever talk to you?” he asks.
“No, I’ve never known them to talk to anyone but their priests,” she tells him. “And even they don’t always understand what they’re trying to say.”
“I think I have,” he suddenly admits.
“Oh?” she says. “And what makes you believe that?”
“Ever since coming here,” he says trying to avoid mentioning where he’d really come from, “there’s been this little creature, about four and half feet tall. He appears and disappears in unusual fashions.”
“And?” she asks, prompting him to continue.
“And, well, he gave me the Star of Morcyth,” he explains. “Could he be Morcyth? He denies it though.”
Shaking her head, she says, “I doubt it. Every god has minions who deal with the mortal world. This creature may be one of Morcyth’s on this world.”
“But he doesn’t act like any I’ve heard of before,” he tells her. When she glances at him, he continues, “I mean, he takes me to get pizza, that’s a food where I come from. And then he takes me to a place of fun and amusement I used to visit as a child. It all seems rather pointless.”
“I doubt if it is pointless,” she says. “The gods and their minions never give straightforward directions to those from whom they want something. But whatever he’s been doing, there’s a meaning behind it. Usually the one who’s experiencing it will understand at the appointed time.”
“But why wouldn’t they just come out and say it?” he asks.
“I don’t know,” she admits. “But that is the way they work, mostly. What you need to do is think hard about what transpired during each visitation and see if anything has a meaning other than what happened.”
“Take my dream about the falling star,” she says. “Did it mean a star actually fell? No, it was pertaining to you coming here. Why you were to come here remains unclear, but here you are. The gods see far into the future, or rather paths that the future may follow.”
“Paths?” he asks.
“Yes,” she replies. “Let me explain. Say I wanted you to go from here to my house. If I asked you to, you would turn and go straight there. But if I saw that the result of that would be for you to fall and hurt yourself, then I may not tell you to go there, but arrange, through another series of events for you to make it there by another path. A series of events that would enable you to go without hurting yourself. Does that help you understand?”
Nodding his head, he says, “I think so.”
“Good,” she says. “Now, you should try to go back to sleep if you can.”
“Alright,” he says, yawning. “I am getting tired again. Will you be alright here alone?”
Smiling at him, she nods and says, “I’ll be fine, but thank you for your concern.”

James gets up and walks back into the house where he pauses by the window again as she begins her song once more. He looks out and sees the three little creatures once again standing around her in rapt attention.

He goes over to his bedroll and lies down, letting the sound of her voice lull him to sleep.

When he wakes up in the morning, he sees Jiron sitting at the table holding a necklace of beads and hair. As he gets up, Jiron turns and waves him over to the table. “Here,” he says as he hands him a note that was lying on the table. Taking the note, he reads what’s written on it:

James,

Take this necklace, it will prove useful in the days ahead,

Lyria

He looks around and Jiron says, “She’s not here. I looked for her but she’s nowhere on the island. The boat’s still here though.”

Over on a side table is stacked a bunch of fruit and roots, “I guess we’re suppose to take those with us?” he assumes. The idea of having something more than meat makes his mouth water.

“It looks that way,” Jiron replies. “They weren’t there last night.” And then he indicates where three jackets and a tunic are lying on another small stand against the wall.

James examines the necklace for a moment, a leather string with beads and a four inch length of braided hair hanging from the middle. “Wonder what this is for?” he asks.

Shrugging, Jiron says, “A charm perhaps?”

“I don’t think so,” replies James. “There’s no magic to it.” He looks at it for a moment more before putting it into his belt pouch. Looking over to Miko who’s still sleeping, he says, “Guess we better wake him and get going.”

Jiron gets up and goes over, nudging him with his foot.

Snapping awake, Miko sits up and looks around, at first disoriented. Then he sees the stacked food on the side table and gets up as he makes his way over to them. “Is this for us?” he asks, turning slightly toward James.

“We think so,” he replies.

Taking several of the fruits and a couple roots, he brings them over to the table and commences eating. He suddenly looks around and asks, “Where is she?”

“Don’t know,” Jiron tells him. “She was gone when I woke up.”

“Too bad,” he says through a mouth full of fruit. “I kind of liked her.” Then he notices the tunic and jackets. Going over to them, he takes the tunic and slips it over his head glad to have one on again. He’s been bare-chested ever since his old one had been used for James’ leg. “A perfect fit,” he announces. Then he takes one of the jackets and puts it on as well. When he finds it’s too big, he looks through the other two until he comes across one that will fit him. He brings the others over to the table and hands them to Jiron and James.

The others try on the jackets and find them to be good fits as well. Then they begin eating the fruit and roots and when they’re done, clean up their mess leaving the place as neat as they found it. They find a backpack of sorts sitting near the fruit. Placing the fruit inside, James shoulders it as they head outside where the boat is still tied to the dock.

“He’s leaving without saying goodbye,” Miko says as he climbs into the boat.

“She understands, I’m sure,” James assures him.

“I hope so, she sure was nice,” he says.

Allowing the others to get in first, Jiron then unties the boat from the dock before jumping in. Pushing themselves away from the dock, they begin drifting out onto the lake. Jiron takes the oars and begins to row across the lake to the north. The mountains on the northern shore loom large above them.

They see where a river comes out of the mountains and flows into the lake. Deciding that following the river up into the mountains would be the best idea, Jiron aims the boat so they’ll land several feet from where it enters the lake.

Grounding the boat upon the shore, they get out and Jiron looks at the boat and asks, “How is she going to get it back?”
“I’m sure she’ll have little problem with that,” James assures him.

“Hmmmm,” mutters Jiron.

As they begin making their way along the river into the mountains, they’re immediately grateful for the warm jackets that Lyria had supplied them. The air coming down off the mountains is quite cold in the early morning hours. James wonders how she could have gotten the jackets so fast and in the right sizes. Or did she know more than she let on when they talked the night before? Regardless, they have them now.

They make decent time as they follow the river, the land adjacent to it is not very overgrown with bushes and allows them to walk with little obstructions. Two hours after they left the lake, they come to where the river cascades down a series of waterfalls where the mountain rises abruptly ahead of them.

Jiron goes first as he begins to ascend the side of the mountain, using the bushes and trees growing along its face for handholds and support.

Miko goes next with James bringing up the rear, his leg feeling much better today after the rest of the night before. The hillside is not seriously steep and they are able to make it up with minimal problems. At the top, they discover the waterfall to be the outflow of another small lake. Several tributaries bring water to it from the surrounding mountains. One small waterfall cascades down one side of the mountain, falling into the lake as well.

They skirt around the lake and jump across several small tributaries as they make their way to a larger one at the far side. It’s much smaller than the river they followed after disembarking from the boat.

With Jiron still leading the way away from the small lake, they continue to follow alongside the stream as it meanders its way further up into the mountains. They pause around noon for a quick meal, the sun now high overhead.

Miko has removed his jacket, the tunic giving him enough warmth in the midday sun. “Does anyone know where we’re going?” he asks while eating some fruit.

“North,” James tells him. “I doubt if anyone will be able to find us up here in the mountains.”

“Let’s hope not,” Jiron says. “If we follow the mountains, and stay away from the roads, we may be able to make it a fair ways before trouble finds us again.”

Finishing their meal, they resume following the stream. Miko’s arms get tired from carrying the crossbow but he just grits his teeth and continues on. No matter how tired he gets from carrying it, he’s not about to lose it. If trouble happens, he wants to be more help than he was last time.

The sword at his waist, though, that’s another matter. It isn’t long before he unhooks the belt and lets it fall to the ground. As he walks away from it, Jiron says, “You sure you want to do that?”

“I’m no good with it anyway,” he explains. “If I use it in a fight, I probably would end up killing myself.” He hefts the crossbow and continues, “I’ll stick with this for now.”

Jiron nods and turns his attention back to trying to find the best path along the stream. The trees here have grown closer together and the way through is not readily evident. Even though he’s not a woodsman, he seems to be able to make due and find the way.

They continue on for the rest of the day, the stream they’ve been following slowly dwindling down to nothing. When the sun begins its descent toward the horizon, they make camp and spend some time accumulating enough wood to last through the night. It’s going to be getting really cold when it gets dark and they need to be prepared.

James brings down a large animal, something like a deer, and they slice it up. They cook most of it in order to be able to carry some of it with them the next day. This going on roots and fruit is fine for a while, but a man needs meat to keep up his strength.

The following morning, they can see the mountains still continuing to rise to the north. Miko dreads more of the climbing and the cold but does his best to keep his mood up. He doesn’t want to become a burden for the others. If the truth be known, he feels he’s actually doing better than James who seems to be really struggling with it, what with his leg and all.

This day is more of the same as yesterday, trying to find a way through the mountains while still maintaining a northerly direction. Once they had to backtrack almost two hours when Jiron had steered them into a box canyon. They debated whether to attempt to scale the walls of the canyon or backtrack, but soon realized they were ill equipped for such a feat and wouldn’t be unable to make it without serious injury.

Their mood was somber as they had to retrace land they’d thought was already behind them. Once out of the box canyon, they pick up what James calls a game trail and the going becomes somewhat easier for a mile or so before the trail disappears again.

That night, they’re fortunate to find a cave they can use for shelter. Building a roaring fire to keep the cold at bay, they rest and relax while the carcass of a small animal roasts on the fire. Miko gets credit for this one. He spotted it while out collecting firewood and brought it down with the crossbow. To everyone’s surprise, as well as his own, he hit it. He was forced chase it down since it hadn’t been killed outright.
He definitely felt part of the group when he brought it back to camp and got the congratulations from everyone.
Once dinner is over, they set up a schedule for watches and Miko takes the first one while the other two sleep.
The night passes quietly.

After another two days of trudging through the mountains, everyone has toughened up and the arduous trek is no longer so bad. Even Miko has stopped complaining as his muscles toughen up and James’ leg is no longer hurting as badly, just the occasional throbbing.
When darkness begins to fall on the fifth day since leaving the lake area, they crest a ridge and look down on a small valley nestled between two peaks. It levels out for a while before rising on the other side.
“Good place to spend the night,” James says.
Jiron nods his head and they begin making their way down to the bottom. As the light fades into twilight, they reach the floor of the little valley and are surprised when they come across a fire ring sitting in the middle of a clearing.
“Whoever it was, they haven’t been here for quite some time,” James assures him. “Probably hunters use this place in the winter.”
Turning to Miko he says, “Go get us some food master hunter.”
Taking his crossbow, Miko replies, “Sure thing.” Then he moves quietly out into the woods looking for dinner.
“Think he’ll get anything?” James asks him.
Shrugging, Jiron replies, “He has the last two out of three times. He seems to be getting better with it, though.”
“True,” he agrees.
They get the fire going and have lots of wood stockpiled for the night when they hear Miko crashing through the forest toward them.
James smiles at Jiron and says, “He’s not going to find anything if he keeps making all that noise.”
Suddenly, Miko bursts out of the trees and runs into camp. “James!” he cries out.
Jiron is about to make a comment about the ‘great hunter’, when out of the brush behind Miko emerges a large bear-like creature. A crossbow bolt is sticking out of its hindquarters. When it sees them, it lets out with a roar and charges straight for them.
Jiron jumps to his feet, knives in hand as the bear approaches. Miko runs past them and then comes to a halt at the other side of the camp. He turns and watches James and Jiron as they confront the beast.
James lets out with a blast of energy that strikes the creature in the side. It doesn’t even slow the creature, it just seems to make it madder.
Jiron steps backward, not wanting to close with it. His knives would be ineffective against such a brute.

**Crumph!**
The ground just in front of it erupts and throws it off its stride. A slug flies from James’ hand and hits it in the side, lodging against a bone. **Damn! This thing is tough!**
Creating his orb, he tosses it in front of the beast and causes it to explode in blinding light.
The creature rears back, crying out in fear from all the unexpected attacks and then runs off into the woods. They can hear its cries as it continues to move further away.
As one, they turn to Miko who says, “I didn’t even see it. I swear!” He looks back and forth between them and then continues, “I was aiming for a small rabbit. When I fired, it moved and the bolt flew past and into some bushes. I guess it was sitting on the other side of the bushes and got hit. It sat up and roared. Then it saw me there and started to chase me!”
They both continue to give him stern glares when suddenly, James starts chuckling. Then Jiron joins in until they’re both laughing.
“IT’s not funny!” Miko yells. “I could have died!”
Which only makes them laugh all the harder. When they finally settle down, Miko is quite put out by them and sits down in a huff. “You guys don’t care,” he says, dejected.
Sobering up, James goes over to him and says, “Of course we care, but the whole situation was just too funny.”
He can’t help himself as he breaks into another smile. “Don’t feel bad.”
“It’s just that I didn’t get anything for dinner,” he tells him.
“That’s okay, we still have plenty of meat from last night,” he assures him. “And I think there are still some fruit and roots from Lyria’s as well.”
When he sees they’re not really disappointed with him, he begins to smile a little.
They break out their rations and sit around the fire as they eat their dinner. Here in the mountains, when night
falls, it falls fast. It’s not long until they’re in full night with only the stars and the almost full moon overhead to give light. They keep the fire going through the night in order to keep warm. Here in the mountains, it gets very cold when the sun goes down.
Early the next morning as they are getting ready to continue on their way, James looks to the east and sees a band of horsemen coming through a gap in the ridge. “Jiron!” he exclaims, pointing over to them.

“Let’s move!” Jiron hollers as they quickly run to the west, hoping to avoid detection. But that hope is short lived when they hear a horn, blaring. They glance back toward the horsemen and see them moving quickly in their direction, one of the riders is pointing to them.

Running through the trees as best they can, James tries to find a place to defend as he knows escape is no longer an option. They come to a steep side of the cliff where they can put their backs to as they face the oncoming horsemen.

The horn blares again and the riders come into view as they make their way through the trees before them. These horsemen aren’t part of the Empire’s forces, they wear leathers and most have short curved bows. Several of the bowmen have arrows knocked and aimed as they use their knees to steer their steeds.

“James!” Miko cries out. “What are you waiting for?”

The horsemen, though targeting them with bows, don’t feel necessarily evil or dangerous. So he holds back and waits to see what they’ll do.

At the horsemen’s approach, Jiron draws his knives and Miko brings up his crossbow. James puts his hand on the crossbow and lowers it back down. He steps forward, holds his hand up and says, “Greetings.”

Two of the horsemen exchange looks and one of them replies, “You are trespassing in Windrider territory.”

“Our apologies,” James says with sincerity. “We did not know that this area belonged to anyone.”

“None are allowed here,” the rider explains. “You must turn around and go back!”

“James!” Miko exclaims.

“Shut up!” he says to him. Turning his attention back to the rider he says, “There must be some way that we could be allowed to continue.”

“There is none,” the rider asserts. He nods over to the ridge to the north and says, “Had you crossed over, your lives would’ve been forfeit. But you have not yet crossed the sacred boundary, so I will let you live.” He pauses for a moment and then adds, “If you leave, now.”

Suddenly, he feels Jiron’s hand on his arm as he whispers, “James, look at their tunics.”

“What about them?” he whispers back.

“The beadwork,” he explains. “It’s the same as on that necklace Lyria gave you.”

James looks closer and he slowly nods his head as he sees the same pattern of shapes and colors as is on the necklace.

He begins to reach into his pouch for it when the archers begin to draw back their arrows at his movement. He stops and says, “I have something I wish to show you, if I may?”

Nodding, the rider holds up his hand and the archers relax somewhat but still have their bows at the ready.

He reaches in and pulls out the necklace, holding it out to the rider.

The rider gasps and takes it from him as several of the others gather around to examine it, the archers lower their bows a little bit more. After several moments of exchanging words in their language, the rider turns to James and asks, “Where did you get this?”

“It was given to us some time ago by a lady,” he explains.

“What lady?” he asks, an odd expression forming on his face.

“She called herself Lyria and she lived on an island in the middle of a lake,” he replies. “The lake sits at the southern edge of these mountains.”

His explanation generates more intense discussion among the assembled riders. The bowmen continue to keep their bows ready, but are no longer aiming them at James and the others.

When the conversation ends, the rider turns back to them and says, “We will take you to our camp.” Then he says something to the bowmen who put their bows away. They put the unused arrow in a quiver slung across their backs and then sling the bow alongside it.

The rider turns his attention back to James and says, “My name is Therin, sub-chief of the Windrider Clan.”

“I’m James,” he replies. Motioning to his companions, he continues, “And this is Jiron and Miko.”
“So we will be allowed to travel in your territory?” Miko blurts out.

“The lady has given you our token,” he says. “So you will not be immediately turned away. But whether you are allowed to live is up to our chief.”

“Live?” James asks.

He gestures to the southern ridge and says, “Our camp lies beyond the ridge. If all is as you claim, you have nothing to fear. If not, you’ll not live the day.” He speaks to one of the horsemen and he quickly rides off toward the southern ridge.

Turning his attention back to James, he says, “Now, if you’ll all mount behind one of my riders, we’ll be on our way.”

“It’s okay,” James assures Jiron and Miko. “I think we’ll be alright.”

As Miko is mounting behind a rider, he says, “I sure hope so.”

Once they are mounted, Therin leads them toward the southern ridge. It takes them a half hour to reach it and when they crest the top, James hears a gasp from Miko. Looking out beyond the ridge, he sees a vast circular valley, surrounded on all sides by mountains. James is reminded of a meteor crater, one must have hit here some time far in the past.

The valley is filled with tents and horses. Thousands of horses run free within the valley. “This is where the Clans gather each year to ready the tribute to the Empire,” Therin tells him as he rides along side of him.

“Tribute?” James asks.

“Of horses and gold,” he explains.

“How many clans are there?” he asks.

“Ten,” he replies. “But four have yet to put in an appearance. The Windrider Clan claims the gathering area as part of our territory, but during this time, all the clans are allowed to come.”

“I take it you don’t all get along?” James asks.

Shaking his head, he says, “No, not all. Most work together for mutual benefit, to make the clans strong.”

As they continue to work their way down the side of the valley toward the Gathering, James looks out over the tents, now able to discern the different patterns of the various clans, each clan having its own unique pattern of color and shapes. The tents, which at first looked to be randomly scattered about, can now be seen as being grouped according to each clan.

Near the center of the gathering, James can see tents bearing the pattern of the Windrider Clan. It’s by far the largest group of tents in the valley, probably due to the fact it’s their territory.

When they reach the edge of the gathering, others begin to notice them riding behind the clansmen and the word of their arrival begins to spread. A crowd gathers around them as they progress toward the Windrider tents.

Therin exchanges words with some as they ride but most are simply following along after to see what’s going on. Upon nearing the Windrider tents, James observes a clansman enter the largest tent and after a few moments, an aged man exits. Though he’s seen a few years, he still has strength about him and a commanding look.


Coming to a halt in front of his father, Therin dismounts and greets him with a hug. He then begins talking to him in their language.

James can hear their names being said during the course of the conversation. At one point, he holds up the token Lyria had given him and the Chief’s eyes widen and several in the crowd begin muttering.

Therin turns toward them and says, “My father would like to meet the friends of the Lake Lady.”

Dismounting, James and the others come forward. Giving him a bow, he says, “Greetings, Chief of the Windriders.” Miko and Jiron both bow just like they saw James do.

“Greetings,” the Chief says. “Never has the Lady given our token to another. This is indeed a strange occurrence, though what to do with you remains unclear. Outsiders are not allowed here, yet you bear the favor of the Lady.”

“Therin,” he says to his son, “find them a place to stay.” Turning back to James, he says, “When the moon is full, the meeting of the clan chiefs will take place. At that time, we shall decide what to do with you. Until then, you can move freely among us.”

As if that’s that, he turns his back upon them and returns within the tent from which he’d emerged.

Therin returns Lyria’s token to James and says, “That will be tomorrow night.” He points off to the east and says, “The Black Tails have just arrived. By tomorrow night, all the clans should be here.”

He leads them away from his father’s tent over to a smaller one set up a dozen yards away. Opening the flap, he says, “You may use this tent while you’re among us.” Once they’ve entered, he follows them in and closes the flap.

“What do you think they’ll do with us?” James asks him.

Shrugging, he says, “The laws are clear about outsiders. To be in the Valley of the Gathering is to die. But yet
you bear the token of the Lady and that is something they must strongly consider. They will not wish to anger the Lady.”

“Why?” Miko asks him.

“She is beloved by all,” he explains. “Many have been the times when she’s appeared and helped us in our times of need. She even saved my father’s life once when he’d been bitten by a snake. We all had begun the final rites but she appeared, gave him some medicine and ministered to him. I needn’t tell you how happy we were when he again walked out of his tent.”

“No, I don’t think death will be your fate,” he says. “What it may be, I couldn’t even begin to guess.”

“I suppose being here for a day wouldn’t be that bad,” Jiron says as he lies down on a blanket.

“If you wish to remain in this tent,” he tells them, “you may. It might be the best thing to do. Some of our warriors are brash and easily offended. It wouldn’t do for trouble to happen before the chiefs have a chance to come to a decision. If you should leave your tent, try to stay within the Windrider’s camp, they all know you are under our protection until the meeting of the chiefs.”

James says, “Alright.”

He lifts the tent flap and leaves.

When the flap shuts closed, Jiron says, “Think they’ll allow us to leave?”

Shrugging, James says, “I don’t know. Thank goodness Lyria had given us that token or there’d be a war going on right now.”

“There still may be one if they decide against us,” observes Jiron.

“Let’s hope not,” Miko says from where he’s stretched out on one of the blankets. “We have at least till tomorrow night before anything will be decided.”

“True,” agrees James.

From outside the tent, a sudden outcry erupts. James glances to the others and says, “I’m going to go see what’s happening.”

The other two get up and join him as he goes outside the tent. The warriors are talking amongst themselves and James can see they’re angered about something.

Seeing Therin talking to several warriors who are obviously distraught, he goes over toward him. Therin glances at him as he approaches and James asks, “What’s going on?”

Pointing to the north, he says, “The Grey Wolf Clan has just arrived.”

James looks and sees a large body of horsemen coming over the ridge. Along with them is a herd of horses, most likely part of the tribute. “And why is that causing such a problem?”

“That they’re here, none,” he explains. “It’s that they’ve brought twice the number of warriors as is agreed upon.”

“And that’s bad?” he asks.

“It’s an insult!” Therin says with anger. “To bring so many here, within our territory, outrageous!”

His father exits the tent and looks in anger at the Grey Wolf Clan approaching the assembled tents. Warriors of the various clans stop what they’re doing and watch their approach. James glances to his father and can tell he’s seething within. When he looks back to the approaching riders, he can see there’s someone else with them, someone who’s obviously not a clansman. Riding at the head of the riders is a man in armor and a chill runs down James’ spine when he sees him. A memory comes to him of a storm tossed sea and a man in armor wielding magic.

“Is that…?” Miko begins.

“I think it is,” James replies. “If it is the one from the boat, how did he know we were here?”

“They must get out of here!” he whispers to James.

James shakes his head, “Therin’s father has given us leave to be here, I don’t think he’s one to go back on his word for an outsider.”

“Maybe we should go back into our tent, then?” Jiron suggests. “We wouldn’t want him to see us.”

Nodding, James says, “That might be a good idea.” Yearning to know what is going to happen, he reluctantly goes back to their tent with the others. As he pauses at the entrance, he looks back to Therin and his father. Many of the Windrider warriors have gathered around them as they move to intercept the Grey Wolf Clan. He can tell none of the warriors are very happy about the situation and all are bearing weapons of one sort or another. Then he goes into the tent and closes the flap.

They sit there, anticipating hearing the sounds of battle erupt around them. But other than raised voices and conversations of warriors going by, nothing happens. They wait anxiously for almost an hour before Therin opens the flap and enters.

“What happened?” James asks as he comes in.
“My father was all for driving them out when several of the other clan chiefs warned him about violating the Pact of the Gathering,” he tells them.

“Pact?” Jiron asks.

“Yes, it’s what keeps the peace during the Gathering while the tribute is being brought together,” he explains.

“The highest law of the Pact states that no blood shall be shed during this time. Those that do are sentenced to death.”

“Kind of harsh,” says Miko.

Turning to him, he says, “Maybe, but it’s kept the peace this long.” Then to James he continues, “If a clan as a whole should violate it, as we were about to do, then all the others would fall upon it.”

“So what are you going to do?” asks James.

“Endure the insult,” he says, seething with pent up anger. “But when the Gathering is dissolved, then we shall have our retribution.”

Just then, the tent flap opens and several warriors come in with food and drink for them. They place them on a rug lying in the center of the tent before turning to leave. Once they’re gone, Therin says, “Since I was the one who brought you to the Gathering, it has fallen to me to see that you are treated well.”

“Thank you,” James says appreciatively.

“There is another thing I must tell you,” he says.

“The armored man with the Grey Wolf Clan?” asks Jiron.

A little surprised, he replies, “Yes.” He takes his seat around the food, as do the others and then grabs a piece of meat as he begins eating. “He wants you, and wants you bad,” he tells them.

“Why?” asks James.

“He didn’t say, just that he’s here for you and we must give you over,” he explains.

“Are you?” Miko asks, worried.

Shaking his head, he says, “No, you bear the Token of the Lady and we respect her more than we fear him.”

“Why would you fear him?” Jiron asks. “You are many yet he is one?”

“You don’t lightly anger a warrior priest of Dmon-Li,” he tells them. “They have fell magic and much influence with the Empire.”

“So what’s to stop him from just coming here and taking us?” asks James.

“You are under our protection,” he says. “And if he broke the Pact, then all would fall upon him. We also would no longer send the tribute, for he’d have broken the peace the tribute guarantees. So he must tread carefully if he doesn’t wish to start a war the Empire can ill afford.”

“I see,” James says.

“Is that why he’s in with the Grey Wolf Clan?” Jiron asks.

“They’ve long been the dark ones among us,” he replies. “The fact that he’s here and that they’ve brought so many with them cannot bode well. They are our sworn enemies, but have allies among the other clans so we dare not do anything outright against them.”

“So, what are we to do?” James asks.

“As before, wait for the council,” he tells him. “If the council should decide against you, you most likely will be handed over to him instead of killed. They would see that as being one and the same thing. If they find for you, you would be allowed to leave but once you left our territory you would no longer be under our protection.”

“So he could come after and kill us?” Jiron asks.

Shaking his head, Therin replies, “No, not here or that would be violating the Pact. But once out of the valley and in the plains below, he could. The Pact only covers the land within this valley.”

“What can you tell us about these warrior priests?” James asks.

“Not much more than what’s been handed down from generation to generation,” he tells them. “Never has one been among us, but they’re believed to be great in battle and to wield the magic of their god, Dmon-Li. They know no fear and the power of their god helps them to heal quickly from wounds. It’s even said to bring them back from the dead.”

“Great,” James says as he looks to Jiron and Miko. Miko stares back at him with a worried expression. Then he turns his attention back to Therin and says, “But he won’t do anything until we either leave, or the council gives him permission?”

“That’s right,” agrees Therin. Finishing up his last piece of meat, he stands up and makes to leave. “You might wish to remain in here until the council, it would cause fewer problems,” he says and then opens the flap and leaves.

A few moments after he leaves, Jiron says, “Maybe we should try and sneak out of here.”

“I doubt if we’d make it very far,” says James. “We’d stick out like a sore thumb if we tried. They’d quickly realize what we’re doing and move to stop us.”
“Why is this priest even after us?” Miko asks.
“Therin said they have influence within the Empire,” explains James. “Perhaps we’ve irritated them enough to bring out the big guns.”
“Big guns?” Jiron asks.
“Sorry,” James apologizes. “I mean, what they’ve thrown at us so far we’ve been able to handle, so it would stand to reason that they’d send in stronger, more deadly adversaries. Those better able to defend against or counter the magic I use.”
“I suppose,” Miko says.
Suddenly, James begins to feel the prickling of magic being used and he signals everyone to be quiet. “Magic is near,” he whispers to them.
They both quiet down, they understand what that has to mean. The warrior priest is near.
A shadow falls across their tent, one bulky with armor. The prickling sensation increases as the shadow pauses at the entrance to their tent. They hold their breath, Jiron gets his knives ready and James takes out a small rock he’d acquired earlier. The shadow’s arm reaches for the tent flap but then several warriors approach and the shadow draws back its arm and returns the way it had come.
They wait for several minutes until the prickling sensation disappears and James says, “I think he’s gone.”
“He almost got in here!” Miko exclaims.
“But he didn’t,” James reassures him. “So try to relax, being edgy won’t help the situation.”
The tent flap opens and Therin walks in. “The last clan has arrived earlier than expected and the council will be beginning later this evening rather than tomorrow. Due primarily to the fact of the warrior priest being here among us. They want the situation with him resolved as soon as possible.” He looks directly at James and says, “They’ll probably want to see the Token and you, the others need to stay here.”
“Should I go now?” he asks.
Shaking his head, Therin says, “No, there’s going to be a banquet first and after that, I’ll come to get you.”
“Alright,” says James.
“Try to get some rest if you can,” Therin tells him. “Sometimes the councils can go till morning. Is there anything else you require?”
“No, you’ve been most generous,” he replies.
Nodding his head, he says, “Good.” He then turns and again lifts the flap as he leaves.
James lies down on a blanket and tells the others, “I better try to get some sleep before the council.”
“Alright, James,” Jiron says. “We’ll keep watch while you do.”
He closes his eyes but sleep is hard to come as he keeps thinking about the warrior priest and how they’re going to get out of here. Eventually though, he does manage to fall asleep.
Later, after the sun goes down, he wakes up when their dinner is brought. Feeling much refreshed, he eats with a hearty appetite. They have a fire going in the center of the tent, the smoke escaping through a gap in the top.
An hour after they’ve finished eating, Therin enters and says, “It’s time for the council.”
James gets up and follows him out of the tent. “Good luck!” Miko says to him before he leaves.
Chapter Eleven

Therin takes him to the large tent in the center of the Windrider camp. Many warriors from the different clans stand around outside the tent. You can tell the different factions of the clans by who stands near whom. As they approach, two Windrider clansmen standing guard by the tent flaps each takes a side and swings them open. Therin precedes him through the opening and into the council tent.

Many braziers are situated around the tent, giving light to the proceedings. James sees the ten members of the council sitting in a semi circle on the ground. A fire burns within a ring of stones before them. His eyes widen slightly when he begins to feel the prickling sensation. Looking around, he sees the warrior priest sitting beside the Chief of the Grey Wolf Clan.

"Bring him forward," Therin’s father says once they’ve entered.

Therin gestures for him to follow and they walk forward until they’re standing before the assembled chiefs. He sees Therin give the council a bow, so he follows suit.

"Here is James, the bearer of the Token from the Lake Lady," he announces to them. Turning to James, he says, "Show them the Token."

James opens his pouch and brings it out, holding the Token up so all can see. He shows it first to the chief on the right then slowly moves it around to the chief on the left so all are able to see it clearly.

"How do we know this came from the Lady?" asks the Grey Wolf Chief.

"Tell them," Therin says to James.

James then relates how they were camped on the shore and the manner in which she came to them. How she had brought them to her home and fed them. Then he speaks of finding the Token the next morning. Once he’s done explaining how he’d come to be in possession of it, Therin takes the Token from him and hands it to his father. After examining it, he hands it to the chief sitting next to him.

As it passes from one chief to the next, James stands there under their eyes. The eyes of the warrior priest never leave him and he can feel nothing but malice coming from him. Twice he feels the prickling increase momentarily as the warrior priest engages in magic, but he’s unable to tell just what he’s doing.

When all the chiefs have finished with their examination of the Token, Therin’s father asks, “Is there still any who doubts that this came from the Lady?”

All the chiefs shake their heads and voice their agreement that it did indeed come from the Lady. The Grey Wolf Chief seems to almost deny it, but with all in opposition to him, he concedes.

“So, now what to do with him and his companions,” he says. Gesturing to the warrior priest, he says, “Abula-Mazki here has laid claim to them.”

Standing up, the warrior priest says, “They are criminals of the Empire. They’ve laid waste to cities and have killed hundreds of its citizens. They have moved through the Empire like a plague, killing and destroying as they go. In the name of justice, I demand them!”

They turn their eyes to James who begins to sweat. What he’d just said is basically true, just not exactly in that context. He’s about to say something when Therin says, “But would the Lady have given men such as he just described her Token?” He looks around at the assembled Chiefs. “We all know her to be good and kind, a friend in need who has never harmed a soul. It doesn’t stand to reason that she would do such a thing as give her Token to such.”

James is relieved to see more than a few of the chiefs nod their heads at his words.

Then Abula-Mazki says, “They belong by rights to the Empire for all that they’ve done. You cannot deny the Empire in this!” He glares defiantly at the assembled chiefs as if daring any of them to oppose him.

Therin’s father stands up and turns to face him, “According to the Treaty our forefathers signed with the Empire, we can.” Face to face now with the burning intensity of the warrior priest’s anger, he continues, “As long as it is in effect, the laws stated therein will hold true. In exchange for the Tribute and a cease of hostilities, the Empire will leave us alone. Our laws govern here, not the Empire’s.”

He gives Abula-Mazki a look of command as he says, “Until at such time either side breaks the Treaty.”

Abula-Mazki stares him down, never once blinking or glancing away.

The Chief of the Sunset Hills comes to his feet and stands between them, “Enough! We are not here to fight
amongst ourselves but to decide what to do with the outlander.” Pointing to James he continues, “It first must be decided if he and his friends are to be allowed within the Gathering without penalty of death.”

Both Abula-Mazki and Therin’s father look away at the same time as several of the other chiefs begin speaking out in agreement of the Chief of the Sunset Hills’ statement.

Resuming his seat, Therin’s father says, “So be it. Who believes they should be granted safe travel?” Six chiefs raise their hands. “And who believes the Token means nothing and they should either be executed or given over to Abula-Mazki?” Four hands go up.

“It’s decided then,” he says. Looking to Abula-Mazki, he says, “They are granted safe passage through our lands.”

Face burning with anger, Abula-Mazki’s eyes practically spark with pent up rage. “So I am to be denied?” he cries out to the assembled chiefs. His anger and rage roll over those in the tent like a red tide.

“As long as they are in our territory,” Therin’s father says, “yes, you are.” When he sees how dark his anger is, he adds, “Harm them in our territory, and you break the centuries long peace between us.”

He turns and gives James a look of naked hatred and anger before stalking out, the air practically sizzling with his rage.

Therin’s father turns to James and says, “You are granted safe conduct within our lands, and none here will gainsay that. It is the will of the council. But once you leave our lands, you leave our protection.”

“I understand,” James says. “And thank you.”

Therin gives the council another bow and again, James follows suit. He then turns for the exit and James follows him as he leaves the council tent.

“You probably better leave in the morning,” he tells him as they walk back to his tent.

“Will we be safe here until them?” James asks him.

“Yes,” Therin replies. “He dares not violate the Treaty.” Sighing, he continues, “I really didn’t think they’d go against him. I’m surprised so many voted in your favor.”

“Why?” he asks.

“Even though you bear the Token of the Lady,” he explains, “we really dare not anger the Empire, their might is too strong. But many saw this as a chance to strike out at the Empire, even in so small a way.”

“Your people don’t care for the Empire?” he asks.

Shaking his head, he says, “No. The Tribute takes too many of our horses and goods every year. We are honorable people, or at least most of us are, and so we abide by it.”

“Maybe some day you can be free of them,” James says.

“It would be a good thing for our people,” he agrees. “But until that day comes, we must do what honor dictates.”

They come to James’ tent and he lifts the flap and enters. He stops suddenly when he sees only Jiron sitting there on the floor.

Jiron looks up as they enter and asks, “Isn’t Miko with you?”

Worry comes over James as he replies, “No, he isn’t.”

With confusion on his face, Jiron says, “Two warriors came and said that the council had requested his presence, so he went with them.”

“The council made no such request,” Therin tells him.

“Then who came and took him?” James asks.

Anger suddenly blossoms upon Therin’s face as he replies, “The Grey Wolf Clan no doubt!” He spits on the floor as he begins pacing. “Since they can’t move against you or it would violate the Pact, they’ve arranged for you to move against them.”

“You mean they’ve taken Miko to cause us to go after him and break the Pact?” James asks. “So we’d be given to that warrior priest?”

“It would seem so,” he replies.

“Damn!” curses James.

“Are we going to tell the council?” Jiron asks him.

“Tell them what?” he replies. “We have no proof other than your word which will not be believed over that of one of us. You can be sure the Grey Wolf Clan will deny any involvement in this.”

“So what are we to do?” James asks.

“You must go and get him,” he says.

“But they’ll be expecting that,” Jiron adds.

“True,” agrees Therin. “But what choice do you have?”

Jiron comes to James and says, “If we can escape from Azzac when all are against us, we should be able to
manage getting Miko from out of here.”

“Then what he said was true?” Therin asks. “About you destroying and killing in the Empire?”

“We only fought those who attacked us,” James explains. “We never initiated any fights, only defended ourselves.”

Nodding, Therin says, “Wait here a moment.” And then he turns and leaves the tent quickly.

“Wonder what that was about?” Jiron asks.

“Don’t know, but we can wait at least a couple minutes more,” James replies.

After only a few moments, Therin returns with two sets of cloaks bearing the design of the Grey Wolf Clan.

“Here,” he says, handing them the cloaks. “These should enable you to get close to where they’re holding your friend. More, I dare not do.”

Taking the cloaks, James says, “Thank you.” He hands Jiron his as he dons his own.

Therin opens the tent flap and peers out, making sure no one is nearby. He waves them to follow as he steps away through the opening. “Follow me,” he whispers. “I’ll lead you over to the edge of the Grey Wolf Clan’s camp. From there, you’re on your own.”

“I understand,” James assures him.

They follow him quietly through the Windrider camp. Warriors recognize Therin and call out a greeting. He merely gives them a short reply as he hurries along toward the Grey Wolf camp.

He meanders through many tents until he comes to a clear area separating the Windrider’s and the Grey Wolf Clan’s camps. Stopping, he turns to them and whispers, “I must leave you here. I can’t take the chance of violating the Pact, though in spirit I suppose I have already done so.”

“We thank you for all you have done for us,” James says as he shakes his hand.

“Just bringing the plans of the Grey Wolf Clan to ruins is thanks enough,” he says as he slips away back within the camp.

They pause there within the shadows as they figure out what to do. A large tent sits within the middle of the camp and is the most likely place to find Miko. Between them and the main tent are rows of smaller tents with many warriors of the Grey Wolf Clan sitting around campfires.

James can’t see any way to make it through them without coming into close contact.

“What do you plan?” asks Jiron.

“I may have an idea,” he says after taking a moment to think. “Give me a moment to work it out.”

Jiron nods as he keeps watch on the camp and the tent where they believe Miko is currently being held.

Suddenly there appear two almost invisible translucent bubbles floating in the air before them. “Are you crazy?” he asks James. “That warrior priest is going to know where we are!”

“Exactly,” he replies. Then the bubbles begin floating away from him, each moving around the camp in the opposite direction of the other. Whispering quietly, he explains, “Right now, they’re not using much magic so I doubt if he’s going to take notice of them. But as they go further from us, they’re going to draw more and more magic from those they pass, a small amount at a time. Soon, they should be emitting enough magic resonance for him to realize something is going on and comes out to investigate.”

Jiron can see him grinning in the moonlight, “And then the fun will begin.”

“I hope so,” Jiron replies. “Whichever tent he comes out of, you can bet that’ll be the one Miko is in.”

Ten minutes pass before they see the flap to the large tent open up and they see Abula-Mazki exit and move directly toward the area where one of the bubbles should be.

When James begins to feel the prickling of magic, he says, “Any second now.”

ZZZZZST!

A flash of lightning flies toward Abula-Mazki out of the night and explodes upon a shield he erected around himself.

The Grey Wolf camp erupts in a frenzy of activity as warriors cry out and grab their weapons. The warriors begin running toward the area where the lightning had originated. Soon, the area between them and the tent is relatively clear.

“Let’s go,” James says, allowing Jiron to take the lead. They run, blending in with the others running around as they make their way to the tent.

ZZZZZST!

Another lightning bolt sizzles as it again strikes out at Abula-Mazki. Then suddenly a loud explosion as the bubble erupts into a fireball, blazing into the night. They can hear cries of warriors who had the misfortune to be caught within the blast.

“He’ll be coming back!” Jiron whispers to James.

“Not necessarily,” he says. “Remember, there were two of them.”
“Right,” he remembers.

They reach a tent adjacent to the one they’re after and pause as they see Abula-Mazki returning to the tent. The expression on his face is one of obvious anger.

From the other side of the camp, the other bubble begins emitting invisible bursts of magic, which do nothing other than create a magical signature. James can feel the prickling as each of the bursts happen. Looking at Abula-Mazki, it’s apparent that he feels them too.

The warrior priest calls out commands as he and the warriors near him run over toward where the bursts are originating.

Once they are past, Jiron crosses to the back of the tent and with a quick swipe from his knife, opens a long slit in it.

He quickly steps through the opening and dives to the side when he detects a movement out of the corner of his eye. The sword of the guard which had been stationed inside the tent passes just inches from where Jiron had entered the tent. Rolling quick, Jiron comes to his feet with both knives at the ready.

The guard calls out to those outside but the noise out there drowns out his words. Jiron moves to engage him and attempts to draw him away from the opening in the side of the tent so James can enter.

James pokes his head through and sees them battling a dozen feet away. Passing through, he moves away from where Jiron and the guard are battling, staying near the side of the tent. Tied to the central pole of the tent, Miko sits with his hands secured behind him. Coming over, he takes his knife out and cuts his bonds.

“Thank god you’re here!” Miko says as he gets up off the floor.

“Never mind that now,” James tells him. “We’ve got to get out of here.” He looks over to where Jiron and the guard are still fighting. Neither one seems able to get the advantage over the other.

Jiron is able to deflect the blows of the guard but so far has been unable to successfully counter attack. James sees his difficulty and picks up a stool and tosses it over behind the guard, causing him to trip.

Off balance, the guard falls to the ground and Jiron is able to sink a knife several inches into the man’s thigh. Leaving the knife there, Jiron falls upon the man as they wrestle for the sword.

The man punches out and connects with Jiron’s jaw, snapping his head back. Jiron uses his knee and catches the man in the groin causing him to gasp in pain.

Seeing them on the floor, Miko comes over and kicks the guard in the side of the head which leaves him dazed. Jiron then has little trouble in taking the sword away and with his remaining knife, slices him across the throat.

Leaving the knife there, Jiron falls upon the man as they wrestle for the sword.

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He retrieves his other knife from the man’s thigh and wipes them both off on the dead man’s tunic. Seeing James has already freed Miko, he moves to the opening in the side of the tent just as the night lights up with a loud explosion which can be heard as the remaining bubble detonates.

“That’s it,” James tells them. “They’ll be back soon.” He tosses a tunic he’d found in the tent over to Miko so he’d blend in better.

“Then let’s not wait around for them to return,” Jiron says as he opens the slit and makes his way out of the tent.

He waits a moment, scanning the area as the others exit, and then they run in the opposite way from where they heard that last explosion. Running as fast as they can, they race past tent after tent until they reach the edge of the Grey Wolf Clan’s camp. Warriors are running around like ants whose anthill has just had a stick poked in it. James grins at the analogy. *I suppose it has!*

Finding that they are now on the outskirts of the entire Gathering, they see a wide open area between the edge of the tents and where the trees begin. Running fast, they cover the distance to the trees before anyone takes notice of them. Jiron again takes the lead as they make their way through to the northern ridge.

The camp behind them is total chaos, warriors swarm the area and several horns can be heard. Other areas of the Gathering are in an uproar as well as after the two large explosions in the Grey Wolf Clan’s area.

“They’re not going to let us just walk out of here,” Jiron says. “We have violated the Pact and I’m sure the protection of the Windriders will be withdrawn shortly if it hasn’t already.”

“Then let’s hurry and reach the northern passage out of here before they begin a serious search for us,” James suggests.

Angling as directly to the northern pass as they can, they break into a run toward the northern ridge. Suddenly, out of the trees ahead of them, appears a group of horses.

Jiron’s knives jump to his hands and James readies a spell before they realize that it’s Therin with several other Windriders. Therin has a big smile on his face as he approaches them. “I can see now why they want you so bad,” he says.

He signals a rider who brings out three horses. “Take these horses and fly swift,” he says.

As James mounts, he says, “Aren’t you running the risk of violating the Pact?”
“Probably,” he says, “but that’s my concern. And don’t worry about the horses leading the trail back to us. We stole these from the Grey Wolf Clan.” At that, a couple of the other riders break out laughing. When they’re mounted, James says, “Thanks again.”

“You are welcome,” he replies. “Though you may not want to come this way ever again.”

“I understand,” James says as he turns his horse toward the north.

“Good luck,” Therin says. “And ride fast!” They kick their horses and ride for the northern passage through the mountains. Jiron again takes the lead as they quickly leave Therin and the other riders behind.

“Think he’ll get into trouble?” Miko asks him.

“I hope not,” James replies. “But like he said, I don’t think we should ever come this way again.”

As they progress toward the pass, they see a large group of riders now following behind them. James can feel the prickling of magic, telling him Abula-Mazki is among them. “It didn’t take them long to determine where we were going,” James observes.

“He probably did the same trick to find you that you used to find Miko,” Jiron explains.

“You’re probably right,” agrees James.

“We’ll never lose them as long as he’s behind us,” Jiron says.

“I know,” replies James. “I’m working on that.” The terrain suddenly rises steeply as they near the upper reaches of the pass. Suddenly, they find themselves between two tall ridges as they enter the pass. The pass is wide enough to accommodate several horses side by side and they continue racing through to the other side. The full moon above gives them ample light to see by.

Halfway through, James brings his horse to a sudden halt and quickly dismounts. Jiron soon realizes he’s not with him and glances back. When he sees him there in the pass, he stops and turns his horse around. Moving back, he asks, “What’s wrong?”

James glances up to him and replies, “Just trying to slow the pursuit.” Jiron watches the pass behind them as James does his thing. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees glowing circular spots flash briefly upon the sides of the pass. They extended at least thirty feet up and after the last one flashes, he sees James slump to the ground again.

He quickly dismounts and helps James get up on his horse, tying him in place. “Haven’t much time,” he hears James say once he has him secured to the saddle.

Nodding, he gets mounted himself and they begin racing toward the far end of the pass. Jiron looks back, and can see riders in the moonlight as they begin entering the pass. Abula-Mazki is in the lead and riding hard to catch them.

Crumph!

When the riders are less than twenty yards from where James had worked the magic, the sides of the pass explode outwards, causing the ridges on both sides to sag into the pass. Gigantic sections of the ridge fall and crush the leading edge of the pursuing riders, Abula-Mazki among them. Cries from horses and men can be heard out of the mammoth dust cloud rolling through the pass.

Jiron pauses momentarily, waiting for the dust to clear. When it does, he sees the pass is now completely blocked by a pile of rubble, several hundred feet high. Even though he’s seen the effect James’ magic can have, it still amazes him. He turns back to the north and quickly makes it to the other side.

They catch up with Miko who’s waiting for them at the other end of the pass. They continue down the trail as it leaves the pass and begin to descend down the other side of the mountains.

“Think that’ll stop them?” Miko asks Jiron.

“If it doesn’t, then that warrior priest is more powerful than anything I can imagine,” he replies.

“Good,” says Miko. They slow their pace a little to save the horses and travel for several more hours before finding a spot to make camp. Miko and Jiron take turns at watch, seeing as how James is already asleep.

Worried about pursuit, they keep the horses saddled and the one who’s on watch keeps extra alert during their vigil.
James awakens with the rising of the sun, tired and head aching slightly. He sits up and finds Jiron by the fire cooking a small animal that he killed earlier that morning.

“Good morning,” he says when he notices James sitting up.
“Good morning to you too,” he replies. He glances over to where Miko is still sleeping on the ground. “Did he take the first watch?”

“Yeah,” Jiron affirms.
“Do you think we have time to cook breakfast?” James asks him. “I mean with all those riders after us?”
He shrugs before saying, “Hope so. I don’t know if you remember, but you pretty well blocked the pass. Any pursuit will have to travel another way.”

“But they will come,” James tells him.
“I know, but we need to keep our strength up,” counters Jiron. He pokes the roasting carcass with his knife and says, “Wake up sleepy head, I think breakfast is ready.”

James gets up and goes over to Miko and nudges him with his foot.
“What?” Miko exclaims, coming awake abruptly. He looks quickly around and sees James standing above him.

“Breakfast is almost ready,” he says.

“Oh,” he grunts as he looks over to where Jiron is taking the meat from the fire. Getting up, he crosses over to the trees and does his morning business and then returns to take a seat by the fire.

Jiron hands him his portion and then gives James his. They sit there for a while in silence as they eat. James takes a look at the mountains surrounding them. Glancing to the south, he can’t really see where he caused the sides of the pass to cave-in as trees and mountain block his view.

“How far did we come last night?” he asks.

“Not sure, we traveled for several hours before stopping,” Jiron replies.
“We better push long and hard today,” continues James. “Abula-Mazki won’t be giving up so easily.”
“I hope he was caught in the landslide,” Miko adds.

“So do I,” agrees James, “but we can’t go on that assumption. We must act as if he’s still after us.”

“Where to now?” Jiron asks.

“Continue heading north,” James replies. “It’s all we can do.”

Once they finished their breakfast, they mount and continue down the side of the mountain. The trail they are following is fairly clear, having been traveled by riders on their way to the Gathering for a very long time.

It takes most of the day to reach the plains below the mountains. They turn more to the west as they continue along the foothills, traveling until the sun begins to fall. A hollow between two hills gives them a good place to remain hidden while they camp through the night.

While Jiron gets the fire going, James goes out and gets a couple rabbits for dinner. Once they’re on the fire roasting, they sit back and relax.

James wishes he had something to use to see if they are being pursued, but there are no pools of water to be found. He needs something that has a smooth, reflective surface in order to do it.

“Think we’re staying ahead of him?” asks Miko.

“Maybe,” replies Jiron. “It’s really hard to say. It all depends on how far he had to ride to find another way from the gathering. And if he’s willing to kill his horse in order to catch us.”

“Do you think the Grey Wolf Clan will aid him?” Miko asks.

“Probably,” answers James. “We messed up their camp pretty good, and probably insulted them in some way when we snatched you out from the middle of their camp.”

“Other clans may help as well,” Jiron guesses. “We did violate the peace, though I doubt if the Windriders will be among those coming after us.”

“Maybe,” agrees James. “If we can make it out of their lands, then maybe the clans won’t continue the pursuit.”

“Let’s hope so,” Miko sighs. “Is that why we’re moving more to the west? So hopefully we will be out of their lands?”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” Jiron says. “I just figured the hills would give us more cover than the open
plains. But that’s a thought.”

“The forces of the Empire in this area would hardly be on the lookout for us,” reasons James. “If anything, they’d still be looking for us further south. We should have a day or two before Abula-Mazki has the chance to alert anyone.”

“If our luck holds, we may be able to keep ahead of the word of our whereabouts all the way to the border,” Jiron says optimistically.

“That would be nice,” James agrees, though doesn’t really feel that is a possibility.

James takes the first watch once they’ve eaten and are ready to bed down for the night.

In the morning, Jiron pulls out rations he found on the horses Therin had given them. After a quick bite to eat, they’re in the saddle and making their way through the hills. They continue to maintain a route to the west, with a slight northerly heading. The hills afford them some protection from being spotted but at the sacrifice of speed.

Some time after noon, they curve around a hill and suddenly before them is a road going north to south. They pause a moment before moving behind a hill bordering the road. Jiron dismounts and while the others wait with the horses, looks for any traffic moving upon the road.

He’s up there several minutes before coming back down. When he returns, he says, “There’s no one on the road and I could see it winding its way through the hills for miles in either direction.”

“Think we should chance it?” James asks him.

“We’d make better time, but you never know who’ll be using it,” he replies.

“Moving through the hills is slowing us down,” James tells him. “I think we need to chance it. If we keep a constant watch for anyone approaching, we might be okay.”

“Alright,” Jiron says as he remounts. Turning his horse toward the road, he continues, “Then let’s do it.” He leads them back to the road where they break into a gallop as they race to the north.

After only going several miles, the hills begin to smooth out until they’re once more in grassland. There’s a river to the west and as they go further north, it slowly draws closer.

Several more miles finds them where the road crosses the river. Ahead of them, a mile or so past the bridge, sits a large keep not far off the road.

They come to a stop in the road before crossing the bridge as they consider their options.

“Think there’s anyone still in there?” Miko asks, referring to the keep.

“From here it’s hard to tell,” Jiron replies. “I would think so though.”

James glances to the east where the hills begin again, about a mile away. “We should return to the hills, they’ll give us more of a chance to get by here without being seen,” he suggests.

“I agree,” says Jiron as he turns his horse and leads them at a gallop toward the cover of the hills.

As they reach the hills, James glances over to the distant keep and sees a force of cavalry coming out through the main gate. They’re heading down the road to the south.

“Jiron, we may have company!” he hollers to him.

Jiron looks over and sees them leaving the keep. Pushing their horses harder, they make their way into the hills. After they’ve put a large hill between them and the riders, they come to a stop and then dismount before climbing to the top of the hill. Peering over the crest of the hill, they see the riders continuing down the road to the south and not turning to follow them.

“I guess that answers whether anyone is in the keep or not,” James announces.

“Yeah,” agrees Miko. “It’s a good thing we got off the road when we did.”

“I’m just happy they didn’t see us,” says Jiron.

“Me too,” James says.

They climb back down to where their horses are awaiting them. Once they’re mounted again, they make their way through the hills toward the northeast.

An hour of riding brings them to where the hills end. To the north is nothing but open plains. To their left is the river where it turns to the north. They can still see the keep far to the west and are relieved when they fail to see anyone around.

“We’ll be pretty conspicuous out there,” Jiron says, indicating the open plains.

“Don’t have much choice unless we want to just sit here forever,” reasons James.

“Maybe we should stick close to the river?” Miko suggests.

Shaking his head, James replies, “Might not be a good idea. If there’ll be anyone around, most likely they’ll be by the river.”

“Oh,” he says.

“Let’s stick to the plains, but keep the river in view,” suggest Jiron.
“Alright,” agrees James. “As good a plan as any.”
Miko gives him an annoyed look.
“What?” James asks him.
“You never take my suggestions but are always taking his,” he accuses.
“Take it easy,” James tells him. “I don’t always take his suggestions. We, meaning all three of us, try to come up with the best course of action. Whichever one sounds the best, we do. Don’t take things so personally.”
Miko doesn’t look very satisfied with his response.
“Shall we?” Jiron asks, looking from one to the other.
“Let’s,” replies James. Miko gives a nod as well.
Jiron moves out, the others follow as he angles east, away from the river. They proceed until it’s just in view behind them before turning more directly to the north. As they travel, they keep a constant watch for anyone out upon the plains, but it looks as if they’re the only ones about.
By the time they stop for the night, the keep has long since disappeared behind them. All they can see in every direction now is plains, with the river cutting its way through them to the west.
They decide upon not lighting a fire so as not to alert anyone in the area where they are. Cold rations are the fare this evening, they still have some cooked meat strips from the previous nights to fill them up. James is still feeling the need for more than just meat, but will have to wait on that.
During Miko’s shift in the middle of the night, he hears horses racing past off in the distance. In the moonlight, he can make out a group of perhaps ten riders. He almost wakes the others but then doesn’t when he realizes they’re not coming their way.
When he wakes Jiron for his turn at watch, he tells him of the riders.
“It might have been that warrior priest,” suggests Jiron once he’s heard.
“Do you think so?” Miko asks, worried.
“Don’t be too worried, remember, we’re in the land of the Clans,” he tells him. “It could very well have just been a group of riders moving from one place to another. Nothing says it has to do anything with us.”
As Miko lies down to sleep, Jiron continues, “Just try to get some sleep, we’ll need our rest tomorrow.”
“Alright,” says Miko.
Soon, Jiron can hear the soft sound of his snores in the night. He spends much of his watch staring out across the moonlit plains, searching for riders. He’s much more worried about the riders Miko had told him of than he’d made out, just didn’t want Miko to fret about them.
In the morning when James awakens he tells him of what Miko saw last night. “I wish I had been awake,” he says to Jiron. “Then I might have felt if Abula-Mazki had been among the group.”
“If that was him,” Jiron says, “then he’s ahead of us.”
Nodding his head, James replies, “I know, that could make things difficult to say the least.”
“He’ll probably enlist the aid of the nearest garrison, as well as send for reinforcements,” Jiron guesses. “We haven’t any time to waste sitting around here.”
“I agree,” James says as he goes over and wakes up Miko.
They mount and quickly make their way toward the north, still following the river from a distance. The river continues almost due north as it flows to the south and James finds it odd that there are no villages along the riverbank.
“I would think there would be someone living along the river,” he states during their travel.
“Why?” Miko asks.
“It’s a good place to live,” he tells him. “You have access to fish and fresh water, plus transportation south as needed. It’s just odd is all.”
“Maybe the clansmen don’t allow anyone to live there?” Jiron guesses.
“Perhaps,” says James as he reflects upon it. “You may be right, this could be the border area between the Clans’ land and the Empire as agreed upon in that Treaty they’d mentioned. If that’s the case, then there most likely will be minimal people inhabiting this area.”
“Which could prove beneficial to us,” Jiron says with optimism.
An hour or two past noon, Jiron points to the west and then hollers out, “James!”
James looks over to the west and sees a band of riders on the other side of the river. One rider has broken from the others as he races to the north, the others pace them as they move north. He can see the riders casting glances their way.
“Damn!” James curses. “They’ve seen us.”
“And it looks like one is going for help,” adds Jiron.
James begins to angle his horse to the east and the others follow his lead. “Need to put some distance between
“It won’t take them long to find us now that they know about where we are,” Jiron says as he gallops along beside James.

“Let’s put off that meeting as long as we can,” James replies as they race through the tall grass. He’s worried that at their speed, one of their horses might put a hoof in a gopher hole or something that will break its leg. That would prove disastrous.

Glancing behind, he sees that the river and the riders are no longer visible. They turn to a more northerly course and push their horses as hard as they can.

A horn sounding to the southeast causes them to glance over their shoulders. There behind them are several dozen riders coming fast. They look to be clansmen, but which ones they can’t tell from this distance.

They continue racing north, maintaining their lead from the approaching riders. Hills begin to appear to the northwest. James begins to angle toward them, the hills would give them a better chance than open plains.

“But what about the riders we saw there earlier?” Miko shouts to James.

“There’re less of them than what’s behind us,” he replies. “Besides, we stand a better chance among the hills.”

They continue racing toward the hills, Miko keeps glancing behind them at the pursuing riders. Though they’re not closing the gap, they’re not falling behind either. Worried, he does his best to keep up with the others.

As they near the hills, they can once more see the river as it flows around the hills to the west. The riders who had been over on the other side are nowhere to be seen.

“James!” hollers Jiron. “The horses can’t keep this up, we’re going to have to do something about those riders behind us.”

“I know,” James tells him.

The first hill they come to rises thirty or more feet above the plains. James steers his horse toward it and begins to climb to the top, the others move to follow him.

At the top, he gets down from his horse and hands the reins to Miko. “Just don’t let him get away,” he tells him. Miko nods his head as he takes the reins.

Jiron and Miko just stand there as they watch James. He faces the oncoming riders and suddenly brings his hands together and then after holding them closed for a moment quickly flings them open. A dozen small blobs appear to be thrown from his hands and land on the ground.

“What’s he doing?” Miko asks Jiron.

“I don’t know,” he replies. “Just be glad he’s on our side.”

James breaks into a slight smile when he overhears that, but otherwise continues his concentration as the blobs roll ever onward.

The further they roll through the grass the greater in size they become. Where they had started out the size of golf balls, now they’re the size of a bowling ball. It almost seems that the larger they grow, the faster they grow as does the swath of withered grass they leave behind them.

When the first riders reach the blobs rolling toward them, the lead ball explodes, spraying a sticky goo which envelopes several riders and horses. The others immediately move to pass by their affected comrades, but other blobs explode as they come in close proximity to them.

One after another, the blobs explode, coating more of the riders in the goo, making it impossible for them or their horses to move. They fall to the ground and struggle to free themselves from sticky mass, but are unable to.

After the last blob explodes, all but one of the riders has been trapped. James turns back to the others and says, “Let’s go.” He gets on his horse and to the amazement of Jiron and Miko, turns toward the entrapped riders.

“What are you doing?” asks Jiron.

“We should leave!” yells Miko.

Paying them no head, he continues on to the entrapped riders. Having little choice, the other two fall in behind as he heads toward them.

The lone rider who’s free sees them coming and draws his sword. Turning his horse toward them, he charges, a war cry escaping him.

James takes a rock he had acquired some time earlier from his pouch and throws it. The rock sails toward the rider and strikes him through the chest, knocking him from his horse.

When they come closer to the entrapped riders, they can see the markings of the Grey Wolf Clan. James notices with relief that neither Abula-Mazki nor the Clan Chief is among those entrapped.

As he approaches them, he says, “Can anyone understand me?”

One of the riders says, “I can.”
“I didn’t kill you, this time,” he tells him. “Continue to follow me and I will the next time.”

The rider translates for his comrades and a growl can be heard coming from several of them.

“You violated the Pact!” the rider accuses them. “For that, you must die!”

“No!” James shouts back. “Your clan broke it first when they took my friend from the Windriders’ tent. I merely came and reclaimed him.”

“You lie!” one of them shouts.

“We already had assurances of safe conduct through your lands,” he tells them. “What possible reason would we have to break the Pact?”

When his words are translated, muttering can be heard coming from more than one. “Anyway, we’re leaving this area and are not coming back.” He turns his horse toward the north and then says before he leaves, “Follow us at your own peril.”

“What about us?” cries the rider.

“This stuff should disappear in a little bit,” he replies. Kicking his horse, he gallops away to the north, Jiron and Miko following.

“You should have killed them,” Jiron tells him.

“I don’t kill unless I have to,” he replies. “That may be hard for you to understand, but that is the way I am.”

“You killed that rider easily enough,” he states.

“True, but he was attacking and I didn’t believe he’d listen to reason,” he counters.

“No,” he agrees, “I’m sure he wouldn’t have. Think they’ll stop following?”

“I don’t know, maybe,” he says. “I did give them something to think about though. Once we’re out of their territory, I’m hoping they’ll stop.”

“Then all we’ll have to worry about is the Empire’s forces and Abula-Mazki,” he says. Grinning, he continues, “That should be easy enough.”

James grins back, “I like your optimism.”

They continue on to the north, again keeping the river at a distance as they move along the eastern edge of the hills. James is still concerned with the disappearance of the riders they’d seen earlier to the west, across the river. He’s sure they haven’t given up the chase, but just where are they?

He direly needs something to use as a reflective surface so he can scan the area for hostiles. But the only place would be near the river and that area could prove unhealthy right now. When he brings his water bottle to his lips for a drink and discovers it’s empty, he realizes they’re going to have to chance the river anyway.

They begin moving toward the river, keeping to the area between the hills. Jiron takes the lead as they move through the hills, keeping his eyes out for anyone in the vicinity.

When they reach the edge of the river, Miko begins watering the horses as Jiron continues keeping a lookout.

James finds a suitable rock and begins to dig out a hole at the river’s edge. Once he has a hole two feet across, he digs a channel to let in some of the water from the river. When he has enough and the ground has saturated to the point where it won’t immediately drain back into the dirt, he closes off the channel so the small pool can maintain a still surface.

He concentrates as the image in the pool shimmers and then sees an aerial view of them at the riverbank. Scrolling the image in a wider arc, he sees the entrapped riders. He grins when he sees several of them have managed to extricate themselves from the goo. It will still be some time before they all get free. Despite what he’d told them, he really doesn’t know how long that stuff will stick around. ‘Stick around’, he lets out a chuckle at his pun.

Getting back to the job at hand, he scrolls to the south and finds the riders they’d seen across the river. Somehow, they’re on this side now and just entering the hills to the south, maybe an hour or two away. He scrolls the image further down but doesn’t see any sort of bridge. Must be a ford in the river.

Scrolling north, he fails to see any sign of the rider that had been riding hard to the north. He scrolls even further but only sees more of the river and plains. The draw of magic to scroll so far is becoming quite strong, seems the farther he scrolls the image away from him, the more magic it takes to sustain it.

He brings it back to the immediate area and sees no one else. Canceling the spell, he gets up and comes over to where Jiron is keeping watch.

“The riders we left in the goo are still stuck,” he says with a slight grin. “Behind us, the riders we saw on the other side of the river managed to cross and are now entering the foothills.”

“How far behind us?” he asks.

“Couple of hours, I would think,” he replies.

“And ahead of us?” Jiron asks.

“It looks clear for quite a ways,” he tells him. “I couldn’t see more than about five miles but didn’t see anyone
“What should we do about the ones behind us?” he asks.

“Someone’s behind us?” asks Miko as he joins the discussion.

“Yeah,” James informs him and then quickly relates what he just told Jiron. “Maybe I need to give them a little surprise when they get here,” he muses. “We have time.”

Ever since leaving the Gathering of the Clans, Sub-leader Ragni of the Grey Wolf Clan has had serious doubts about following these men. After witnessing what had happened back at the camp, he soon realized that maybe they should just let them go.

But Abula-Mazki would not be denied. Their chief was too much under his influence and so when he went after them when they fled, Ragni and several other Sub-leaders took their men with him.

When the pass exploded in front of them, he thought the rage of Abula-Mazki would kill them all. Somehow the warrior priest had survived the rocks. All the men around him had been crushed but none of the rocks had even so much as touched him. Somehow, he’d reined in his rage at those who they were pursuing escaped. When told that the only other way to follow would be to backtrack to the eastern pass, his rage again erupted.

Riding like to kill the horses, he pushed them on until they were through the pass. Once on the other side, Abula-Mazki had sent the Sub-leaders and their groups in different directions in an attempt to locate them, while keeping two of the groups with him. Ragni was glad that his was not one of the groups that had stayed with the unpredictable man.

He had moved his men across the river to patrol the western bank. Earlier they spied their quarry and sent a man north to raise the alarm while the rest of them backtrack to the ford.

Once across, they continued the pursuit halfheartedly. Ragni had no desire to confront a mage who could bring down mountains, but dare not show this to his men. They entered the foothills, moving quickly for a little over an hour.

One of his men cries out from a hilltop where he’d been scouting. “I see their campfire.”

“They took the time to camp when they knew we were giving chase?” Ragni muses to a nearby rider.

“Either they’re sure of themselves, or stupid,” the rider replies.

Nodding his head, Ragni motions for the scout to return to the group. Once he’s returned, Ragni says, “Use bows and take them unawares, we cannot let the mage have time to cast a spell.”

His men all nod and get their bows out and ready. When all are set, they move as one around the hill toward where their quarry has their camp.

As the camp comes into view ahead of them, he sees their quarry sitting there relaxed around the fire, meat sizzling as it cooks over the fire. Off to one side are their horses tied in a picket line.

He signals his men to quietly surround the camp, using animal calls to one another, letting him know they’re in position.

Once he’s heard the last call, telling him all are in place, he gives out with the call to signal the attack. Arrows fly into the camp as they simultaneously fire at the enemy. They drop their bows as they draw their swords and follow the volley of arrows into the camp.

Suddenly, a light encircles them and golden bands arc toward the sky where they meet above the center of the camp.

His men cry out and try to leave but soon realize they are trapped in a cage they can’t escape. That’s when Ragni realizes the mage is facing them. He’s shocked to see all their arrows in the ground, each one having missed their mark.

The mage says, “To follow is to die. Turn around and go home!”

Then the mage, his companions and their hands begin to change. Their features turn into demonic visages and their hands become claws with long, sharp nails. They begin howling and growling as they advance upon them.

His men cry out with fear, pressing themselves as far away from the demonic creatures as they can. Two of them, warriors tested through many battles, faint dead away as the creatures come closer. Then suddenly, the creatures swell to twice their original size as they let out a roar of ear shattering intensity.

Then with a blinding flash of light, the creatures, the camp, and the cage disappear.

From a nearby hill, Jiron gives a quiet chuckle as he sees what’s going on over there. “Man you’re good,” he tells James.

James doesn’t respond, just continues watching, hoping it’ll be enough to dissuade them from continuing.

When the light flashes and all becomes still, he holds his breath, hoping it worked. Then suddenly the men down there erupt in a flurry of motion as they wake up the ones who fainted and run back to their horses. They
mount quickly and he sighs with relief when they turn and race south just as fast as their horses will go. For these men, the chase is over.

Once the riders have moved through the hills and are once again out of sight, James stands up and makes his way with the others back down to where their horses are picketed.

“That should discourage any pursuit from them for awhile I would think,” announces James.

Laughing, Miko says, “I would think so. I thought they were going to soil themselves when we turned into demons.”

“How did you manage that, anyway?” Jiron asks.

“Can’t really explain,” replies James. “Has to do with light and perception.”

“It was effective anyway,” he says.

“Doubt if it would fool any serious mage,” he tells him. “Abula-Mazki wouldn’t have been fooled, I’m sure.”

Once they’re mounted, they head north again. Even though the pursuit from the south is stalled, if not stopped completely, there’s still the rider who’d raced north. James wonders what he is up to as they head once more to the north.
Chapter Thirteen

Continuing north until it’s almost dark, they then move toward the river so James can look around to see if there are any forces closing in.

He digs his pool again and once the water has filled it and becomes placid, begins to scan the countryside for hostiles. To the south, it’s clear. He smiles to himself when he realizes his attempts to thwart pursuit had met with success. To the east all he can find are more plains.

Looking westward past the river, he finds the road going north and south. He scans the road in both directions and is satisfied when he doesn’t see anyone upon it. There is a small town sitting on a crossroads further north, but nothing which concerns him is going on there. The road goes through the town as it continues its way north while another one begins, heading due west out of town.

The town there does have a garrison but doesn’t look to be very large and it shows no signs of preparing to leave. He moves the image northward and finds the river continues on through more plains until entering another set of hills.

Getting up, he says, “Looks like there is no one near, so it should be safe to have a fire tonight.”

“Good,” Miko exclaims. “I hate being in the dark out here.” He scans the area and tries to find sufficient fuel for the fire, but there’s not much available. When he has gathered all he can find, he looks at the small pile and says, “I doubt if this is going to last the night.”

“Probably not,” agrees Jiron. “But it should last through dinner.” He looks over and sees James returning to camp with three small rabbits. He takes them from him and proceeds to get them ready for the fire.

James sits and rests, a little tired from the magic expended earlier in the day. He seems to be able to do more with less effect as he goes along. Must be like weightlifting, the more you do, the more you can do.

Miko gets the fire going and in no time the rabbits are cooking.

The evening passes uneventfully after dinner as they take their turn at watch.

Before setting out in the morning, James goes back over to the small pool and again scans the area for hostiles.

“Jiron!” he hollers.

When Jiron comes over, with Miko right behind, he shows them the large force of riders on the plains.

“Where are they?” Miko asks.

“Best I can figure, about an hour to the southeast,” he says. “And Abula-Mazki is with them. It looks like two or three times the number that we surprised back in the hills.”

“Is that all?” Jiron asks.

As he continues to scan, they see another force approaching from the northwest, having already entered the west side of the hills the river flows through to the north. “Looks like they have us boxed in,” says James.

“If we can make it north along the river quickly,” Jiron suggests, “we may be able to move past them before they connect with the riders.”

“Then we better hurry,” James says, getting up. They mount and quickly break into a gallop heading north. He wishes he still had his mirror so he can scan while riding, but that’s long gone at the bottom of the ocean.

Moving fast, they are soon approaching the hills to the north. Hoping to have beaten the soldiers coming from the west, they continue to follow the river as it moves among the hills.

Suddenly from the west, they see a scout crest a hill. They watch as he raises a horn to his lips and blasts a series of notes.

“That’s done it,” James says, just before a rock leaves his hand and sails toward the scout on the hill. They watch the rock fly through the air and then strike him, knocking him off his horse to the ground.

“They’ll be on us for sure, now,” Jiron says as he once more spurs his horse onward, the others following suit. They continue to follow the river as it meanders its way through the hills.

As they ride, the ground begins to change from hilly grasslands to more of a desert, like what they experienced when they were searching for Miko. Another horn rings out, James glances behind and spies another scout. Several more riders suddenly appear alongside him.

“We’ve got company!” he hollers.
Spurring their horses on to even greater speed, they fly alongside the river. The hills on either side of the river begin to rise and James realizes they’re entering a canyon of some kind. Not as big as the Grand Canyon back home, but large. As the sides of the canyon continue to rise, he’s quick to realize that if they sent forces to the other side, they may very well be trapped.

The ground becomes rockier and less stable the further into the canyon they move, forcing them to slow their speed. Behind them, the foot soldiers have entered the canyon as well and are following about a mile away. Progressing still further into the canyon, they come across a series of wooden stakes with wooden crossbeams. Skulls and bones hang from them as well as pieces of leather, which James thinks might be skin.

“What is that?” Jiron asks.

“I’m not sure,” James replies. “It can’t be good though.”

As they pass the structure, James begins to see others scattered about the floor of the canyon as well. Some not very large, though a couple are even bigger and more complex than the first one they encountered.

“This might be a burial ground of some sort,” he tells them.

“Burial ground?” Miko asks.

“Yeah,” he says. “It just feels that way.”

Nervous, Miko looks around.

“James, look,” Jiron says, directing his gaze back to the soldiers following them. James glances back and sees the soldiers have stopped at the first of the stakes and skulls.

“Seems as if they are reluctant to enter,” Jiron observes.

“Hope so,” James says.

“Maybe we shouldn’t be here either,” Miko says as he glances around the canyon nervously.

“We have no choice,” James tells him as they continue on further into the canyon.

They keep glancing behind them and still the soldiers remain there at the stakes, unwilling to enter the canyon. The further into the canyon they move, the more of the burial sites they see. Some now actually have full skeletons laid out upon them. All the bones are human.

Miko is getting more and more nervous the further they go. The canyon is absolutely silent, not even the familiar sound of birds or animals can be heard, only the rush of the river flowing by makes any kind of noise. But even that has a hushed quality to it, as if it dares not disturb the peace of this place. With the sun already having moved past the lip of the canyon, the lengthening shadows give the place an even more eerie feel.

They proceed onward, further into the canyon for another hour or so when James decides to pause a moment to dig out a pool by the river to look for pursuit.

“Do we have to stop?” asks Miko, who is getting very jumpy.

“Yes,” replies James. “I want to do it before it gets dark and I’ll no longer be able to see anything.”

Once the pool is filled and the surface has stilled, James begins to see what the forces behind them are doing.

The image shimmers a moment and then they see themselves by the river. He scrolls the image south until the soldiers who stopped at the boundary are in view. A large force of foot and horsemen are gathered together. Bringing the focus closer, they are able to see two men arguing animately. One of them is Abula-Mazki. What I wouldn’t give for a little sound.

The two men are obviously at odds over what they should do. From the way Abula-Mazki is gesticulating, it would seem he wants them to follow into the canyon. The other officer is adamantly refusing.

In an enraged fit, Abula-Mazki stretches out his hand and they see the officer fall to the ground. Abula-Mazki then turns to the others assembled there and begins talking. The death of their officer must have given them the impetus they needed, for they begin to hesitantly move into the canyon.

“They mean to follow us then,” Jiron says from over his shoulder.

“It would seem so,” agrees James.

“What’s at the other end of the canyon?” Jiron asks.

The image moves quickly until it reaches the northern end and they see another large force of men waiting there. They seem to be settling in and preparing defenses. Tents and campfires have sprung up throughout the assembled forces.

“They plan to force us north and then get hammered between both armies,” guesses Jiron.

“Yeah, and with his magic to counter mine,” James says, “we’re dead.”

The image disappears as they stand up. Jiron looks around them, then up at the canyon walls.

“You aren’t serious,” asks Miko when he realizes what Jiron is thinking. “We can’t climb that far.” He looks up at the imposing sides of the canyon, in some places the surface is almost vertical.

“We have several hours before the southern force gets here,” Jiron says. “It’ll be a hard climb, but we seem to
have little choice.” He walks over to his horse and takes his things.

James follows suit. When he sees Miko just standing there, he says, “Come on, we can do this. We have a better chance of scaling the walls of the canyon than surviving the battle that’s to come.”

Coming over to his horse, Miko gets his things. Then he looks dubiously at the canyon wall above them. “Couldn’t we just scare them like we did to that bunch earlier?” he asks.

“I thought about that,” James tells him. “If it were just the men, then sure, I’d try it. But not with that warrior priest with them. He’d for sure see through the illusion and most likely counter it.”

“Oh yeah,” he says, disappointed.

“We need to hurry if we’re to beat the failing light,” Jiron says. Then he moves away from the river and begins to ascend to the top of the canyon.

Miko starts to follow him but then pauses when James hasn’t moved. He glances back and sees him staring intently at the horses. Suddenly, the horses begin whinnying in fear and bolt along the river to the north.

James then turns to follow Miko and Jiron. When he sees Miko looking at him, he says, “Didn’t want them to find the horses and know where we’d started climbing up. It might give us more time.”

Miko just nods slightly as James joins him. He turns back and resumes following Jiron as he hunts for the way up.

At first, the way is fairly easy and not too steep. The sides of the canyon are composed mostly of shale and the ground is covered in loose rocks. This makes for an unstable surface which causes their feet to at times slip out from under them.

The canyon continues to darken as the sun sinks further to the horizon. The sun is still hitting the far side of the canyon and Miko keeps glancing over to it, dreading the time when it’s no longer there.

Jiron has gotten a ways ahead of them up the side of the canyon, James and Miko are staying fairly close together, helping each other. The way is beginning to get steeper and the loose shale is starting to cause them to slip more and more often. Once, Jiron starts a small landslide which pelts them with rubble and coats them with dirt.

“Watch it!” James hollers up to him.

“Sorry,” they hear from up above.

After climbing what seems a very long time, James looks down to the river, but is unable to see it. The bottom of the canyon is hidden in shadows with the setting of the sun. It no longer shines on the opposite wall of the canyon. *Hope they’re not below us yet!* He looks again but cannot make out anyone or anything down there in the dark.

Ahhhh!

Suddenly from up above them, they hear Jiron cry out. James looks up but other than some shale falling along the side of the canyon can’t see anything.

“Jiron!” James cries out. “Are you alright?” When no answer is forthcoming, he doubles his speed, sending a cascade of rocks down below him. Miko hurries along beside him.

When they near where they believe Jiron had been, they see a darker shadow ahead of them in the shadows. He quickly realizes that it’s a hole in the side of the canyon.

“Miko,” he says to him where he’s climbing, “stay there. It looks like he may have fallen into a hole.”

“Okay,” Miko replies as he comes to a halt, maintaining his balance on the unstable surface.

James moves to the edge of the hole and peers over the edge but all he can see is blackness. “Jiron!” he whispers down.

“James,” he hears him reply from down below.

“You okay?” he asks, concerned.

“Yes, I only fell about fifteen feet,” he tells him. “Help me out of here, will you?”

“Sure,” he says. He creates his glowing orb so he can see how to get him out.

As the orb begins shining, it reveals the face of a corpse only inches from his own. James screams and jumps back in panic, the light from the orb disappearing when his concentration is broken. He loses his balance and tumbles down the side of the canyon for twenty feet before coming to a stop. His heart beating wildly, he picks himself up just as Miko reaches his side.

“What happened?” Miko asks, eyes wide with fear.

“Thought I saw something,” he replies.

“What?” he inquires with a quaver in his voice.

“A dead guy,” he replies.

“Dead?” Miko asks, in a fearful tone.

“It’s probably just someone who had been buried here,” he explains. “It just took me by surprise is all.” Getting back to his feet, he climbs back up to the hole.
“James!” he hears Jiron yelling as he again approaches the hole. “Where are you?”
He comes to the edge and says, “Sorry, got startled and lost my balance.”
“You okay?” Jiron asks from the dark below.
“I think so,” he says, “maybe some scratches. I think you may have fallen in someone’s burial mound.”
The orb once more springs to life and he can see what had startled him. On the right edge of the opening, a corpse is lying on its back and its face had been only inches from James’ when he made the orb.
He looks down to see Jiron standing in the middle of a circular room with several resting places for the deceased set in tiers along the walls. The whole room looks to be rather crudely done, the biers just dug out from the walls and the dead placed within.
“How are we going to get you out of there?” James asks. “We’ve got no rope.”
“I could try climbing up along the walls,” he says, indicating the biers where the corpses are resting.
“Alright,” James says. The whole place gives him the creeps and the corpse that’s lying exposed next to him seems almost to be looking at him. But he’s sure that’s just his overactive imagination.
He watches as Jiron begins to climb up the biers. He’s being careful not to disturb the dead any more than is absolutely necessary.
Suddenly, from behind him, he hears Miko cry out as the earth beneath him gives way and he falls. “James!” he screams as he drops below the surface.
“What happened?” Jiron asks from where he’s climbing up.
James looks back to Jiron and says, “Miko just fell through, this whole place must be riddled with these things.”
“James!” he hears Miko’s panicked cry.
“Just hold there a moment,” he says to Jiron. “I need to check on him.”
“Don’t take too long,” he says from halfway up the side of the biers.
James moves over to where Miko had fallen through and when he reaches the side of the hole, the ground beneath him caves-in as well, and he lands upon a bier. “YAAAA!” he cries out when he feels the bones of the dead under him and rolls off the bier, falling another few feet to the floor.
He feels a hand on his shoulder, “James, you okay?” Miko’s voice quavers in fear and worry.
The orb blossoms into light again and Miko cries out in shock when he sees the dead lining the walls around him. One corpse lies in a heap in the middle of the floor, most likely the one James had landed on when he initially fell.
“Calm down!” James exclaims commandingly, trying to halt the panic he sees trying to consume Miko.
He gets up and grabs a hold of him and shakes him slightly. “Miko!” he cries, trying to get him to focus on his face.
Miko’s eyes slowly relax as they focus on James standing there in front of him.
“Relax,” he assures him, “you’re okay.”
“Where are we?” Miko asks when he gets the panic under control.
James glances around the small burial chamber and says, “I think we’re in a burial mound.” He sees an opening in the side of the chamber and moves toward it, “Looks like it might be part of a catacomb.”
“What’s that?” asks Miko, keeping very close to James.
“A catacomb is a place where people are buried,” he explains. “It’s usually associated with a church or a religion.”
“Jiron!” James hollers out the opening.
They hear some movement coming toward them and are relieved when they see him move into the orb’s light.
“You both okay?”
“Physically we’re fine,” replies James as he nods over to Miko.
Nodding, Jiron understands when he sees the frightened look on his face. “What are we to do now?”
“I think we’re in a catacomb,” James tells him. “If so, it must lead somewhere. Maybe we could follow it and find the way out.”
Miko’s eyes widen when he hears that. “Are you crazy?” he asks. “We should leave, this is no place for the living.”
“If we go back up, as likely as not we’ll fall through again,” he explains. “Plus, they’ll never find us here unless they stumble upon the opening. Which, in the dark is unlikely.”
“How do you know there’s even a way out?” Miko asks.
“I don’t,” he replies. “But the dead had to be brought here somehow.”
“The two chambers we fell in were connected,” Jiron says. “Stands to reason there would be a way out.”
James moves closer to Miko and says soothingly, “Just stay close and we’ll make it out, okay?”
Miko nods his head.

James moves to the opening of the burial chamber and takes the lead. Before leaving, he glances over his shoulder and says, “Follow me and stay close.”

Jiron nods his head and Miko says, “Don’t worry about that.”

He turns back toward the opening and leaves the burial chamber.

Chapter Fourteen

A small crude path extends from the burial chamber. James steps out and follows it as it passes by another chamber. They can see the hole in the roof where Jiron had fallen through and the rubble on the floor from the collapsed ceiling as they make their way past the opening.

“Wonder why they dug it so close to the surface?” Jiron muses.

“Probably wasn’t when this had been done,” James replies. “Over time, when the walls of the canyon had eroded away by wind and rain, the distance between the chambers and the surface gradually diminished. Now there’s only a thin layer remaining, which we broke through. No telling how long this has been here.”

They continue past more of the chambers, all feeling incredibly old, the air musty and stale. James is glad it’s still breathable. As they pass one chamber, Miko hollers out when he sees something shining within.

James backs up and lets the orb’s light shine into the room, and they see several gold coins lying on a bier next to a corpse. “You going to take them?” James asks him.

Shaking his head, Miko says, “I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“Why?” he asks.

“Robbing from the dead is wrong,” he says. Then he glances to James and says, “Everyone knows that.”

Giving him a slight smile, James nods his head as they continue down the dug out pathway, leaving the coins where they found them. They come to where the way splits to the right or left, James takes the right.

After passing three more chambers of the dead, the passage abruptly ends. “Looks like they just stopped digging here,” he guesses. Turning around, he leads them back to where the passage had split, this time following the left fork.

When they pass the next chamber, something else catches his eye. Stopping, he returns to it and finds a corpse lying there with a sword across his chest. The sword, which at one time had been finely crafted, has now been eaten away by rust. The man had been laid out in his armor, obviously a warrior of some sort.

Returning to the passage, they continue down past several more chambers when again, the passage diverges. Either straight, or to the right. Being methodical, James again turns right.

This passage extends quite a ways, winding to the right and left as it comes to different chambers. All of the chambers are in the same crude style, some of the occupants are wrapped in cloth, while some are laid out as if sleeping. All of them have the look of having been here an awfully long time.

The interesting thing about the dead here, is that some are fairly well preserved while others are almost rotted away to skeletons. **Maybe different embalming techniques for the different social classes. But if that is the case, why are they all together? Never heard of different classes being mingled together. Interesting.**

As they move through the catacomb, Miko begins relaxing. He doesn’t lose his nervousness, but the panic he originally felt upon entering has long since subsided.

The passage they’re following abruptly ends again, so they again turn back. Coming to the juncture of passages, they turn right.

They follow this passage down past six chambers until it suddenly ends at a crude stairway going up. “This is encouraging,” James says as he begins to ascend the stairs.

“I hope it leads out,” Miko says from behind him.

“Me too,” agrees James.

Coming to the top of the stairs, they enter a small room, with more biers of the dead. This room looks to be
constructed slightly better than what they saw down below. Where the area below had looked to have been just dug out of the earth, here it looks more constructed. The walls are more uniform, though still consisting of dirt and earth.

The biers here aren’t just dug out of the walls. Instead, some are lined with linen and wood. The dead here looks to have been better preserved than those below.

“This area looks newer than the other,” observes Jiron.

“Yeah,” agrees James. He moves through the chamber to the opposite side where a doorway leads to a connecting hallway. The hallway is wider and slightly higher than its counterpart below. “We may be getting closer to the exit,” he announces.

“That would be wonderful,” he hears Miko exclaim behind him. He can’t help but smile at him.

Moving along the hallway, they pass more chambers. These contain more gold and other valuables for the dead. In one, he sees gripped in a corpse’s hands that are crossed upon its chest, a finely wrought golden chalice. *The Holy Grail?* He smiles at the thought. *I doubt it!*

Continuing on, they come to where the hallway they’ve been following intersects another. Now faced with three choices, they pause a moment.

“Which way?” he asks, glancing back to his friends.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jiron says.

So James turns again to the right and follows the hallway. After passing by several chambers, it opens up onto a large chamber, the largest they’ve yet seen.

A large sarcophagus rests in the center of the chamber and a chest sits at the foot of it. He moves into the chamber to inspect it more closely.

“What are you doing?” asks Miko from where he stopped at the entrance.

“Just taking a better look?” he replies.

“Why?” he asks. “Let’s get out of here!”

“Just a moment,” James replies. He moves to the sarcophagus and holds the orb over it as he examines the artwork. His eyes are drawn to the chest and he really wants to open it. If this had been a role playing game, he’d not even had hesitated. But he dares not risk it, he remembers the last time they opened a chest and the results.

The room itself is fairly unadorned, a lone tapestry which has long since fallen to rot hangs on one of the walls. His curiosity satisfied, he leaves the room and they move back to the juncture. Turning again to the right he follows the hallway down past burial chambers until it ends at a stone door set in the wall.

He gasps when he sees what is upon the door. The Star of Morcyth. “This must be a burial chamber for a priest of Morcyth,” he says. Taking out the medallion, he puts it into the recess of the Star on the door and the door begins to open.

Before he replaces the medallion back within his shirt, he notices a subtle glow emanating from it. He shows it to the others. “Never saw it do this before,” he says.

“Maybe it’s like back when we were trapped in the place with the skull pyramids,” suggests Miko.

“Perhaps,” James agrees, “but I’ve yet to encounter anything bearing the Star of Morcyth to be harmful.”

He moves through the doorway, holding the medallion out before him and enters a large chamber. A single sarcophagus rests upon a stand in the center of the room, the Star of Morcyth engraved upon the top.

The medallion flashes in his hand and the room seems to begin to glow with a soft, warm light. Next to him, he hears Jiron suddenly gasp. He looks toward the sarcophagus and sees a light begin to form next to it.

“James…” Miko begins to say as he tugs at his arm.

More curious than fearful, James continues to watch as the light turns into a ghostly apparition.

The ghost is a man in robes, hovering there next to the sarcophagus, and upon its breast is a medallion similar to the one James is holding. It’s face, hard to make out but looks human, is facing them.

James steps forward and says, “Greetings.”

The ghost nods its head and replies in a far off sounding voice, “Greetings, fellow priest of Morcyth.”

James glances at the medallion he’s holding and replies, “I’m not a priest.”

The apparition reaches out, almost touching the medallion he’s wearing. “The glow only comes from his priests, it manifests for no others,” the ghostly voice says.

“Who are you?” James asks.

“I am no longer,” the ghost explains. “I wish no longer to be.”

“Why are you here?” he asks the ghost.

“To guard, to watch, to bar, to wait,” the ghost replies.

“Guard what?” James asks.

“That which must not be found,” he says. “That which must never leave.”

“What must never leave?” he asks.
“The fire, the scourge, the ending,” moans the ghost.
“I don’t understand,” James says.
“Stolen it was,” the apparition says. “Stolen by us, never to leave. No, it must not be found!”
James glances back to his friends who look back at him nervously. Returning his attention to the ghost, he says,
“Who did you steal it from?”
“The name that shall not be spoken,” the ghost wails with great anxiety.
“What would happen if it is found?” James asks.
“Death! Much death at the hands of his followers,” cries the ghost.
Suddenly, the ghost begins wailing. The wailing increases to such intensity that they’re forced to cover their ears. When the wailing stops, the ghost cries, “One has come!” Again the intense wailing.
“Hope is lost!” it wails and begins moving in an agitated manner.
“What?” yells out James. “Who has come?”
“One who belongs to him that shall not be named,” cries the ghost. “He shall find it!”
Suddenly, in his mind, he understands. Abula-Mazki has entered the catacomb.
The ghost moves suddenly and comes to stand but inches from James. “You must take it!” it wails to him.
“Take it and hide it!”
“Where is it?” James cries out to the ghost.
“Above us,” the ghost replies. “You must find the Room of Stars.” He moves to the side of his sarcophagus and placing a hand upon it, says, “Within here, is the key.” Beginning to wail again, the ghost begins shimmering until finally dissolving into nothingness.
When the apparition is gone, they glance at each other.
James walks over to the side of the sarcophagus and tries to remove the stone slab covering it. “Help me!” he hollers back to the others.
Moving closer, they both grab a hold of the stone slab and with all three working together, manage to raise one side. Pushing the slab away from them, they begin to slide it across the sarcophagus where it drops over the other side, smashing into the floor.
Within, they see the body of the priest whose ghost had just spoken to them. Upon his breast is a golden key, three inches in length with a large diamond at one end. Reaching in, James picks it up.
“Come on!” he says as he runs from the room.
“What’s going on?” Miko asks him as he follows.
“Didn’t you hear what the ghost told us?” he asks.
“All we heard was wailing,” Jiron explains.
“He said that there is something here that the priests of Morcyth had been hiding from someone,” he tells them. “He also said that a follower of that someone is now here. I think Abula-Mazki has found the entrance to the catacomb and is now within it, hunting for us.”
“The priest told me I must find the ‘fire’ and keep it from him. It’s above us in the ‘Room of Stars’, whatever that means.”
“What happens if he should get it?” Jiron asks.
“The priest said ‘Death! Much death at the hands of his followers’. I don’t think we have much choice.” James hurries back to the junction and again takes the right.
He follows the hallway and comes to a set of stairs leading up. Taking them two at a time, he reaches the top and enters the hallway at a run. The hallway is constructed better than the ones below. It has worked stone for sides as well as frescoes and tapestries.
Rushing down the corridor, he comes to a door in the right wall. Upon the door is a faded picture of a diamond. He pulls out the key and finds the diamond on the door is a direct match to the one on the key. Placing the key in the lock, he turns it and opens the door.
The room on the other side is octagonal, with upraised sarcophagi upon the other seven sides of the room. Upon each is emblazoned the Star of Morcyth.
“This must be the room of stars,” he announces. Turning to Jiron, he says, “Keep watch here and if anyone comes, let me know.”
“You got it,” he says drawing his knives.
“Come with me,” he says to Miko as he drags him through the door and into the room.
The medallion on his chest begins to glow once more, the Stars on the sarcophagi begin to glow as well. The glowing of the Stars reveals that another Star has been engraved upon the center of the chamber floor.
James grabs Miko and they move to the center of the room.
“Why do I have to be here?” Miko asks as they approach the center of the Star.
“Quiet,” James tells him. Upon reaching the center, he takes the medallion and holds it up high. A high pitched note begins to be heard coming from all around. It grows steadily louder and louder.

Jiron is now bathed in the light coming from the Stars as he stands out in the corridor, watching in awe at what’s transpiring within the room.

Suddenly the note stops and all is silent, then the sarcophagi doors begin to open. When the doors are fully open, a warrior steps out of each and comes toward James. Each is heavily armored, bearing a longsword and a shield. The shield is embossed with the Star of Morcyth.

All but one stops when they come to within three feet of where he stands. Miko quakes in fear as the largest of the seven comes even closer. This warrior stops a scant foot and a half from them.

“That the Star should shine here once more is dire indeed,” the warrior says.

“One has come who serves he that should not be named,” James replies, hoping to get it right.

“Yes,” the warrior says. “I can feel his presence as he approaches. The Fire is no longer safe here.”

“I must retrieve it,” James says.

Shaking his head, the warrior says, “Only a son of this world may touch it. All others must surely perish.”

“But…” James begins to say.

Then the warrior raises one of his hands and points at Miko. “He must be the one,” he says to Miko’s horror.

Miko backs away and says, “N…n…no way.”

“James!” he hears Jiron call from the corridor. “You better hurry!” Then the clash of battle can be heard as Jiron engages with the enemy.

“Miko, you have no choice!” James says. “We can’t let it fall to Abula-Mazki!”

Suddenly they hear a grinding sound as the back of one of the sarcophagi begins sliding into the floor. The circle of warriors part, creating a way for Miko to move toward the passage revealed behind it. “Go,” the warrior says, “therein lies the Fire.”

“We’ll go together,” James says as he takes Miko by the hand.

From the corridor, they continue to hear Jiron fighting. Miko looks to James, the fear evident in his eyes as he slowly nods his head. Together they walk to the revealed passage and pass through the sarcophagus.

The passage only goes ten feet before opening up to a small room. A three foot pedestal sits in the middle of the room and upon it is a red ruby, easily the biggest ruby James had ever heard of. It has to be at least three inches in diameter. Coming closer to it, they can see light moving within it, like the flickering of a flame.

Miko looks to James and says, “What do I do?”

“I’m not sure,” he admits.

Miko comes closer to the Fire and hesitantly reaches his hand out to it. When nothing happens, he picks it up.

James studies his friend, worried, but doesn’t see anything happening to him.

Miko closes his hand around it and turns back to James, “It’s cool to the touch.”

“Put it in your pouch and let’s go!” he says.

Miko does as he says and they return to the Star room. The lead warrior says, “Go and protect the fire.”

“We shall,” says James. As he makes to leave, the warriors rush past him and out the door, engaging the enemy.

At the door, Jiron almost runs into them, both of them coming to a quick stop. “Who are those guys?” he asks him.

“Not really sure,” James says. He looks down the corridor and sees them fighting most effectively against the soldiers. “Let’s get out of here while we can.” One more glance back at the fighting and he sees the warriors have mowed through the soldiers like a scythe through wheat.

They begin running down the corridor in the opposite direction when James suddenly feels an intense prickling sensation. *Abula-Mazki!*

A feeling of evil and revulsion rolls over them like a wave. James is almost reduced to vomiting from the feeling of it.

“What was that?” Jiron asks.

“I’m not sure,” James replies once he’s regained control of his stomach again.

From up ahead, they hear movement. Holding the orb up, its light reveals a corpse shuffling around the corner ahead of them, others following behind. “He’s raised the dead against us!” James cries out.

“James!” hollers Jiron. “The Star!”

Holding the Star of Morcyth high, the light again comes from it. The dead only shy away from it, it slows them down but fails to stop them entirely.

“It’s not working!” shouts Miko when he fails to see the dead dissolve like the torsos had.

“The magic of Abula-Mazki must be sustaining them,” replies James. Turning to Jiron, he says, “Only one
thing to do.”

Nodding his head, Jiron moves to the fore where he begins laying into them. Hits that would normally drop a living man have minimal effect upon these.

“Don’t try to kill them,” advises James, “they’re already dead. Try to disable so we can get by them.” He sees Jiron nod as his tactics suddenly change.

One of the dead is wielding a sword and Jiron easily takes it from him. Then he uses the sword in one hand and a knife in the other as he begins cutting off limbs from the dead.

Miko suddenly cries out as a hand that had been severed from a corpse grabs his foot. Screaming, he kicks out with his other foot and knocks it away. In revulsion he sees the hand still moving, as it begins pulling itself across the floor toward them with its fingers.

“Come on!” he hears James yell. Turning back toward him, he sees that the last corpse has been sectioned and the way is clear. He hurries past the moving pieces of the dead that try to grab him as he passes, and joins James and Jiron.

They make a break down the corridor and come to another junction. The orb’s light shows shambling shapes coming from the right so they turn and go to the left.

Running down the corridor, they follow it for twenty feet before it turns sharply to the right. Around the corner, they come to a flight of stairs. Without pausing they race up them, taking them two at a time.

When they reach the top, they find themselves to be in an old cellar, perhaps of a temple of some kind. The ceiling has collapsed in several spots and it’s difficult to make it through to the doorway on the far side.

They’re going to have to to dig out some of the rubble in order to squeeze through. “Guard the door!” James yells to Jiron as he and Miko begin clearing the way.

“Hurry up man!” Jiron hollers over to them. A corpse comes into view at the bottom of the stairs and begins to climb up. Many more follow.

Digging as fast as they can, they finally clear a wide enough space for them to squeeze through. Miko goes first and James has to push him through for him to make it. He widens it a fraction more before he hollers over his shoulder, “Jiron, let’s go!” James quickly squeezes through and then turns to watch Jiron still fighting at the stairs.

Jiron kicks out at a corpse, knocking it back down the stairs. Then he turns and dashes toward the narrow opening and easily wriggles through.

Leaving the room, they follow a hallway for another twenty feet before coming to a flight of stairs going up. Rubble chokes it, but they are able to work their way up the stairs and soon find themselves outside under the moon and stars.

“Which way?” Jiron asks when they’re all out.

“Not yet,” James says as he pauses a moment and summons the magic. When he releases it, the ground begins to shake and they start to lose their balance. Suddenly realizing he went too far, he yells, “RUN!”

They follow him as he runs away from the entrance as fast as possible. Behind them, they begin to hear a roar as the shaking of the ground increases. They are thrown to the ground and all they can do is lie there. The roar intensifies as the shaking continues, James prays they’ll not be caught up in it.

When the ground finally stops shaking and they’re able to get up, they move cautiously back toward the entrance to the catacomb. The dust is thick and it takes a while before they can see clearly. When they do, the sight amazes them.

The cliff had collapsed and fallen into the canyon. The moonlight doesn’t show the extent of the damage but the edge of the cliff is now a lot further back than where it had been. The ruins they had climbed from are gone, probably lying somewhere in the bottom of the canyon.

“Hope that killed him,” Jiron says as he stares into the darkness of the canyon. From below, they can hear the sound of stone sliding down the slope.

“I do too,” agrees James.

“I don’t think we should stay here,” Jiron advises. “We better put as much distance between us and here as we can.”

In the moonlight, James nods agreement. They set out away from the canyon, ever mindful of the troops awaiting them at the northern end. Angling more east than north, they walk for several hours before stopping.

“Just a quick rest, and then we must be on our way,” James announces. “I’ll take first watch.”

He can see Jiron nod affirmatively and lie down. A glow suddenly appears from where Miko sits. Glancing over, he sees him holding the Fire in his hand. “Probably shouldn’t be touching it more than you have to,” he advises him.

Jiron sits up and looks over to Miko. “What is that?”

Miko gets to his feet and brings it over to them. “They said it was the ‘Fire’,” he explains.
“Fire?” he asks confused. “What does that mean?”
“It would seem it has to do with Dmon-Li,” James replies. “The priests of Morcyth had stolen it somehow and had secreted it back there,” he explains, gesturing back toward the canyon. He goes on to explain all that the spirits had told him.
“Man!” Jiron exclaims. “Now what?”
“I don’t know,” James replies. “But we better make sure that it remains hidden.”
“It’s so beautiful,” they hear Miko whisper. Looking over, they see him completely engrossed with the gem, his gaze fixed upon it.
“Miko,” James says, trying to get his attention. When Miko fails to respond, he hollers louder, “Miko!”
Starting, Miko looks over to James, his eyes not really seeing him.
“Put it away,” he tells him. “You need to get some sleep.”
Nodding abstractly, he returns the Fire to his pouch and promptly lies down. His snores can be heard moments later.
James moves closer to Jiron and whispers, “We’re going to have to keep an eye on him. Not sure if that will affect him in any way.”
“Yeah, it sort of looked like he was lost in it for a moment there,” Jiron whispers back. “Why don’t you take it?”
“I can’t,” replies James. “The spirit said ‘Only a son of this world may touch it. All others must surely perish.’ So I’m not sure what would happen, but I’d rather not take the chance.”
“Don’t blame you,” he says.
“Maybe when we get back to Cardri we can hide it somewhere,” he says.
“Maybe,” Jiron agrees.
James lies down and says, “Wake me in a couple hours, we’ll let Miko sleep.”
“Alright,” says Jiron as he gets up to begin walking in order to stay awake.
Chapter Fifteen

The following morning when they wake up, Miko is acting his normal self. Thoughts of the Fire don’t seem to be on his mind, much to James’ relief. James’ biggest worry is that it might affect him like the ring did to Frodo. They make an early start, none of them having had much sleep. Keeping an easterly direction, they gradually move toward the hills to the north.

Not long after they get moving, the sound of horses thundering across the plains alerts them to their danger. From the south, a band of ten riders are bearing down upon them. As they near, Jiron says, “Grey Wolf riders.” A moment later, James is able to see their pattern as well.

Miko asks, “We going to run?”

Shaking his head, James replies, “No, we’d never get away from them on foot.” He reaches down and picks up several stones from the ground and waits for them to come closer.

Suddenly, he arcs his hand back and takes out the rear rider, and then progressively works his way to the front. By the time he’s taken out five of the riders, he lets loose the power and…

∇\textit{Crumph!}∇

…the ground under the front riders explodes upward, throwing horses and riders into the air.

Jiron moves forward with his knives and advances on the two men who are still alive. Before reaching them, another stone flies and takes one through the chest. He engages the remaining man, catching his sword on crossed knives.

Kicking out, he connects with the man’s knee but fails to do any serious injury when the rider twists at the last moment. The rider backs up a step and then thrusts quickly with his sword.

Jiron easily deflects the blade to the left and follows through with his right knife, catching the man in the side. Then he brings his knee up hard into the man’s groin and he falls to the ground.

A swift kick causes the sword to fly out of his hand. Defeated, the man lies there, holding his side as he tries to stem the flow of blood.

James surveys the battlefield and finds the man lying at Jiron’s feet to be the only one left alive. He goes over to the dying man. “Do you understand me?” he asks the Grey Wolf rider.

“Leave him,” James says. To Miko he hollers, “Round up the horses and we’ll take them with us.”

“All of them?” Jiron asks.

“Can’t leave any here for him to use to give warning,” he says, indicating the injured man.

“I’ll give him a hand,” Jiron says after he’s finished wiping off his knives.

James stays near the injured man until they’ve managed to round up all the remaining horses, only five are alive and fit for travel. The others had either been killed, or had suffered grievous injuries when the ground erupted.

When they bring the horses over to where he waits with the man, he takes one and mounts. He gives the man on the ground one last look, knowing he’ll most likely not survive. Then they leave, moving due east.

Once they’ve passed beyond where the man can see them, they turn north and gallop toward the safety of the hills. Another hour finds them entering the foothills.

They move to the top of the first hill and pause a moment to get a view of the surrounding area. The plains to the south are devoid of anything moving upon them, other than the waving grass.

To the north, the hills progressively become higher until finally turning into the range of mountains they see further ahead. The hills also begin sprouting trees and James can see how the trees get progressively thicker as the forest extends to the distant mountains.

Moving down off the hill, they make their way more to the northeast as they wind their way through the hills. At a river flowing out of the hills, they begin following it upstream, further into the hills.

As the sun begins to set, they decide to find a spot along the river to make camp, one near the lee of a hill to better conceal them. James wades into the river with a sharpened stick and succeeds in catching two large fish while
the others get the fire ready. His legs cold from having waded out in the water, he huddles close to the fire for warmth.

Keeping the fire as low as possible so as not to announce their presence to whomever may be around, they cook the fish. James is glad to find some bread in a couple pouches that had been on the horses. Though it’s a little stale, he’s pleased to be able to have something other than just meat.

After the meal, while they’re sitting around the fire, James sees Miko begin to reach into his pouch to bring out the Fire. “Better leave it alone,” he advises.

“Why?” Miko asks, pausing momentarily in reaching for it.

“It needs to remain hidden,” he explains. “We don’t know if Dmon-Li has any spies in the area. But the last thing we want is for him to know we have it.”

Miko considers it a moment and then takes his hand away. “I guess you’re right.”

Jiron looks to James and says, “I’ll take first watch.”

“Good enough,” replies James as he settles down to get some sleep. He smiles when he hears Miko snoring from the other side of the fire. Sleep doesn’t come quickly, his mind is too full of the events of the last several days. What is he to do with the Fire? Obviously he’s supposed to keep it hidden and away from Dmon-Li, but how is he suppose to do that if he can’t even touch it? Questions and more questions, that’s all he seems to have since coming to this world. What I wouldn’t give for some concrete answers!

Sleep does finally come but it seems all too short before Jiron awakens him for his watch.

Up early with the sun, they move further north along the river, keeping a good pace as it makes its way through the hills. They continue following it for several hours before coming upon a road ahead of them.

Jiron moves forward to investigate and discovers the road goes north and south. He scans both directions to see if anyone is upon it, and is relieved to discover it empty. Going back to the others, he says, “It looks like it’s little used. To the north it crosses the river and continues on further into the mountains. It just disappears into the hills to the south, doesn’t look as if anyone is currently using it.”

“We’d make better time on the road,” Miko urges.

“But we’d run the risk of running into someone, as well,” James says.

“I’m with Miko on this one,” Jiron says. “Unless we want to abandon the horses, we probably better stay to the road. It’s unlikely they’d be able to continue through the mountains.”

James replies, “Alright, but let’s be careful.”

“You needn’t keep saying that,” Jiron tells him. “I’m not about to be careless.”

“Sorry,” apologizes James.

Moving out, Jiron takes the lead as they come out onto the road and turn to the north. The bridge where the road crosses the river is an old wooden one. It seems to have stood here for quite a long time, the horses’ hooves clatter as they make their way to the other side. Moving quickly, they head down the road and are able to make better time now that they’re on the road than they had along the river.

As they continue following the road, the hills begin to turn into mountains as the road follows a narrow path between them. The river had left them shortly after they crossed the bridge. It isn’t long before they can no longer hear it.

Suddenly from up ahead where the road curves around a bend, a group of men come into sight. James is shocked when he sees the extensive tattoos that cover them. Parvatis! Just like the ones from Korazan.

The two groups pause momentarily, both sides stunned to see the other there in the road before them. Then the Parvatis give a war cry as they draw their swords and rush to attack.

Miko turns his horse and is about to gallop away when Jiron suddenly kicks his horse and rushes to meet the charging warriors.

James readies a stone to throw and is about to when he notices that Jiron hasn’t drawn his knives. But instead is holding aloft the necklace with the three stones, the one the Parvatis back in Korazan had given him for defeating one of them in battle.

As he approaches the Parvatis, they suddenly come to a stop as they realize just what he is holding. Their demeanor changes quickly from one of antagonism to one of astonishment.

James and Miko come up behind Jiron as they hear him say, “May your swords drink deeply.”

One of the Parvatis, an older one, gives him a smile and replies, “May your knives drink deeply.” His expression subtly changes when he sees James and Miko ride up behind him.

“They’re my friends,” Jiron says to the Parvati who nods in response.

“Welcome, then,” the Parvati says to them all. “My name is Qyith, Warleader of the Eller Tribe,” he says.

Jiron replies, “My name is Jiron, and these are my friends, James and Miko.” They each give the Parvatis a
slight bow from the backs of their horses.

“How is it that you came to possess mounts of the Grey Wolf Clan?” he asks.

“They attacked us,” Jiron explains. “We killed them all and took their horses.”

The Warleader breaks into a grin as he says, “Truly, you are a formidable warrior.” He translates for his fellows who nod approvingly. Turning back to Jiron, he says, “We have no love of the Grey Wolf’s, they’ve been a blight upon us for generations.”

“You must come to my village,” he says to them. “We should feast and hear of the exploits of such a Shynti.”

“Shynti?” asks Jiron.

“Ah, that means a friend of the Parvatis,” he explains. “Any who bear the three stones is called such.”

“We don’t have time, I’m afraid,” he tells them. “We are pursued and must make all speed north.”

Qyith waves away the comment and says, “Not to worry, none shall harm you while you remain with us.” He says something to his men and one runs down the road to the south while the others turn around and begin running north. When he sees Jiron looking questioningly at him, he explains, “They’re going to spread the word a Shynti is here.”

James looks at the departing warriors worriedly, but takes Qyith at his word.

“Come,” he says. “Our village lies not far from here and tonight you may rest in safety. Tomorrow, you may go upon your way, should you wish.” He then turns and begins moving northward.

Jiron glances back to James who shrugs and then nods as he begins moving his horse to follow the Warleader. Qyith leads them down the road until it comes to a fork and turns to follow the right hand fork that runs due east.

They follow him for a couple hours before coming to the outskirts of his village. It’s a large collection of huts nestled in a small valley in the mountains. James sees many young Parvatis running around, playing at one game or another and the Parvati women can be seen in and around the various huts.

When they’re noticed arriving, the young ones come over to them and gather around to see the Shynti. Word must have already been brought here. “Do many Shynti come?” asks James as all three dismount.

Qyith shakes his head as he replies, “It’s been a generation at least since anyone has been named such.” He then faces the assembled members of his tribe and begins speaking in their tongue.

James can hear their names being told to the Parvatis gathered there as he tells the people about them. On the way to the village, they told him about the Gathering and their escape. They also told him about the fight back at Korazan. All this, he relates to his people.

When he’s done, Jiron is looked to with awe and many of the children come close to touch him, to see if he’s truly a real person. He endures their attention until Qyith shoos them away. “I ask your pardon,” he says to Jiron. “They’re just excited to meet an actual Shynti.”

“I understand,” he replies.

“Let me show you around our village and where you’ll be staying while you’re with us,” he says. Not waiting for a reply, he leads them into his village and begins to describe some of the things he thinks they’ll be interested in.

Jiron interrupts him and says, “I noticed none of the women have tattoos like the men do.”

He pauses and turns back to them. “Tattoos are only for the men, once they’ve attained manhood,” he explains. “Each of our young boys goes through a series of tests that bring him from childhood into manhood. If they survive, then they are given the honor of bearing the mark of the warrior,” he says as he gestures to the tattoos covering himself.

“Oh, I see,” Jiron says.

They come to a hut where Qyith abruptly halts at the entrance. “You may use this hut while you are here,” he tells them. “If you’d like, you may roam freely about the village. The feast will be later this evening when the others arrive.”

“Others?” asks Jiron.

“Yes,” he says. “A Shynti here is a rare thing. Many will wish to come and see you to pay honor.”

“I see,” he says, not altogether happy about all the attention.

“I must leave you now and ensure all is properly prepared for this evening,” he tells them. Turning around, he begins moving away from them, back the way they’d come.

“Think we’ll be okay?” Jiron asks James.

“I would think so,” he replies. “You seem to be some kind of celebrity.”

“Celebrity?” he asks.

“Someone famous and well liked,” he explains.

“I suppose,” he says.

They tie their horses to a post near the entrance and then go inside. There are four beds with an open stove in the center to allow for heat and cooking. Rugs and mats cover the floor giving the place a comfortable feel to it.
Miko stretches out on one of the beds and says, “This is nothing like Inius’.”

Jiron looks questioningly to James who says, “Inius ran an inn we stayed in that had the softest beds.”

Still, for all their stiffness, they’re still better than the ground. James lies down and turns his head toward Miko and says, “Better not take the Fire out here, we don’t want anyone to see it.”

Miko sighs and says, “I’ve already decided to leave it in the pouch.” He leans on one elbow and looks at James as he continues, “It makes me feel weird.”

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“It’s hard to explain, but I feel like it wants to suck me into it,” he replies. “That’s not exactly the feeling, I’m not sure how to describe it. But if I keep it in the pouch, then I don’t feel anything at all.”

“Then it may be a wise thing to leave it alone,” Jiron says from where he’s lying on his bed.

“I agree,” adds James. He’s relieved to be able to just lie down and rest. It seems lately, he’s been going from place to place, events propelling him along. He would really like to just stay in one place for a while and relax.

Coming suddenly awake, James realizes he had fallen asleep and that it’s now almost dark. Sitting up, he looks over to find Jiron and Miko are no longer within the hut. Getting up, he goes over and opens the door.

Outside, the village is lit with dozens of fires and hundreds of torches. Parvatis are everywhere, their numbers having swelled dramatically over the last few hours.

“James!” he hears Miko cry out to him but is unable to find him in the mass of people. Suddenly he appears out of the crowd, coming toward him, waving his arms. Several of the Parvati young boys are with him as well. “About time you woke up,” he said when he draws close.

Miko is wearing some of the Parvati attire and another of the boys is wearing his shirt. Apparently, he’s been making friends with the locals. “Where’s Jiron?” he asks.

“Over there,” he says as he gestures to the middle of the village. “He’s talking with many of the Chiefs and Warchiefs that have come from neighboring villages. Come on, I’ll take you there.”

James follows him as he leads him over to where a dense concentration of Parvati warriors have congregated. “…and then we raced for the pass, leaving the Gathering behind us,” he hears Jiron say to the assembled warriors.

He waves to James when he sees him approaching and the Parvati move aside, allowing him to come forward to stand next to him. “This is my friend James,” he tells them as he reaches his side.

The gathered warriors begin talking among themselves when his words are translated for them.

“When we got to the pass,” he continues in his narration, “James here brings the sides of the pass down and completely blocks it with rubble, keeping the Grey Wolf Clan from catching us.”

At that, the assembled warriors break into a cheer. “They don’t much care for the Grey Wolf Clan,” Jiron tells him.

“Yeah,” replies James, “I kind of gathered that.”

Next to Jiron is seated a wizened, old Parvati, heavily tattooed. “This is the Chief of the Eller Tribe,” he says to James.

James gives the man a bow and the chief gives him a slight nod of his head in return. “Welcome to our village, friend of Shynti,” the chief says to him.

“Thank you, Chief of the Eller Tribe,” James replies.

The chief says, “It’s been long since a Shynti has earned the right to walk among us. We are honored.” The warriors give a murmur of assent. He gets up from the ground, all the other Parvatis there rise as well. Motioning for them to follow him, he moves toward where the women have set up the feast.

“When you leave tomorrow, we’ll send an escort with you so you will have no trouble as you pass through our land,” he tells them.

“You are very generous,” Jiron replies.

He waves away the comment, leaning toward Jiron, he continues, “Many have asked to accompany you, actually. This way, it makes it seem an honor to them as well.” He gives Jiron a brief smile then resumes walking toward the feast area.

The feast area is a large cleared area, with dozens of large mats on the ground. Several fires burn in pits throughout the area to give light and warmth, already it’s getting cold. The chief leads them to a large mat at one end, and the other warriors along with the women and children, settle upon the others.

James looks out to a veritable sea of faces as he gazes over the Parvatis come to honor Jiron.

They sit there for several minutes as the last of the Parvatis come and take their seat. Then the chief stands up and begins talking to them. Though they can’t understand what he’s telling his people, the response from the crowd is positive, with several cheers erupting during the telling.
When the chief is done, he sits back down which signals for the feast to begin. Women and older children begin bringing food to the assembled people. The fare is plentiful and James is happy to see vegetables mixed in with all the meat. The chief looks at him as he loads his plate with just vegetables and James tells him, “I’ve had nothing but meat for days. These remind me of home.”

The chief gives him a grin and nods his head.

The veggies are good, not to the standard of his grandmother, but still good. Midway through the meal, the open space in front of the chief’s mat is the scene of acts of skill. Wrestling, fighting, and swordsmanship are all displayed to the Shynti.

“They’re really quite good,” Jiron tells James. “Better than any from the pits, but don’t tell Scar and Potbelly I said that.”

James smiles and shakes his head, “My lips are sealed.” Then he notices a stir of commotion coming from the far side of the feasting area. A runner dodges around those on the mats as he makes his way to the chief’s mat.

When he stops in front of his chief, he begins talking quickly and animatedly. James watches the reaction of those hearing him, and at first there is silence, then there is annoyance, then anger. Some begin standing up and shouting.

The chief stands up and hollers to them, bringing quiet to the feasting area. He shouts out a series of orders and warriors jump to their feet as they quickly run out of the area.

“What’s going on?” asks James.

The chief turns to him and says, “The Grey Wolf Clan has dared to pass our borders and now are moving here. At least two other clans are with them.”

James knows why they’re here, and he glances to Miko and Jiron. The looks on their faces show they understand as well.

“What are you planning to do?” Jiron asks him.

“Tell them to leave, or make them,” he says with determination.

“Will they?” asks Miko.

The chief glances at him and with an evil grin says, “I hope not. But we will not be the first to shed blood this night, if they leave. If not, WAR!”

He gestures for a young Parvati, a lad of around Miko’s age to come over, “Jobi here will take you along the road north. If war comes here, you should not be.”

Jiron holds out his hand and says, “Thank you, you and your people. True friends you all have been and glad am I to bear the name of Shynti.”

The chief takes his hand and gives him a brief nod. After giving the lad some instructions, he turns and begins calling his warriors to him as he moves to meet the Grey Wolf Clan.

The lad says, “We must hurry.” He leads them back to their hut where their horses are still tied. Mounting, they turn to follow the lad who goes over to where several other lads are mounted and waiting. A couple of the boys call out greeting to Miko, obviously they’ve met earlier. He mounts the remaining horse, and then they move to the rear of the village.

The lads take an almost hidden path through the trees as they lead them away from the village. They ride single file as they follow the path among the trees and around the sides of the mountains.

After a couple hours, the path takes them near a small lake nestled in among the trees. Winding their way around it, they come out upon the road and quicken their pace as they turn north. They don’t travel far before a band of a hundred Parvati warriors passes them as they run south. “They’re gathering the warriors in case of war,” Jobi tells them.

“Think there will be?” James asks him.

“Probably, there is little love between my people and the Grey Wolf Clan,” he tells them.

The road suddenly branches and Jobi takes the road to the west which crosses a river coming from a larger lake to their right. Shortly after they leave the lake behind them, another band of warriors, well over two hundred strong, pass them heading south.

James almost feels sorry for the Grey Wolf Clan if they should fight the Parvatis. Almost. They continue down the road, making as best time they can in the moonlight. An hour after the warriors had passed them, a smaller road branches off to the right, but Jobi continues leading them north along the main road. The other boys with them trail along behind, perhaps acting as guards.

The sky to the east is beginning to lighten with the coming of the dawn. As they continue down the road, the mountains begin to smooth off into rolling hills again. By the time the sun can be seen in the sky, they’ve completely passed out of the mountains and are among the foothills.

Jobi brings them to a stop and says, “This is where we must leave you.”
“Thank you for bringing us through your lands safely,” Jiron says.
“It was our pleasure,” he replies. “To the north is the keep which guards the borders of the Empire and the Kirken Federation. It’s to the east of the main road, so stay on it and you should be fine.”
“Kirken Federation?” asks James.
“Several kingdoms to the east have banded together to keep the Empire from conquering them,” he explains. “Alone, they could never have halted the Empire, but together, they’re very formidable. Hostilities have broken out between the Federation and the Empire recently, but if you stay to the main road, you should be able to stay clear of it.”
“Thank you again,” James tells him.
“You’re welcome,” Jobi replies.
“May your swords drink deep,” Jiron says.
“May your knives drink deep,” replies Jobi as he turns his horse as he and the other Parvatis gallop back the way they’d come.
“Think this Kirken Federation would help us out?” Jiron asks.
“The enemy of our enemy isn’t always our friend,” James replies. “We’d better stay clear of them as well.”
“Alright,” says Jiron. “Let’s move, we’re getting closer to the northern boundary of the Empire.”
“I know,” replies James. “I’m a little surprised to have made it this far.”
“Me too,” adds Miko.
They break into a gallop as they head down the road to the north.
Chapter Sixteen

As the road continues northward, it stays among the hills for several miles before beginning to ease back into the grasslands. From up ahead, they see a group of riders coming toward them.

Miko begins to turn off the road, but James stops him. “They’ve already seen us,” he tells him. “If we run, they’ll chase us just to find out why.”

He then turns to Jiron and says, “If we just ride like we belong, maybe they’ll go right past.”

“Either way, they’re going to be here in a few minutes,” Jiron replies.

“Just continue on and stay calm,” James says.

Miko moves closer to James, with Jiron just a few feet in front of them.

As the riders near, they can tell they are part of the Empire’s cavalry. James watches them approach, his heart beating rapidly and then they ride right on past. The riders give them a once over as they go by, but fail to stop.

Once they’ve disappeared to the south, they all breathe a sigh of relief. “Why didn’t they stop us?” Miko asks.

When James turns to look at him, he continues, “I mean, we don’t look like we belong here.”

“Most people see what they think they’re supposed to,” he tells him. “Since we were behaving normally and not acting odd, they assumed we belonged here.”

“When they get further south and hear about us, they’ll probably give the alarm,” says Jiron.

“Maybe,” he says. “Hopefully we’ll be further north and not have to worry about it by then.”

They continue moving north and Miko glances behind them every once in a while as he searches for the return of the riders.

A little past noon, they begin to see a town up ahead. It’s a fair sized town with a sizeable defensive wall. Many people can be seen moving along the outer perimeter of the walls, as well as guards walking along the top.

“We better steer clear of that,” Jiron says while they pause to consider their course of action.

“But which way to go?” asks James. “To the right looks to be hills but from what Jobi said, that may put us closer to the keep. Around the left side looks to be just plains with little chance to sneak by.”

“Let’s wait till dark,” suggests Miko. “Then we could pass by and not be seen.”

Nodding, James says, “That would give the horses a chance to rest as well.” Seeing how tired Miko is, adds, “We could use one too.”

They turn around and head back down the road several miles before turning off into the hills. When they’ve gone far enough into the hills that the road is no longer visible, they set up camp.

After the horses are staked out and they’ve had a bite to eat, Jiron climbs the hill overlooking the road in the distance. Lying down up there so as not to create a silhouette, he keeps watch while the others try to get some sleep. Able to do with little sleep, he doesn’t bother waking them up for a turn at watch.

From his vantage point, he can clearly see the road and it remains devoid of traffic throughout the rest of the day. By nightfall, when he determines it is getting dark enough to conceal them, he returns to the camp and awakens the others.

Upon reaching the far side of town, they pick the road up again and continue following it north. With the town now behind them, they’re able to once more make good speed.

The three quarter moon gives them plenty of light to see by. As it slowly makes its arc across the sky, they
move ever further toward the north. As it reaches its zenith, a band of riders can be heard approaching quickly out of the night from the east.

A shout can be heard coming from them, James looks and sees them there in the moonlight, heading straight for them. A crossbow bolt flies past as one of their pursuers takes a shot.

“Move!” James yells as he kicks his horse into a gallop. The other two follow suit as they race away from the approaching riders. Glancing back, he sees the riders turn to follow them. He can make out at least seven in the moonlight, there could be more in the darkness behind them, he’s not sure.

“We’re not going to be able to outrun them,” announces Jiron.

James glances back and sees the riders are continuing to gain slowly. “You’re right,” he agrees. He brings his horse to a stop and turns to face them. Jiron and Miko do the same just as a bola flies out of the dark and wraps around him, pinning his arms to his sides.

Losing his balance, James tumbles backward off his horse and thuds to the ground. He snaps the bola in half with a thought just as Jiron and Miko fall to the ground, bolas wrapped around them as well.

*Crumph!*

The ground under the approaching riders explodes upward, throwing them in every direction. James draws his knife and soon has Jiron free as the remaining riders approach.

Jumping to his feet, Jiron takes the severed pieces of the bola which had bound him and throws them at the approaching horsemen. One flies wide, but the other half connects with the lead horse in the chest causing him to stumble and throw its rider.

A stone flies and takes the remaining rider through the middle, gore exploding out his back.

Jiron engages the man who had just been thrown from his horse, his knives easily deflecting the sword of the rider. From behind he hears James yell, “Need him alive!”

Concentrating now on the sword and less on attack, he bides his time. Suddenly, he sees the maneuver he was waiting for. When the rider thrusts with his sword, he locks his knives together around the blade and with a twist of his wrists, the sword goes flying.

The rider tries to turn and flee, but Jiron tackles him and puts a knife to his throat.

James comes up to them and asks the captured rider, “Who are you?”

The rider just stares back defiantly.

“You are not of the Empire,” he says holding a bola. “This, if nothing else, would indicate that. I have not seen anything like this in the Empire before.”

Continuing on maintaining a defiant demeanor, the rider lies there uncooperatively.

“Are you from the Kirken Federation?” he asks. “That would be my guess, perhaps a raiding party?”

The man’s eyes flinch just enough for James to know he’d hit the mark. “Let him go Jiron,” he says.

Not taking his knife away, he says, “But they tried to kill us.”

Looking at the man, James asks, “If we let you go, will you return from where you came and leave us alone?”

The man stares at James a moment, considering the voracity of his words. Then, he nods his head affirmatively.

To Jiron, he says, “Let him go.”

Jiron slowly pulls the knife away from the man’s throat. When no attack is forthcoming from him, he gets slowly to his feet, never taking his eyes off the Kirken soldier.

As the man stands up, James tells him, “We are not of the Empire, we are from the north and are currently at war with the Empire ourselves.”

“Madoc?” the man asks.

“He is,” James says, indicating Jiron. Gesturing to Miko and himself, he says, “We’re from Cardri.”

The Kirken says, “We thought you to be the Empire’s men.” He looks around at his men lying dead around him before returning his attention to James, “A costly mistake.”

“We would not want to count the Kirken’s as enemies,” James says.

The man nods, “You are not, and I’m sorry we attacked you.” He goes over to a horse and grabs the dangling reins. “I must return and tell of what happened here. You’re welcome to come with me.”

Shaking his head, James says, “No, we cannot take the time, I’m afraid.”

“As you wish,” he says. He rounds up the other horses and then places the dead upon their backs, securing them into place. Then he ties the horses in line before mounting the lead horse. Then with a wave, he’s off.

They watch him as he disappears into the night with the bodies of his dead comrades. “It’s a shame they had to die,” James says.

“Fortunes of war, I’m afraid,” Jiron adds.

“Why didn’t we go with him?” Miko asks. “It seemed like a good idea.”

“We don’t want to get caught up in someone else’s war,” he says. “We’ve got our own problems and duties.”
“What duties?” he asks.
“Have you forgotten so soon?” he asks, pointing to his pouch.
“Oh, right,” he says then drops to a whisper, “the Fire.”
“Exactly,” replies James. “We can’t risk anyone getting their hands on it or even knowing about it.”

Getting back on their horses, they begin moving once more toward the north. They travel for several minutes when Jiron asks, “Just what did they hit us with anyway?”
“It’s called a bola,” he explains. “It’s a length of rope with weights at both ends. They twirl it and then let it fly at their target. If they do it right, then the target gets wrapped up and entangled.”

“Those things seemed pretty effective,” he says.

Nodding, James continues, “I’ve known them to be spiked and even have metal wires running the length of the rope to prevent it from being cut.”
“Nasty,” he hears Miko say.
“It can be,” admits James.

They ride on in silence as they eat up the miles. In a short while, they come to where a new road forms going west, into the heart of the Empire. Staying with the northerly route, they soon leave it behind.

After midnight, they stop for a quick meal of old rations, plus some from the Parvati’s. “You know,” James begins, “this riding at night is a whole lot better than riding in the day.”
“Yeah,” pipes up Miko. “No one can see us passing by.”
“Exactly,” replies James. “Maybe we can keep this up till we reach Madoc.”
“Maybe,” Jiron agrees. “As long as we’re able to find a place to hole up during the day.”

From up ahead, lights of a town begin to be visible. This town is a lot smaller than the one they’d skirted around earlier in the evening. Jiron leads them westward around it, making their way again through the farms and homes along the outskirts.

Once they made it to the north side of town, Jiron again leads them along the road to the north. The trees become denser as they move further away from the town. After only a mile or so, the trees become so thick, their upper branches virtually block out the light of the moon.

The road is quite dark now so James casts his light spell, just enough to be able to discern their way and stay upon the road. The night becomes stiller as they continue along the road through the forest. Off in the distance, they can hear the sound of wolves and other nocturnal creatures.

A shiver goes up James’ back as he remembers his first night in this world when poor Seth had been torn to pieces. 
If I would have known then what I do now, he would still be alive.

Several hours later, they come to a small river flowing to the south, a bridge had been built over it. The hollow sound of the horses’ hooves walking across reminds James of Ichabod in Sleepy Hollow. He almost expects to hear the maniacal laugh of the headless horseman as he comes charging out of the woods.

They continue through the forest for several more hours before the sky begins to lighten. Once it becomes bright enough, James cancels his light spell. The forest is a little less foreboding in the light than it had been in the dark.

“Should we find a spot to hole up for the day?” asks Miko.
“Naw,” replies James. “We’d loose too much time, daylight’s longer in the summer than the winter. Let’s ride another hour or two before we stop.”

Obviously tired and wanting nothing more than to get off the horse and sleep, Miko nods his head. James looks over to his friend, understanding his need, but they must continue to make time while they can.

He feels like they must be nearing the border, couple more days or so and they should be there. That’s when the fun is really going to start as they try to break through the lines. Hopefully, Madoc’s soldiers won’t mistake them for the Empire and attack. That’s been James’ biggest worry for the last day or so. Ever since the Kirken’s mistook them for the Empire and attacked, he’s been worried about other non-hostiles doing the same.

From up ahead, they begin to hear the sound of wagons coming their way. Jiron leads them off into the woods to hide as they approach. A small caravan of ten wagons and an accompaniment of twenty of the Empire’s cavalry slowly make their way by.

“Those wagons are coming from a mine,” whispers Miko.
“How can you tell?” Jiron asks him.
“I know, trust me,” he replies. “There must be a mining complex somewhere to the north.”
“I’m not destroying this one,” James announces a little too loud. One of the cavalrmen turns to look out into the forest in their direction as he pauses a moment.

Holding very still and quiet, they look through the trees at the rider as he continues to search. Another of the cavalrmen comes over to him and they begin having a quiet conversation. The other man looks out in their
direction as well, but after a couple more moments, he says something to the other and they both resume their place along the wagons.

Once the wagons have passed their hiding places and have moved further down the road, Jiron walks to the road and looks south after the departing wagons. When he sees the wagons are out of sight, he waves the others back onto the road.

“Sorry,” apologizes James for his lapse in judgment back there when he spoke too loudly.

“Don’t worry about it, nothing happened,” assures Jiron.

They turn and continue back toward the north. “Wonder what they were carrying that requires an escort?” Miko asks.

“Could just be so the Kirken’s won’t attack it,” suggests James.

“You’re probably right,” agrees Jiron.

“We’ll need to keep on our guard from here on out,” says James. “If this is an ore shipment route, they’ll probably have patrols or guards all along this stretch of the road.”

Jiron glances back to him and nods before turning back. They quicken their pace, anxious to get out of the confining forest.

Two hours later, they’re all getting fatigued, and the horses are starting to show signs of wear. They decide it’s time to stop and move into the forest, far enough from the road so anyone passing by will be unable to see them through the trees. Tying the horses to neighboring trees, they take a moment to clear a camp before settling down.

James takes the first watch, with Jiron taking the last. Miko hates the middle watch, he never seems to get adequate sleep when he does. During James’ watch, he hears horses moving fast from the north and disappearing to the south. He tells Miko about the riders when it’s his turn at watch.

Jiron wakes everyone up when the light in the forest begins to fade. They have a quick meal of stale rations before mounting up and moving back to the road.

After several miles, James begins to realize the trees here don’t seem nearly as thick as the ones the night before, light from the moon is able to filter down through them more effectively. The road is barely discernable in the faint light, but enough can be seen so James doesn’t have to create his orb.

They travel down the road for several more hours before the trees begin to thin out even more. The ground begins to rise and fall as they enter what seems to be rolling hills. “If there are mountains ahead, that would explain where those wagons had come from,” James says.

“We’ll see,” replies Jiron. Leading them on, he keeps a brisk, distance eating pace.

The road begins to wind through a series of increasingly tall hills and after it goes around a large one, the lights from a small village appear in the distance ahead. The road proceeds directly down the center of the village. There are not many buildings, kind of reminding James of a ghost town he once visited with his family.

“Do we go around?” Miko asks.

“The hills are getting pretty steep,” Jiron says.

“We may have no choice but to go through,” James tells him. “We can’t afford to stumble around in rugged hills at night.”

“There doesn’t seem to be any guards or soldiers around,” Jiron announces.

James gives the village a long look and nods his head, “You’re right, I don’t see any either.” He glances from one to the other before continuing, “Let’s chance it. Move in and pass through as quickly as possible.”

Moving quickly, not so fast as to draw undue notice, they move toward the town. As soon as they pass the first building, someone sitting on its steps calls a greeting to them.

Unable to speak the language, Jiron just waves as he continues on through. As they pass by the one who greeted them, the man calls to them again but they pointedly ignore him. Then from behind they hear the man obviously swear at them, Miko turns around and sees him waving his fist. The man soon stops and to Miko’s relief, settles back down on the steps.

Others call out to them as they pass through the town as well, and they hear curses follow them when they fail to respond to them.

At the outskirts on the other side of town, they breathe a sigh of relief as they pass the last building. They glance back to the town and see several people there staring after them but are making no move to follow.

“Guess we got off lucky there,” Jiron says once they’ve put the village behind them.

“Looks that way,” agrees James.

“I’ll be glad to be back where I can understand what someone’s trying to tell me,” Miko pipes up. “It’s unnerving when you don’t know what they’re saying.”

“I know what you mean,” agrees James.

The road continues to wind through steep hills, with little in the way of hiding spots should the need arise. They
continue along the road for several more hours, the hills continuing to be steep and inaccessible.

The light from another town begins to be visible from up ahead. This one is sizably larger than the one they recently passed through. There are many buildings and when they pause a moment to survey the area, they see guards walking the streets.

“We could pass by over there,” Jiron suggests, pointing to an area west of town.

James looks where he’s pointing and sees just a few buildings. The whole area is fairly dark, just some light escaping through several of the windows. Nodding, he says, “Looks like our best bet, let’s go.”

With Jiron in the lead, they stay as close to the sides of the hill as they can. They’re forced to pass close by one of the buildings and as they move past, the door suddenly opens and a man steps out.

The light from within the house illuminates them as they sit there on their horses, frozen in the man’s back yard. They stare at each other a moment when suddenly the man calls out and two dogs begin barking.

James sees two dogs run around the house and head straight for them as the man goes back in the house, shutting the door. He takes a stone from his pocket and throws it at one of the dogs, taking it through the head.

Jiron jumps down from his horse as his knives flash in the moonlight. The dog jumps for him and he twists as his knives strike the dog as it flies past. It falls to the ground and begins whimpering as blood flows from the wound in its side. The dog tries to get up but is unable and soon lies still as its life leaves it.

From the other side of the house, they hear the man running into town, raising the alarm. “That tears it!” exclaims Jiron as he gets back on his horse.

No longer trying to remain quiet, they race toward the north side of town and the road. Lights begin springing up as people fill the street to see what’s going on.

From up ahead of them, they see a dozen soldiers moving to block their escape. Kicking their horses to greater speed, they race to beat them to where the road moves back into the hills.

“They’re going to make it first!” cries out Jiron.

Crumph!

The ground under the running soldiers erupts, tossing them every which way. The few that remain, turn around and run back toward town.

Suddenly, James feels the prickling sensation of someone doing magic. “They’ve got a mage here!” he hollers at the others.

A wall of flame springs into being ten feet in front of them, the heat searing their skin. The horses cry out and come to a quick stop. James hears Miko yell, “James!” Turning to look, he sees Miko’s panicked horse running directly toward town, nothing he does seems to be able to alter its course.

“Miko!” he cries out as he turns to follow. The heat behind him increases and he realizes the wall of flame is moving quickly toward him. He concentrates and the wall begins to decrease in size as it slows in its approach.

Seeing James occupied with the wall of flame, Jiron says to him, “I’ll get Miko!” Without waiting to see if he’s been heard, he turns his horse and races into town.

James finally gets the wall of flame to vanish and he looks around, trying to find the mage. He locates the brown robe off to his right. Taking a stone from his pocket, he launches it at the mage and watches as the stone hits him, blasting out the back.

When the mage falls to the ground, he turns his horse toward town and moves to follow Jiron.

Jiron, upon reaching the edge of the town, is thrown from his horse when a crossbow bolt strikes it, knocking it out from under him. Jumping clear, he rolls and comes to a crouching position as he surveys the area.

Another crossbow bolt strikes the ground near his foot, he looks back along its trajectory and sees the crossbowman pulling the wire back. Without hesitation, Jiron sprints toward the crossbowman to engage him before he can get it ready again.

The crossbowman sees him approaching and throws the crossbow at him as he draws his sword. He thrusts at Jiron who deflects the sword with one knife and then follows through with the other, sinking the blade three inches into the man’s side.

The man falls to the ground and begins coughing up blood as his lungs fill from where Jiron’s knife had punctured them.

With him out of the way, he looks around and tries to see Miko, but can’t see him anywhere. The town is in total chaos, people running everywhere. “Miko!” he hollers, but no reply comes. “Damn!” he curses as he sets off into town on foot to locate him.

James reaches the outskirts just as the prickling sensation starts again. Looking around, he sees another brown robe just as the air between them begins to shimmer and a wave of force knocks him backward off his horse and into the side of the building.

Smashing into it with great force, James has the breath knocked out of him. As he tries to get his breath back,
he takes another stone out of his pouch and throws it at the brown robe. Again, the stone smashes through him and
the mage falls to ground.

Looking around, he doesn’t see anyone nearby. His horse had been spooked and is now running away out of
town. Moving cautiously, he stays against the building and moves further into town. When he sees Jiron’s horse
dying in the middle of the street, he momentarily fears for his friend. But when he doesn’t find his body anywhere,
figures he’s already moved further into town. The streets are beginning to clear of pedestrians as they begin to
realize fighting is going on.

James once more feels the prickling of magic being used. Just how many mages are in this stupid town?

Unconsciously, he glances back to where the last mage had fallen, and stops in shock. The mage’s body is no longer
there. He’d seen it fall after the stone had blasted a hole right through its chest, so just where is it?

Down the street in front of him, a brown robe stands as bolts of energy are fired toward him. He deflects them
by creating a shield and throws one of his last stones toward the mage. The stone blasts through his chest and the
mage falls to the ground.

James moves toward the building and pauses next to it as he watches the body of the fallen mage. After several
moments, it shimmers and then disappears. An illusion!

He begins to look around, trying to find where the mage actually is. From up the street, a brown robe begins
walking toward him. Without pausing, James launches a stone at the brown robe, and again, it falls to the ground
dead.

James bends down and picks up a stick from the ground. He casts a seeking spell to find the source of the other
mage’s magic and the stick begins to point to the building across from him. Canceling the spell, he searches all the
windows before he catches a movement out of the corner of his eye. Looking all the way to the top, he sees a
shadow moving upon the roof.

Gotcha! He begins to let the magic flow and directs it to the building the mage is on. Suddenly, cracking and
snapping can be heard coming from within it as the support beams begin to break in two. A section of the building
collapses and then the whole thing falls in.

A thick cloud of dust rises and a second later he sees the mage stumbling from the rubble, coughing and
holding his broken left arm tight to his chest. Letting the magic flow, he strikes out with an energy wave which
strikes the mage with great force. He’s propelled back into the wreckage and James can hear more boards break as
the mage smashes into them.

Moving toward the collapsed building, James hunts for the mage. A prickling sensation can be felt as the mage
begins a spell. James doesn’t wait for it to be completed, he lashes out with waves of force, pummeling the mage.

The prickling wavers and then stops. He creates the orb of light and moves into the rubble. He finds the mage,
lying unconscious as blood oozes from her nose and mouth. A woman? Unable to outright kill her, he leaves her
where she lies as he makes his way out of the rubble and back onto the street. He cancels his orb so as not to be a
beacon in the night for his enemies.

Back on the street which is now empty, he moves further into town to find the others.

Jiron, meanwhile, turns a corner and is knocked down by a running, terrified woman. The woman falls on top
of him and begins screaming. She claws at him, leaving red lines along his left forearm before she gets back up to
her feet and runs away down the street. He gets back up quickly and looks down the way the woman had come, he
can hear the clashing of swords. “Miko!” he cries out as he runs toward the sound.

As Jiron moves toward the sound of battle, a townsman rushes from a nearby doorway and hacks at him with
his sword. Easily blocking the attack, Jiron kicks out with his foot and hears a snap as the man’s knee breaks.

The man falls to the ground, and Jiron moves around him, leaving him there in his agony. James must be
rubbing off on me he thinks as he leaves the man alive behind him.

Suddenly, the sound of fighting stops and from around the corner steps Miko. Covered in blood and carrying a
ore covered sword he walks toward Jiron.

“Miko!” Jiron calls out but it doesn’t seem as if he’s hearing him. Running forward, he stops in front of him
and places a hand on his shoulder. “Miko, are you alright?” he asks as he shakes him slightly, looking intently in his
eyes.

Miko suddenly starts, as if seeing Jiron for the first time and replies, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Thank god!” Jiron says. “Let’s go find James and get out of here.”

Nodding, Miko looks at the sword in his hand, almost looks surprised it’s there. Tossing away the sword he
follows Jiron as they hunt for James.

As they run back down the street, they see him coming toward them. “You guys okay?” he asks as he comes
close and sees Miko there, covered in blood.
“We’re fine,” replies Jiron. Miko nods as well.

“Then let’s get out of here,” he says. He quickly surveys the area and sees an inn. Moving quickly, he leads them around back to the stables there. Entering the stables, they find a terrified stable boy who runs to his room and hides. While they are saddling three horses, they catch him peering out at them. Whenever he sees he is being observed, the boy ducks back inside the room.

When the horses are saddled, they mount and ride out of the stables. No one is there to challenge them. As they race out onto the street and make their way to the north side of town, they see people staring out of windows and from behind doorways.

If there are any guards or soldiers remaining, they’ve decided it more prudent to be absent than to stand in their way. They make it to the north road and quickly leave the town behind them.

After they leave, the townsfolk start to come out of their homes. They begin to take stock of the damage wrought by the intruders. The most ghastly sight of all is the area where the boy had walked out. A dozen soldiers lay dead as well as several of the townsfolk who tried to help, their bodies literally hacked apart. Some wonder what had visited their town that night. Many pray that it never comes back.
Chapter Seventeen

They find a small stream several miles past the town where they pause to allow Miko a chance to clean off the blood.

While he’s by the stream, James pulls Jiron aside and asks, “What happened?”

Shrugging, he replies, “I don’t know. I heard fighting and by the time I got near, the fighting was over and he walked around the corner.”

When he pauses a moment thinking about it, James asks, “What?”

“It’s just that, when I first approached him, he didn’t seem to be aware I was even there,” he explains. “When I took him by the shoulder and shook him, that’s when he became aware of me.”

They both turn to look at their friend over by the stream. James is worried about him, not sure what happened. Maybe he was just in shock over the fighting, he hopes that’s all it was. But how had he even survived?

When Miko finishes cleaning himself as best he can, they once more mount and quickly put distance between themselves and the town. He’s not sure when it will materialize, but James is positive that pursuit will be forthcoming, and soon.

As they ride, James keeps an eye on Miko but he seems his same old self and soon quits worrying about him.

The hills begin to fall away as they move further away from the town until they finally pass into grasslands once more. As the road starts to turn more to the west, James suggests cutting cross country across the plains in order to maintain a more northerly route. Everyone is in agreement with the idea so they turn off the road, making their way into the grasslands.

As they cross the grasslands, the moon begins to reach the horizon, what light it gave them about to disappear. Once it sinks below the horizon, travel becomes more risky as they only have the light from the stars to guide them. Like ghosts, they move silently in the night, hoping there are no holes or anything else for their horses to trip upon.

Throughout the night, they maintain a quick pace, pausing now and then to allow the horses to rest and grab a bite to eat. When dawn approaches and the sky begins to lighten, they find themselves still in the middle of grasslands. Off to the northeast, the lightning sky silhouettes a range of tall mountains.

“We’re pretty exposed here,” says Jiron.

“I know,” agrees James. “But not much we can do about it now.” He glances back to Miko and sees him asleep in the saddle. Despite being asleep, he’s somehow managed to remain on his horse. James cracks a slight grin at the sight.

They continue on as the day gradually brightens until finally the sun tops the mountains to the east. With the sun comes the heat of the day, James can tell it’s going to be a hot one.

As the sun makes its way up into the sky, they see a sizeable city ahead of them. This one is even bigger than the previous one. It even has a sizeable defensive wall. A small keep can be seen situated near its center. Not wishing to take the chance of being noticed by the men patrolling along the top of the wall, they turn east and move quickly toward the mountains in the distance.

They see many people moving outside the walls but none seem to take notice or even care that they’re there. Suddenly, horns can be heard coming from the city. They turn in panic, expecting soldiers to boil from the gate in pursuit. Instead, they hear answering horns sound from a large force of men consisting of both foot and cavalry approach the city from the east.

Turning south, they gallop until the city and army are no longer visible. They then slow a little to save the horses and again turn more Easterly.

“Think that was a force coming back from Madoc?” asks Jiron.

“Maybe,” replies James. “Of course it could be one coming back from a battle with the Kirken Federation as well.”

“Either way, it would be best to avoid that city,” suggest Jiron.

“I agree,” Miko adds.

“We better head for the mountains and try to keep as much distance from those forces as possible,” James tells them.

“Good idea,” says Jiron.
Moving quickly, they continue pushing for the mountains to the east. The mountains continue getting larger on the horizon until they reach the foothills at their base.

“Man, can we stop?” James hears Miko ask in a tired voice from behind.

“Give us a minute or two to find a good spot,” he tells him. “And then we’ll rest until dark.”

Miko nods tiredly as they continue further into the hills. When they finally find a spot to make camp, he gets off his horse and in less than a minute, has laid out his blanket and fallen asleep.

“Never seen him that tired before,” says James. “He didn’t even eat anything, and that’s odd.”

“We have been pushing hard with little rest the past few days,” comments Jiron. Even he is showing signs of fatigue.

James glances over to the sleeping Miko and says, “Let’s split the watch and let him sleep.”

Nodding, Jiron replies, “Okay with me.”

They get the horses taken care of and then build a small fire to roast a couple rabbits that James kills. He is surprised when Miko doesn’t wake up to the smell of the rabbits roasting. When they’re fully cooked and ready to eat, he goes over and wakes him up.

“Tired?” he asks him when he gets up and comes over to the fire.

Nodding his head, he replies, “Yeah, I feel more tired than I ever have before.”

“We’ve been on the go for a long time, it seems,” James tells him. “I think we’re all reaching the point of exhaustion.”

From the other side of the fire, Jiron adds, “You’ve been taking the mid watch as well, which really plays hell on your sleep.”

“I suppose so,” he says. He eats the remainder of his portion of the rabbits in silence, then promptly returns to his blanket and in no time at all, his snores can be heard.

“He could be getting sick,” suggests James.

“Maybe, but he seems okay, just tired,” replies Jiron. “I don’t feel that tired actually, why don’t I take the first watch?” The dark circles under his eyes belies that statement.

James is more than happy to allow him to take first watch. Lying down away from the heat of the fire, he pulls his blanket over him to shield him from the sun. As exhausted as he is, it takes a while before he’s finally able to fall asleep under the heat of the midday sun.

Several hours after James had fallen asleep, Jiron begins to hear the sound of horses coming their way through the hills to the east. He moves to the top of a nearby hill and looks out at the approaching riders.

There are eleven riders, all looking like they just came from a battle. Bandages and blood soaked clothing can be seen on each and every one. They don’t really have the look of the Empire’s men and he lies there upon the hill, watching them as they move closer.

Suddenly, he gasps when he recognizes one of them. He backs down from the hill and begins to move around it as he makes to intercept their path. When the riders are close, he steps out in front of them.

They come to a sudden halt and begin to draw their weapons when Jiron looks at the one he recognizes and says loudly, “If you ain’t the sorriest piece of meat ever to be hauled out of the pit!”

“Jiron!” the rider cries out when he recognizes him. “He’s a friend!” he hollers to his comrades as he gets down from his horse and rushes over. Wrapping his arms around him, he gives Jiron a big hug.

“Easy, Fifer,” he says, “You’ll break my back.”

“I thought you dead!” Fifer exclaims. “How’d you escape the City?”

“That’s a long story,” Jiron replies. He motions over his shoulder and says, “My camp is over that way, would you and your friends care to join us?”

“Us?” Fifer asks. “Who else is with you?”

“No one you’d know,” he explains.

When Fifer’s comrades come over, he turns to them and says, “This is Jiron. We fought in the pits together, the deadliest man with two knives you’ll ever see.” Then he turns back to Jiron and asks, “Is Tinok with you?”

“He was, but we got separated some time ago,” Jiron tells him as he begins to lead them back to where James and Miko are sleeping.

“At least he survived the fall of the City,” he says. Gesturing to one of his comrades, he says, “This here is Miller, he’s our leader.”

Jiron gives him a slight bow, “Glad to meet you.”

“You as well, Jiron,” Miller replies. “Fifer here has constantly told us about the pits and the fighters there. It’ll be good to have you as one of the team.”

James is awake and looking anxiously in their direction when they round the hill. When he sees Jiron smiling
and unconcerned, he visibly relaxes and returns the rock to his pouch.

Miko starts awake, at first disoriented but then comes to his senses. When he sees the band of men coming toward them he at first fears attack, but then like James, relaxes when he sees Jiron’s calm demeanor.

“James, Miko,” says Jiron as they reach the camp. “This here is Fifer, a friend from the pits.” He claps him on the back and then indicating the leader of the group, saying, “And this is Miller, the leader of this band.”

“Greetings,” James says. Miko remains quiet, unsure how to take all this. “Just what brings you all this way into the Empire?”

“We’re on the trail of a force traveling south,” Miller says. “You wouldn’t have seen them, have you?”

“As a matter of fact we did, earlier today,” replies James. “There’s a town to the east a few hours away, I believe they were heading toward it.”

Miller and Fifer exchange glances that tell James this news was not what they had hoped to hear.

Turning to Jiron, Miller asks, “Now that you know our business, would you mind telling us yours?”

“We rescued James’ friend Miko here from slavers,” Jiron explains. “Now we’re just trying to get out of the Empire.”

“Why are you pursuing that army?” James asks.

Fifer looks to Miller who nods his head. Fifer turns back to them and says, “Several days ago, there was a major battle between the forces of the Empire and those made up of Madoc’s forces as well as allies who’d come to help.”

“Our general, Lord Pytherian, was captured when the Empire made a bold attack on our flanks. A force of cavalry had cut their way through the lines and before anyone could stop them, had broken through to the command area and taken the general.”

“And you’re trying to rescue him?” James asks.

Nodding, Fifer says, “We must. The alliance is beginning to fall apart without him. Most only joined because he was in command. Without him, the opposition to the Empire in this area will simply disappear.”

“It’s worse than that,” interjects Miller. “Suspicion has been growing that one faction or another had a hand in his capture. If he’s not returned, there may be conflict between the different members of the Alliance as they begin accusing each other of the deed.”

“Join us!” exclaims Fifer. “We must get him back or the Empire will expand unchecked until all of Madoc lies under its thumb!”

“What do you plan to do?” James asks.

“Now that we know where he’s been taken,” Miller explains, “we’ll go to this city and find a way to get him out.”

“Give us a moment,” James says as he nods to Jiron and Miko. Moving away from the others, they talk quietly among themselves.

“We should help them,” Jiron says. “If things are as they say, we have no choice.”

“But we don’t know that it is,” James replies. “We just have their word.”

“Fifer wouldn’t lie to me,” Jiron asserts. “We’ve known each other too long.”

“Okay, let’s say what they say is true,” James begins. “Dare we risk what we carry to help?” He points to the pouch at Miko’s waist wherein the Fire lies.

“I know,” says Jiron.

“What do you think Miko?” James asks.

Surprised at being asked, Miko says, “I say we risk it. The Empire is a blight upon this world that must be hindered in any way.” He says it with such conviction that James is taken aback by it.

Glancing from one to the other, he comes to his decision. “Alright, we’ll help,” James tells them. “But we stick together, agreed?”

Miko nods his head and Jiron says, “Agreed!”

Going back over, they tell them that they’ll help them regain Lord Pytherian.

“Great!” Miller says. “Now, show us where this city lies.”

Suddenly, James realizes that they’ve only gotten a couple hours of sleep and that Jiron has had none. “We should wait until nightfall,” he says. “We are on the point of exhaustion and need to rest before embarking on this venture.”

“Lord Pytherian may not have that much time!” Miller exclaims. “We go now!”

“Then go!” James exclaims with impatience. “You scout around and we’ll show up later, after sunset.”

“That is unacceptable!” blusters Miller. “When you agreed to join my band, you agreed to follow my orders. I say we go now!”

James gets in his face and shouts, “We did NOT agree to join your band, and we certainly are NOT under your
orders! If you want our help, you will have to wait until this evening, I’ll not jeopardize our lives because of your impatience!” Standing there eye to eye with him, James can see his face beginning to turn red, obviously he’s not used to having his orders challenged.

James turns his back on him and walks away.

Shhhhh!

He hears Miller’s sword leaving its sheath. Turning around, he sees Jiron has already moved to position himself between Miller and James. The others of Miller’s band draw their weapons as well just as Fifer steps between them.

“Enough!” he cries out. Looking to Miller, he says, “These are allies! And friends! They’ve agreed to help, but even I can tell they’re dead on their feet. As they are now, they’d be little help in rescuing Lord Pytherian.” He looks Miller in the eye as he says in a calmer voice, “They need to rest. We can scout the city and allow them that time. When they’re able to help us, we’ll know better what to do.”

Getting his anger under control, Miller returns his sword to his sheath. A second later the rest of his band follows suit. “Very well,” he says as he turns his attention to Jiron. “We’ll meet you to the east of the city after sunset.”

“Agreed,” Jiron says.

Miller and his band mount their horses again and then head west toward the city. Fifer gives Jiron a shrug and a slight smile as he follows his leader.

“How did he ever get in charge of a band of men,” James says.

“Probably knows someone,” replies Jiron.

“You get some rest,” he tells Jiron. “I’ll take the rest of the watch.”

Yawning, Jiron replies, “Sounds good.” He spreads out his blanket and lies down under the afternoon sun. Both he and Miko slip into sleep in very short order.

As he sits there waiting for night to come, he shakes his head. Another city, more danger. Will it never end?

He took an instant dislike to Miller. Fifer wasn’t so bad, but that Miller, he could definitely do without.

Shortly after the sun sets, James gets everyone up. After a quick meal, they get mounted and then make for the rendezvous with Miller. It takes them a couple hours before the lights from the city appear on the horizon.

They keep to the east of the city as they hunt for Miller’s band, which is quite difficult in the dark of night. The moon hasn’t risen yet, so the only light they have is that of the stars. Off further to the east of the city, they see a small fire burning and Jiron leaves them behind while he goes to investigate.

He doesn’t get too far before they see the fire being kicked out and extinguished. As he returns with Miller’s band, James can hear Miller saying, “…long enough. What kept you?”

“We slept till dark and then it took us a couple hours to get here,” Jiron replies. “Relax, we’re here aren’t we?”

“What did you discover?” James asks Miller when they reach him.

“There are two main gates, one to the north and one to the south,” he explains. “There are also smaller, auxiliary gates to the east and west. Those may afford us our best chance for entering the city.”

“Do they close them at night?” asks Jiron.

“They closed all but the south gate once the sun went down,” he says. “There’s a contingent of guards there watching all who enter.”

“Perhaps someone could sneak in through the south gate and then go over to the east gate and open it?” suggest James.

“With those guards there?” Miller asks.

“Sure,” Jiron replies. “Just appear like you belong and they’ll most likely not say anything to you.” He glances to James and gives him a grin, “We’ve done it before.”

“True,” James replies, “we have.”

“Okay then,” Miller says. “You go in and open the east gate and let us in.”

Jiron looks to James who nods agreement. “Give us an hour once we’re inside,” he tells Miller.

Miller nods his head, “Alright.”

James, Jiron and Miko turn their horses toward the south gate, leaving Miller and his band behind them. Once they’ve put some distance between them, Jiron says, “Glad they’re not coming with us.”

“Me, too,” he agrees. “There’s just something about that Miller that bothers me.”

“Think he’s a traitor?” asks Jiron.

“Nothing like that,” he replies, smiling. “It’s just his personality. It grates on me like fingernails on a chalkboard.”

“What’s a chalkboard?” asks Miko.

“Something from where I grew up that makes a horrible noise when you run your nails across it,” he explains.
“Oh,” grunts Miko. As they near the south gate, they see many people going in and out. Many buildings spread outward from the gate, inns and other such business as cater to travelers. “How are we going to play this off?” Jiron asks.

James points over to a single story building and says, “Look.” Hanging around the building are lines with clothes hanging from them. From the looks of it, the building is a laundry. There’re lights coming from the windows of the building indicating someone is still at work inside.

Jiron nods his head as they move in that direction. “Wait here,” he tells them as he gets down from his horse and hands James the reins.

Moving slowly and carefully, he makes his way over to the clothes. After a careful inspection and a quick look around to see if anyone is close, he begins taking clothes off the lines. Once he has his arms full, he hurries back to James and Miko where he passes out the clothes.

They don the native attire and then tie their horses to one of the clothes lines before they begin moving toward the gate. The flow of people in and out of the gate isn’t great, but enough for it to be fairly constant even this late at night.

James notices how the guards will every once and a while pull someone aside and talk to them, inevitably letting them continue to pass through. His pulse starts to race when he realizes they’re doing that. Should they be asked to step aside, they’ll quickly be found out.

When they’re within ten people of entering the gates, one of the guards begins walking toward them. James casually reaches into his pocket and takes a stone out, holding it ready. The guard continues to approach them and then says something. James begins to panic when he feels Jiron’s hand on his arm and whispers, “Steady!”

The man in front of them steps out of line and moves to the side with the guard. Relief washes over James as they continue to advance toward the gate. Giving Jiron a sidelong grin, they pass through the gate and enter the city.
The city is a bustle of activity, in many ways the same as any other. Even though it’s night, there are still many people out and merchants can be heard as they hawk their wares to those passing by. The crowds of people are beginning to disperse as the night progresses and some shops are in the process of closing for the evening.

Jiron directs them to a small alley adjacent to a store where they enter and move far enough away from the street until they're hidden from the view of those passing by. In a hushed voice, he asks, “How do you plan on opening up the east gate?”

“I don’t,” replies James.

“But we told them we would,” argues Jiron.

“Not exactly,” James said. “Besides, once the gate is opened, we’d soon be found out. Something like that would be sure to draw unwanted attention.”

“I suppose you’re right,” says Jiron.

“Now,” begins James, “do you know anything about this Pytherian?”

“Heard his name a couple of times,” he tells him. “Like Miller said, he’s supposed to be some sort of great general. I think he is related to someone on the Ruling Council in Madoc, not sure who though.”

“Ever seen him?” asks James.

Shaking his head, he says, “No. How are we going to find him?”

“Not sure,” admits James. He looks over the tops of the houses to the Keep near the center of the city. Pointing to it, he says, “But considering whom he is, he most likely would be there.”

Looking where James is pointing, Jiron says, “You’re probably right, but how are we to get in there?”

“Haven’t a clue,” he tells him. “But that hasn’t stopped us before.”

Jiron just nods in response.

James turns to Miko and asks, “You ready?”

“Let’s do it,” he says with a startling eagerness. James gives him a sidelong look and then moves to follow Jiron as he walks out of the alley.

Upon entering the street, he follows the main flow of people down for several blocks before they come to another main road which crosses theirs. That road bears more toward the Keep than the one they’re on so Jiron turns and follows it.

As they continue toward the Keep, the amount of people on the street begins to steadily decrease. The street leads to the gate into the Keep area where two guards are standing watch. While they pause and observe those going through, they notice that the guards give comments and greeting to practically everyone who passes.

“Just about everyone who goes through that gate is probably known to them,” states James.

“I would think so,” agrees Miko.

“How are we to get through?” asks Jiron.

They move to another alley while they ponder the problem. When no answer is forthcoming, Miko says, “We could try the sewers.” When both Jiron and James look to him, he continues, “There has to be a spot where the sewers in the Keep and the sewers in the city intersect. If we can find it, we could walk under the walls.”

By the look on James’ face, he’s obviously not liking this idea. Jiron on the other hand, is nodding and giving Miko a grin.

Miko says, “If we look around a bit, we’re sure to find an access to the sewers.”

“Good idea,” says Jiron, patting him on the back.

“Alright,” James says with little enthusiasm. “Let’s see what we can find.”

They move down the alleyway and along several streets before finding a water runoff drain that they can use to gain access to the sewer. Making sure no one is watching, Jiron squeezes through and begins to descend down the rungs set into the wall to the bottom. James and Miko follow shortly afterwards.

As James begins to climb down the slime covered rungs embedded into the side of the sewer, the smell hits him. Trying not to gag, he continues down until he’s standing next to Jiron on a ledge running next to and slightly above the main flow of the sewer.

Suddenly, the orb springs to life, giving them light to see. James moves over to allow space for Miko as he
reaches the bottom.

The ledge they are standing on is a foot wide and there is one running on both sides of the main flow of the sewer, allowing people to walk without having to step into the filth flowing by below. “Wish Bearn’s sewer would’ve had this,” Miko says.

“Me too,” agrees James. “The keep was to the north of here so we should try to head in that direction.”

“Follow me,” Jiron says as he begins moving north along the sewer’s ledge. They follow him for a hundred feet before coming to where the sewer tunnel splits, one going northwest and the other going northeast. Jiron glances back to James who indicates he should follow the northeast passage. Giving him a nod, Jiron turns to follow it.

They pass several more access ladders leading up into the dark, but they continue on past. Opening up on their left, another sewer passage connects to the one they’re in and is blocked by thick iron bars spaced half a foot apart.

“That’s got to be it,” says James. The iron bars would have been put there to prevent unauthorized access to the Keep.

“I would think so too,” agrees Jiron. “Now, how are we to get through?”

“Leave that to me,” James says as he looks for a way to get to the bars without having to step in the muck.

Miko sees him as he is looking around and smiles. Then he says, “I think there’s no other way but to step into the flow.”

Sighing, James replies, “I know.” Gritting his teeth, he steps off the ledge and into the main flow of the sewer. His leg sinks a foot and a half into the filth and he almost loses the contents of his stomach from the stench that produces.

As he pauses there in the flow, Jiron says, “You okay?”

He just shakes his head. How can he explain to them just how much this nauseates him? Taking several more steps, the muck making a sucking sound every time he pulls his foot out, he makes it over to the bars.

Standing there in front of the bars, he begins to consider the best way to get through them.

“James!” Miko whispers urgently.

When he turns back to look at Miko, he sees him pointing down the sewer where it continues. He glances to where he’s pointing and sees a light coming toward them. Quickly canceling the orb, he plunges them back in darkness as they watch the light approach.

A lone man is approaching, the flickering of his torch becoming brighter with every step he takes. They can hear him muttering to himself as he walks along the ledge, the same ledge Miko and Jiron are standing upon.

As he continues looking at the approaching man, he sees a shadow begin to move toward him. A glint of reflected torchlight from a knife blade tells him Jiron is moving to intercept the man.

Wishing there was another way, he stands there silently as Jiron moves closer. Then there’s a cry as the torch falls into the sewer and is quickly extinguished. “It’s okay now James,” he hears Jiron say.

The orb blossoms into light once more and he can see Jiron moving back toward them. He sees James looking at him and he says, “He’s not dead, just unconscious.”

Relieved, James turns back to the bars and begins to work the magic to bend the bars enough for them to squeeze through. When the bars begin bending, a vibrating noise can be heard coming from them.

Once the noise stops, James glances back to them and says, “Let’s go.” He squeezes his way in through the bars and then stands there as the other two make their way through the filth and join him on the other side. Then he again uses the magic as the bars begin to move back into place. By the time he’s done, his head is beginning to hurt and his breath is a little labored. Turning back to the others, he says, “That was tougher than I thought.”

“You alright?” Jiron asks, concerned.

“I’ll be fine,” he assures him. “Let’s go.”

Jiron again leads them as they move down the sewer. James is certain they are passing under the wall of the keep area, or soon will be.

This section of the sewers has no ledges upon which to walk. The sewer here is not as deep as the other had been either, much to their relief. They pass by another set of rungs leading up and Jiron pauses as he glances back to James.

James shakes his head and says, “Let’s move further in toward the keep, that one would probably come out in the outer courtyard area. We need to find access into the main keep.”

Jiron nods and then turns back as he continues down. Several more sets of rungs come and go before they decide to stop and investigate.

“Just go up and see if you can tell where we are,” suggests James.

Placing his hand on one of the rungs, he replies, “I understand.” Then he quickly climbs up until he disappears into the darkness.

A thud can be heard above them, probably from a trapdoor or something that he had to open in order to leave
the sewer. Several minutes pass before they hear a quiet thud again and soon see Jiron descending the rungs.
“These rungs lead to the basement of some kind of home,” he says. “I didn’t move too far into it before finding
a window. We’re about a hundred feet south of the walls of the Keep itself.”
“Good,” James exclaims. “Let’s move on then and try to find the one we need.”
Nodding, Jiron again takes the lead. When they come to a junction of sewer passages, he moves to follow the
one that’ll bring them closest to the Keep. They follow the new passage for a little over a hundred feet when a set of
rungs becomes visible ahead of them.
“This might be it,” Jiron says as they reach them.
“Go up and see,” James tells him.
Jiron quickly climbs up into the darkness and then they hear his voice calling down, “It’s clear, come on up.”
Miko goes first, with James right behind. The light from the orb shows Jiron and Miko standing in a barren,
small room with a single wooden door as the only exit.
When James finally exits the sewers, Jiron indicates the door and says, “It’s locked. Can’t hear anything from
the other side.”
“Can you open it?” he asks.
Taking out a knife, he says, “There’s only one way to find out.” He moves to the door and begins working on
the lock. James closes the trapdoor to the sewers, in an attempt to block off the stench, but soon realizes that they’re
the source of the intense odor. That could cause a problem as they move through the Keep.

**Click!**
He looks to Jiron who has a smug expression on his face. “It’s open?” he asks him.
Jiron nods in reply.
James cancels the orb to avoid it being seen as Jiron begins to slowly push the door open. The hinges squeal as
it opens, protesting after long years of not having been used.
It’s dark on the other side of the door. Jiron moves out and says, “Need the light.”
Soft light fills the room as the orb springs to life once again and partially illuminates the passage running
The passage extends in both directions, doors lining both sides at three foot intervals. Each door is wooden,
sturdily built with a small window at eye level, as well as a lock similar to the one Jiron had just opened.
“Looks like cells,” James guesses.
“Must be in the lower dungeon under the keep,” Miko says. Turning to James he asks, “Would this be where
they’re holding Pytherian?”
Shaking his head, James replies, “I wouldn’t think so, but you never know.”
“How far?” asks Jiron.
“One’s as good as another,” replies James.
So Jiron leads them down to the left. All the cells are quiet, no sound comes from them. James pauses at one of
the doors and holds the orb to one of the windows to see what’s inside. Within the room lies a skeleton wearing
scraps of clothing that’s all but rotted away. A shackle is attached around one of its legs and is secured to a ring set
into the wall.

“Poor guy,” he whispers as he moves to follow Jiron down the passage. The level of undisturbed dust on the
floor and doors tells James this area of the dungeon hasn’t been used in a very long time.
The passage suddenly ends at a wooden door, slightly different from the others. When Jiron checks it, he finds
it locked and begins working on the lock. When they hear a ‘click’ again, he opens the door slowly.
On the other side, they find a stairway leading up into darkness. Jiron begins to climb the stairs with the others
right behind him. The top of the stairs opens up onto another corridor running the same direction as the one below.
This area shows the same signs of disuse as the area below. There’s also another door across from the stairs down.
Jiron glances back to James who indicates the door. Taking out his knife, he begins to work at the lock until
they hear the familiar ‘click’.
On the other side of the door, is another flight of steps leading up. Again Jiron leads the way until they come to
where the stairs end at a stone wall.
When James sees the wall, he says, “Jiron, back away and let me look at it.”
“Another secret door?” Miko asks.
“Possibly,” he replies. He hands the orb to Miko as he begins to inspect the walls. Pressing lightly upon the
stones, he finds one loose and glances at the others. “I think I may have found it,” he says as he presses on it.
The wall begins to slide to the right and they are suddenly bathed in bright light from a torch on the opposite
walls.
They hear a gasp from the other side and Jiron is through in a flash. “Don’t kill him!” James whispers as he
He hears a crash and then Jiron says, “It’s just a servant.”

James and Miko leave the stairs just as the wall begins to slide closed once more. They see Jiron with a man held at knife point against the wall. The man is obviously a servant and at his feet are the broken remains of a chamber pot that had been full. A disgusting mess, but after the sewers, it has little effect on James’ senses.

Coming to the servant, James says, “Do you understand me?”

The servant looks back blankly, clearly not understanding and completely terrified.

“What are we to do with him?” asks Jiron.

James looks down the corridor in either direction. It looks identical to the corridors below, except this one looks to be currently used. Across from them is an open doorway with a flight of stairs leading up. To their left, the corridor extends further down, a couple of torches spaced along its length gives off some light.

“Knock him out,” James tells him.

Jiron strikes the poor man in the back of the head and he slumps to the floor, unconscious.

James goes over to one of the cells and looks in. Finding the cell empty, he has Jiron open it and put the man inside, tying him up and gagging him.

When Jiron leaves the cell, he holds up a four inch ring with several keys attached to it. He tries them and finds the one that fits the lock to the cell where the servant lies. Locking the door, he turns back to James.

“Why?” asks Miko.

“He was removing a chamber pot from somewhere down there,” he explains. “I doubt they would supply one to an ordinary prisoner.”

“You think Pytherian is down there?” Jiron asks.

“Maybe,” he replies. “Only one way to find out, though.” Turning to Miko, he says, “Stay by the door and let us know if anyone comes.”

“No problem,” he replies as he puts his ear to the door.

James takes the torch from the wall and begins to make his way down the corridor, looking in through the windows of the cell doors. The first ones he checks are empty, but then he comes to one with someone lying on the floor, dead. From the looks of him, he didn’t die all that long ago. A rat looks up at him from where it’s chewing on a part of the poor man’s exposed leg. From the size of the missing section, the rats have been eating for a while.

Disgusted, he continues on, finding more empty cells until he at last comes to the end of the corridor. The second to last cell contains a man of average build. When James looks in through the window, the man lifts his head up and looks back. He can see sitting over in a corner, another chamber pot similar to the one the servant had been carrying.

“Who are you?” asks James.

The man’s eyes open wide when he realizes James isn’t another guard. He comes to the door and cries, “Help me!” He brings his face to the window and looks pleadingly to James.

“Who are you?” James asks again.

“My name’s Braelin,” the man tells him. “We don’t have much time, let me out!”

James looks to Jiron who shrugs. “Do you know Pytherian?”

The man just looks at James with a blank expression, then he cries, “Yes! Yes I do.”

“Who is he?” Jiron asks as he looks in the window at the man.

The man looks at both of them then sinks down to the floor and begins sobbing. “I don’t know, I don’t know.”

“Why are you locked in here?” James asks him.

“For having an affair with Cyel, the Lord’s daughter,” he says with resignation. “We loved each other, but she was betrothed to another. They’re going to execute me in the morning.”

He looks up from the floor and says pitifully, “Please, please get me out of here.”

James brings Jiron away from the cell and gives him a questioning look.

Jiron just sighs and says, “You can’t save everyone. This man broke the law and he’s going to pay for it. If you let him go, you put our mission in jeopardy.”

“I know,” he says with resignation. He goes back over to the window and says, “I’m sorry.” As he walks away, the man inside begins crying and wailing for them to help him.

They go back down the corridor to where Miko is watching the door. He sees them returning and asks, “What was all that about?”

“Nothing,” James says somewhat sadly. “It wasn’t Pytherian.”

“It’s been quiet on the other side of the door,” he tells them.
“Then let’s go,” he says.

Jiron opens the door and peers around to the stairway leading up. At the top of the stairs is another lit torch, bathing the whole area up there in light. He gestures for them to remain here as he moves quickly and silently up the stairs.

Upon reaching the top, he cautiously glances around the corner and then waves for them to join him. When they reach his side, he says, “Doesn’t look like anyone is around.”

He steps out into the corridor and begins following it down. This area has the look of frequent use. Doors line the walls, not set nearly as close as the ones below had been. James glances in through one of the windows and sees large cells used to hold multiple people, all of which are currently empty.

From further down the corridor, they can hear the cries of a man in pain. Ahead of them, Jiron suddenly slows and then quickly returns.

Whispering quietly, Jiron points back down the corridor and says, “It opens up onto a room ahead. It sounds like someone there is being tortured.” As if to emphasize what Jiron is saying, the man cries out again, gibbering incoherently. Other voices can be heard as well, speaking the Empire’s tongue.

As they make their way slowly down the corridor to where it opens up, James is able to begin to see within the room ahead of them and recognizes many of the implements there. It’s a torture chamber, or rather, a room used for extracting information.

Upon reaching the end of the corridor, they can see a naked man lying spread-eagled on a table, his arms and legs stretched out and secured to the corners. There are two men standing next to him, both dressed in similar attire. One is holding a glowing hot poker and James watches as he brings it down to the man’s left breast. The man cries out as smoke arises from where his flesh is being burnt by the hot poker, the smell of burnt hair permeates the room. They can tell the man on the table is of northern stock.

Jiron bursts out of the hallway, knives flashing as he advances upon the torturers. They turn at his advance, one crying out while the other throws the hot poker at him. They both turn toward the door behind them and make a break for it.

Jiron reaches them before they have time to even open the door. With a couple quick strikes, they fall to the floor. One starts to cry out and Jiron stomps on his neck, smashing his windpipe. Gurgling, the man chokes for a minute before becoming still. The other had already died from where one of Jiron’s knives had punctured his heart.

The man on the table looks around at them, his single eye wide. The other eye socket is filled with what looks like lead. James can see numerous cuts and burns marring his flesh. Two fingers had been cut off as well as a couple of toes. His eye darts around, not really seeing anything.

James comes over to him and stands next to his head. The man flinches when he realizes he’s there. “It’s okay,” James assures him. “We’re not going to hurt you.”

The man just jibbers, saliva running down the side of his face.

“Who are you?” James asks.

The man doesn’t respond, just makes nonsensical noises.

James looks over to Jiron who says, “He’s mad.” Gesturing to the two stiffs on the floor, he continues, “They drove him mad, probably just for fun.” He comes over to the poor man and cuts his throat.

James looks at Jiron in horror, “What did you do that for?”

“Mercy killing,” he says. “We can’t take him with us and I’m not about to leave him here for someone else to have fun with.”

He watches as the man chokes on his own blood and slowly begins to calm down and dies. Maybe it was the best thing for the poor guy.

Miko’s over at the door leading out of the room. “I don’t hear anything,” he tells them as he pulls his ear away from the door.

“If anyone shows up, they’ll know someone’s been here,” Jiron says as he cleans his knives on the torturers’ clothes.

“Then let’s hurry, shall we,” James says, coming around the dead man lying on the table as he makes for the door.

Jiron listens a moment at the door before slowly opening it. A series of open cells, similar to the ones the slaves had been in back in Korazan are lined along both sides of the corridor. There are several men inside who come to the front of the cages when they see them leave the room, speaking to them in the Empire’s tongue. They hold out their hands, obviously asking for them to be let out.

They move along, ignoring the pleadings of the prisoners. At the other end of the room is another thick wooden door with a small window.

Jiron moves to the door and peers out through the window. He turns to the others and says, “Don’t see anyone.”
He sees James nod, then he turns back to the door and opens it. Sticking his head out, he slowly opens the door further until there’s enough space to pass through.

Miko and James follow him out into the corridor, closing the door behind them and cutting off the cries of the prisoners.

The hallway they find themselves in is dark, extending away from the door, with a single torch at the far end giving off light. Moving quickly, they hurry down the hallway toward the lighted area.

Upon coming near, they see a flight of stairs at the end of the hallway going up to the left. They slow down as they approach the stairwell, Jiron moves to the fore as he peers around the corner and up the stairs.

He turns back to the others and says, “It curves out of sight as it spirals up.”

James nods his head, “Okay, take it slow and listen for anyone coming down.”

“Right,” Jiron replies as he turns back to the stairs and begins going up.

They follow the stairs as they wind around several times before Jiron pauses. He holds his hand up for the others to stop as he cocks his head to the side as if he’s listening. Then he turns back toward them and whispers, “Someone’s coming.”

Moving quickly and quietly, they return back down the stairs. At the bottom, they run along the hallway until they come to the door to the holding area. Opening the door, they slip inside and shut it just as two guards round the corner from the stairs.

The prisoners are making lots of noise as they plead with them to release them, at least that’s what James thinks they’re trying to say. But the guards don’t seem to be paying it much attention, the door muffles most of it.

Jiron waits next to the door, knives ready. The prisoners become quiet when they realize what they’re about to do.

In the quiet, they hear the two guards talking as they approach. Suddenly the door opens up and Jiron strikes out, taking one of the guards across the throat before they even realize what’s going on.

He kicks out at the other as he tries to draw his sword, knocking him against the wall and throwing him off balance. Then he’s on him, knives striking fast.

Before James even realizes it, the battle is over and the guards lie dead on the floor, their blood beginning to pool by the door. He and Jiron take the bodies and drag them into the room with the cells.

The prisoners begin to once again clamor to be let out. Once the guards are within the room, they again leave and close the door behind them.

Going back to the stairs, they once more begin climbing to the next level, making what feels to James as three complete circles before coming out into a basement of some sort. It’s a large, dark room with boxes stacked around the edges.

A door sits in the wall to their right and across from them, a stairway extends up. James signals for Miko to watch the stairs as he goes over with Jiron to the door. “Which way?” he asks him.

“I don’t know,” replies Jiron. “My best guess would be the stairs, since he wasn’t below. We need to find someone who can tell us where to find him.”

“I know, we’ll never find him in time hunting blind,” admits James.

“Can’t you do that bubble thing to find him?” he asks.

Shaking his head, James replies, “No, I don’t know him at all so it wouldn’t work. If I had something of his, maybe, but I don’t.”

Before they head up the stairs, they check the other door first, just in case while Miko watches the stairs. Opening the door a couple inches, they discover a darkened corridor extending away from the room. James looks to Jiron and says, “Not this way, let’s go up the stairs. He isn’t down here.”

Closing the door, they move back over to where Miko is keeping an eye on the stairs. “Anything?” James asks him.

“No,” he replies. “Haven’t heard anything.”

Jiron takes the lead as they move up the stairs. It runs fairly straight up and after fourteen steps comes out on a wide hallway running to the right and left.

Candles spaced every twenty feet or so give off a soft light. To the right, the hallway extends for a hundred feet before turning to the left. The other way, it extends further until finally disappearing into the distance.

Jiron glances to James who just shrugs. Stepping into the hallway, Jiron begins moving to the right, the others following close behind.

They pass three doors before the hallway turns to the left. Glancing around the corner, he sees it extending further into the distance. “It’s clear,” he says as he goes around the corner and continues following the hallway.

All the doors they pass are closed and a quick check fails to hear anything within. Suddenly, further down the corridor, a door opens and a woman walks out into the hallway. A servant by her dress, she glances their way and
her eyes open wide.

Jiron sprints toward her as a scream escapes her lips. A second later, Jiron grabs her and clamps his hand over her mouth, silencing her. She struggles to free herself but is no match for him.

Placing a knife against her throat causes her to cease her struggling and to become quiet. He walks her back to where James and Miko stand, all the while expecting other doors to open in response to her scream. But either there’s no one else down here or a woman screaming in this area is common, for no other door opens.

“Do you understand me?” James asks her when Jiron has brought her close.

She nods her head and they all breathe a sigh of relief.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

“Elspa,” she replies.

“Elspa, do you know where they’re keeping the captured general?” he asks.

“I think in the north tower,” she says, a fearful quaver in her voice.

“Where’s that?” Miko asks.

Elspa looks to him and says, “It’s on the other side of the Keep.”

“Of course,” mumbles James. *Couldn’t be just above us, oh no, it has to be all the way on the other side!*

“You’re going to take us there,” James tells her. “And if you give us away, or trick us, my friend here will make sure you’re the first to die.”

He sees her eyes open wide as they flick momentarily to Jiron. “Do you understand?” he asks her.

Nodding her head, she quietly says, “Yes, I do.”

“Now, what’s the best way to get there?” he asks. Then he adds, “Without being discovered.”

“There’s no direct way to get there,” she tells him. “And the whole tower is full of guards, you’ll never make it to where they’re keeping him.”

“You let us worry about that,” he says. “Now, I understand that servants often have a way of moving about to avoid being underfoot. I want you to take us along those ways as best you can.”

She nods her head. “It’s this way,” she tells him, pointing down to where she had just entered the corridor.

James nods to Jiron who takes her by the arm and holds her close as she begins to lead them down the hallway. As they reach the door that she’d exited from, she pauses a moment before opening the door.

They move through into a narrow hallway. “This leads to the lower kitchens,” she says as she continues along.

“Another of these passages leads from the kitchens to the main banquet room which should be relatively empty at this time of night.”

“What about the kitchens,” Jiron says. “Will there be anyone there?”

Sighing, she replies, “There’s always someone there but any other way and you risk being spotted even more.”

“Alright,” James says.

They continue down the hallway until they begin to smell the yeast of many loaves of bread rising as they’re being prepared for the morning meal. Slowing down, Jiron hands the girl to James as he moves forward to check the kitchen.

The kitchen is a large room with many tables and ovens. Ten tables are lined with loaves of bread dough, and beneath one of them is a boy sleeping. The boy appears to be the only one currently in the room.

He goes back to the others and tells them what he’d seen. “That’s Kibby”, she tells them. “He’s the baker’s apprentice and is there to make sure the bread is ready for baking in the morning.” She looks to them and asks, “You’re not going to hurt him are you?”

“If we can get through without waking him,” James assures her, “then I see no reason to harm him.”

She nods her head and they move closer to where the hallway opens up into the kitchen. She points off to the right where another small hallway leads away from the kitchen, “That’s the one you want.”

James indicates with a nod of his head for her to precede them. She moves out, stepping cautiously, trying to remain as quietly as she can as she moves around the table where Kibby is sleeping.

As they move through the kitchen, Miko snags some bread sitting on a counter that was left over from the night before and begins munching on it. When James looks at him, he just gives him a smile as he continues chewing. James grabs one as well.

They reach the hallway and James glances back at the still sleeping Kibby beneath the table. Then he turns back and follows Elspa as she continues to lead them through the Keep.

From up ahead, they hear someone coming toward them. They duck down another side passage and hold still and quiet as the person approaches.

Jiron holds a knife to Elspa’s throat to prevent her from crying out. Then a man walks by their hiding spot and continues down the passage. Once the man’s footsteps can no longer be heard, they return to the passage.

“That was Olyth, the baker,” she tells them once Jiron has removed his knife from her throat.
“Let’s go, we’re running out of time,” urges James. She begins leading them again down the passage. They go for several hundred feet when she again comes to a stop. Indicating further down the passage ahead of them, she says, “Up ahead, it opens into the banquet room.” Jiron moves forward and then pauses at the end of the passage. He returns quickly and says, “She’s correct, it’s the main hall alright. It looks empty.” They move to the end of the passage and James asks, “Where now?” She points over to another, wider passage across the hall and says, “We’ll have to take that one, there’s no servant’s way on that side of the keep.”

“Where does it lead?” James asks her.

“To the north tower,” she tells him. “There’ll be guards, you’ll have no chance to sneak in there.” “We’ll see,” he says. Moving to the edge, he glances around the room and then they move quickly across to the other hallway.

It’s much wider than the one they’d been in and has more candles keeping it well lit. Moving down the passage, they pass many doors made of finer quality than the ones they’d seen earlier.

Suddenly from up ahead, three guards suddenly move into the passage heading in their direction. James opens the door they’re closest to and they all rush into the room before the guards spot them.

Once the door is closed, Jiron keeps his ear to the door as James looks around the room. It looks to be a sitting room, where ladies could visit and entertain guests. A doorway leads to another room and James moves toward it to see if there’s anyone there.

As he gets closer, he begins to hear the unmistakable sounds of someone snoring. He looks through the doorway and sees a large bed with two bodies sleeping under covers. Backtracking quickly and quietly he goes back to where the others are waiting by the door.

Jiron opens the door and peers out to see if the guards are still there. Bringing his head back in, he says, “They’re gone.”

“Good, there’s someone sleeping in the other room,” James tells him as he points through the doorway. “Then let’s go,” he says as he takes Elspa and returns to the hallway. The others follow and Miko closes the door quietly behind them.

“How far to the tower?” James asks her.

“Not very,” she replies. She points to a set of double doors further down where the hallway turns to the left and says, “That’s the entrance. It’s the only way I know to get there.”

As they continue to approach, he says, “How many guards are there?” “I don’t know,” she replies, “I’ve never been there, my duties were always elsewhere.” “Then I’m afraid this is where we must part ways,” he says to her.

Her eyes open wide, expecting to be killed on the spot. He moves to a door and listens for a moment. When he doesn’t hear anything, he opens it up and finds another sitting room. This whole area must be guest rooms for visiting nobles. Moving quickly, he looks through to the bedroom and with relief, finds it empty.

Returning to the sitting room, he grabs Elspa and drags her to the bedroom where he gags her mouth and ties her up securely. “I’m not going to kill you,” he tells her. She calms down somewhat when she sees a gold piece appear in his hand. “I appreciate your helping us,” he says as he places the gold piece within a pocket of her outfit.

He gives her a wink and then returns to the front room where the others are waiting for him. Jiron is by the door and when he sees the nod from James, opens it up and checks to make sure the hallway is empty before they step out.

Moving down toward the double doors that Elspa had told them led to the north tower where Pytherian is being held, they quickly cross the distance and stand before them.

Miko keeps watch down both hallways while Jiron listens at the doors. After a minute, he lifts his head away and says, “I think there’re two guards on the other side, can’t be sure. I do hear something though.” “What do you propose?” James asks him.

“If there are just the two, we might be able to silence them quickly before they alert the whole keep,” he whispers to him. “But if there are more than two, then we’ve got problems.” “No way to know for sure is there?” James asks him.

He shakes his head, “No, there isn’t.” “Then let’s move quick and decisively,” he says. Jiron nods in agreement.

Drawing his knives, he makes ready to pass through the doors. James takes three stones out of his pocket, the last ammo he has, and prepares.

Miko takes the handles of the doors as he prepares to swing them open to allow Jiron and James to fight those within.
When both James and Jiron signal Miko that they're ready, he swings open the doors.
Chapter Nineteen

When the doors swing open, Jiron rushes in and trips over two bodies entwined on the floor before the door. James looks incredulously at the guard with his pants down around his ankles lying atop the half naked girl. He stands there in shock as they look at him and the girl opens her mouth to scream.

Miko gets over his shock and draws his knife as he dives toward her. Her scream begins to escape her lips just as his hand comes and covers her mouth, silencing her.

The guard reaches for his sword that’s lying next to him, but Jiron has already recovered from his fall and kicks it out of reach.

“Get up!” James orders the guard as he closes the double doors.

The guard keeps his eyes on them as he gets up off the girl and pulls his pants up. The girl tries to cover herself as well, her muffled scream subsiding as she realizes they’ll not be killed immediately.

James gestures for Miko to remove his hand from her mouth and then for the girl to get up. She pulls her clothes around her as she gets to her feet, obviously terrified.

The hallway extends from the double doors twenty feet before ending at a stairway which winds its way up to the tower above. Two doors, one on either side of the hallway, lie between the double doors and the stairs. James nods his head to the one on the left side and Jiron moves over to the door and listens. He looks back to James and shakes his head, indicating he doesn’t hear anything.

“Check it out,” he tells him.

Jiron opens the door and looks inside. He turns back to James and says, “Looks like a storage room.”

James turns his attention back to the guard and the girl. He indicates the storage room and says, “Move inside.”

The guard gives him a defiant look as he walks over to the storage room, the girl following with fear in her eyes. Jiron rips off two lengths of cloth from the girls dress and uses them to gag their mouths. Then he proceeds to bind their hands and legs. Once they’re secure, they leave the room and close the door behind them.

Suddenly, from the other side of the double doors, the sound of someone whistling comes to them. Jiron motions for James and Miko to move out of the way as he takes position near the door.

The whistling draws near and Jiron gets ready. The door opens up, a guard enters with a smile on his face and a bottle of wine in his hand. He stops abruptly when he sees Jiron there in the hallway before him.

Jiron moves quickly, but not before the guard realizes what’s going on and tries to shut the door. Slamming into the door with his shoulder, Jiron knocks it open. The guard is forcefully pushed back and falls to the floor, the bottle of wine flies out of his hand and smashes against a wall several feet away. As he hits the floor, the guard draws his sword while at the same time attempting to roll out of Jiron’s way to regain his feet.

But Jiron doesn’t allow him the opportunity to do that and kicks him hard in the side. The guard groans as Jiron kicks out again, knocking the sword from his hand. As the guard starts to cry out, he kicks one more time, this time in the side of the head and silences his cry.

He picks up the unconscious guard and carries him over to the storage room where the others are bound and gagged. Miko picks up the guard’s sword and brings it to the storage room as well. Once Jiron has him gagged and tied up, Miko removes the sword belt from the guard and secures it around his own waist.

When he sees James looking at him, he says, “May need it before we’re out of here.”

“Just be careful,” he advises.

“I will,” replies Miko. “Don’t worry.”

As they again leave the storage room and shut the door, James says, “That must’ve been the other guy’s partner.”

“I’d hate to be them when they’re discovered in there with that girl,” Jiron says with a grim smile. “They’ll be hard pressed to explain what she’s doing there, and in that state of undress.”

Chuckling, James nods his head.

They move to the end of the hallway where Jiron takes the lead as they begin to climb up to the tower. After making two complete circles, the stair comes to the next level.

This level is dark and has the look of a storage area. They continue on past, following the stairs up as it continues spiraling toward the top.
Voices begin to be heard coming from the level above them as they finish the first circle after the storage area. Light can also be seen coming from above them as well. Jiron motions for them to stop as he proceeds alone to investigate.

They watch him as he follows the stairs around, disappearing where the stairs curve out of sight. James waits anxiously for several moments before he returns back down the stairs. Coming close he whispers, “The next level looks to be a guard room. I saw at least six guards taking their ease there. Also, these stairs end there. I think I saw another flight going up over on the other side of the guard room.”

“So in order to continue up, we’ll have to pass through the guard room and the guards stationed there?” asks James.

Jiron nods his head, “I didn’t see any other way.”

James glances to Miko who nods his head and draws his sword. “Alright then,” he says to them. “Let’s strike hard and fast.”

With Jiron in the lead, they climb the remainder of the stairs until they near the landing which opens onto the guard room. James can hear the guards talking amongst themselves as they come near.

Jiron looks back to him, both knives drawn. James gives him a nod and they burst into the room. He strikes out at the nearest guard, taking him across the throat. Two stones fly in quick succession, taking out two more across the room.

The remaining three guards quickly recover from their initial shock at seeing them and draw their swords. The one closest to Jiron moves to engage while James’ last stone flies and takes out one of the others.

Coming straight for James and Miko is the last guard, sword ready and war cry on his lips. James readies a spell but Miko shoves him aside as he moves to engage.

As James stumbles to the side, he cries out “Miko! You’ll be killed!”

But Miko blocks the thrust of the guard and deflects the blade to the side. He follows through with a counter attack which the guard blocks.

Jiron is fighting with the remaining guard and is unable to come to his aid. But Miko seems to not need any as he again blocks an overhand hack. He kicks out with his foot and connects with the man’s chest, knocking him backward.

Miko immediately follows the man as he trips over a chair behind him and runs him through with his sword before the guard hits the ground. Putting his foot on the man’s chest, he yanks out his sword as he turns to the sound of Jiron battling the last guard.

Before Miko has the chance to make it over to help him, Jiron deflects a thrust with the knife in his right hand, twirls and smashes his left elbow into the guard’s jaw as he comes around.

The guard stumbles backward, blood streaming down his face from his broken nose. Jiron follows through with a quick series of attacks and succeeds in plunging one of his knives into the guard’s chest, puncturing his heart.

As the man falls, Jiron pulls his knife out of his chest and returns to the others when out of the corner of his eye he sees a sword coming down toward him. With reflexes honed through years in the pits, he brings up a knife and blocks the attack.

Miko brings his sword around for another attack when James yells, “Miko!”

Startled, Miko pauses as his eyes begin to focus on who stands before him. Lowering his sword, he stands there dazed for a moment.

Jiron and James look to each other, and James mouths the words ‘The Fire’ silently as the points to Miko’s pouch.

Sudden understanding comes to Jiron as he steps back from Miko.

Miko begins looking around and James comes over, saying, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he says, somewhat distantly. “I’m fine.”

“You sure?” asks Jiron as he comes over.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he says as he glances from one to the other. “What’s the matter?” he asks, seeming to abruptly snap out of whatever fugue he’d been in.

“Nothing,” James replies. “Let’s go.”

As they move across the guard room, James and Jiron exchange concerned glances.

Miko seems alright, just the sudden skill at arms and the way he attacks anyone gives James cause for concern. He gestures for Jiron to take the lead as they come to the stairs.

Jiron pauses at the bottom as he peers up the stairs and finds that they extend up to a heavy door with a small window. A face is looking out at him through the window. He turns back to James and says, “I think we’ve found him.”

James moves around Jiron and climbs the stairs, stopping several feet down from the door. The man is looking
“Are you the Madoc general, Pytherian?” he asks.
“Who wants to know?” the man behind the door says.
“One who would bring you from here,” replies James.
The man seems to consider a moment and then says, “Yes, I am Lord Pytherian.”
James turns back to Jiron and says, “Open the lock.”
Moving past James, Jiron takes out one of his knives as he begins working to open the lock. They all hear a ‘click’ and then he pushes the door open into the room.
Lord Pytherian is a man in his middle years who’s begun to gray along the temples. He looks at them and says, “Is this all?”
“What do you mean?” James asks.
“Is this it, two of you and a boy?” he asks. “How do you plan to get us out of here?”
“I assure you,” James tells him, “we are more than enough to get you out of here.”
Lord Pytherian doesn’t look convinced.
James looks at him and asks, “Are you coming?”
He starts to leave the room when from outside the window of his cell, they hear a great commotion coming from below. They all move to the window and look down to the courtyard below. Several figures are moving quickly across the open area as they head for the gate leading out of the keep. Soldiers are moving to intercept them and soon they’re engaged in battle.
“Are they part of your group?” Lord Pytherian asks.
“No,” replies James, mystified. “I don’t know who they are.”
“I do,” replies Miko. They all turn to him as he continues, “They’re those prisoners in the cells down in the dungeon.”
“But how did they escape?” asks James.
“They must’ve gotten a hold of the guards we killed and managed to escape their cells,” figures Jiron.
“That tears it!” exclaims James. “They’ll be here to check on him, he says as he points to Lord Pytherian, “once they’ve dealt with them. If they’re not already on the way.”
“Then let’s move!” Jiron says as he heads for the stairs.
They follow him as he quickly moves down the stairs. When they reach the guard room, Lord Pytherian pauses a moment to remove a scabbard from a fallen guard and buckle it around his waist. As they hurry through, he takes out the sword and tests its balance. Satisfied, he returns the sword to its scabbard and hurries after them.
Almost running down the stairs, they reach the bottom just as the double doors open up and a squad of eight soldiers enters, led by a man richly dressed. Both groups pause momentarily in stunned silence at seeing the others before the soldiers draw their swords and charge.
James hears a strange cry behind him as Miko rushes past, sword in hand. He meets the lead soldier and in two passes of his sword, the man lies dead at his feet.
Jiron and Lord Pytherian follow and the battle is joined.
Deflecting a sword thrust with a knife, Jiron follows through with the other and is able to stab the man in the exposed armpit. When the knife is pulled out, blood flows quickly from the artery that was severed.
Lord Pytherian, with a war cry, wades into the soldiers. He deflects one sword thrust and quickly brings around his sword and slices into the man’s leg, practically severing it. Another soldier engages him and he blocks a downward hack as he kicks out at the man’s stomach, knocking the wind out of him and causing him to stagger back.
The man staggers back near Miko who almost absently-mindedly swings his sword in that direction and takes the man’s head off. The head flies and bounces off the wall as the torso falls to the floor, blood spraying everywhere.
Then all of a sudden it’s over. James glances over to see Miko looking around. His eyes catch sight of Lord Pytherian standing there and begins moving toward him to attack. “Miko!” he yells.
Lord Pytherian sees him coming and backs away from him, sword at the ready.
“Miko!” he cries one more time.
Miko slows and then suddenly comes to himself. He looks around at the dead bodies and almost without thinking, reaches down and cleans his sword on a fallen soldier before replacing it in its scabbard.
Lord Pytherian glances from Miko to James and back again. “What’s wrong with him?” he asks.
“No time to explain,” replies James. “Just stay away from him when he’s fighting.”
He nods and then looks around at the dead, “Where’s the other guy?”
“What other guy?” Jiron asks.
“The one that was with them, the one in the fancy clothes,” replies Lord Pytherian.
They look around but fail to find him among the dead. “He must’ve gotten away,” James says.
“Then we’re out of time,” Lord Pytherian says. “He’ll bring the whole army to hunt for me.”

“He’s got to find us first!” Jiron cries as they hurry out through the double doors. A couple servants can be seen in the hallway, looking around confused. But when they see them burst through the double doors, all covered in blood, they begin to scream and yell as they run away down the hallway.

Jiron leads them down to where they left the girl and opens the door. He looks in but finds her gone.

“Where to?” asks Lord Pytherian as he continues glancing down the hallway.

James looks to Jiron and says, “Back the way we came?”

“As good a way as any,” he replies as he moves toward the banquet hall. Before they come very close to it, a group of soldiers enters the hallway from there, the fancy dressed man in the fore.

He hollers to the soldiers and they rush to attack.

Turning around, they run back the way they’d come and turn down the other hallway at the double doors. Racing with a dozen soldiers at their back, they fly down the hallway until it suddenly opens up onto an inner garden.

They run along the walkway, past many types of flowering bushes and benches where people could rest while enjoying them. “Do you guys know where you’re going?” Lord Pytherian asks.

“No,” replies James. He hears a curse from Lord Pytherian behind him.

They exit the garden through another door and they swing it closed. The room they’re in is not too large, several benches sit on either side.

“Give me a hand!” hollers Jiron as he indicates one of the benches. Lord Pytherian moves to help him and they pick it up, carrying it over to in front of the door, blocking it somewhat.

A door on the opposite side of the room stands open, James moves toward it and looks out. “Another hallway,” he hollers back. “Doesn’t look as if anyone is in it.”

Their pursuers suddenly hit the door on the other side and the door swings open a little before Lord Pytherian puts his weight against it and closes it once more. “I can’t hold this very long,” he hollers to them as the soldiers on the other side continue throwing their weight against it.

James comes over and places his hand against it as he casts a spell of holding. When he’s done, he says, “You can let go now milord, it won’t open.”

Lord Pytherian gradually reduces the pressure he’s exerting and the door continues to hold even with the soldiers hitting it from the other side. He looks to James and raises an eyebrow, “Mage?”

James nods his head.

“Then we do stand a chance,” he says with a grin.

“Come on!” cries Miko from where he stands next to Jiron. “We’ve got to get out of here!”

Lord Pytherian and James run across the room as the soldiers continuously beat upon the door behind them. As they reach the others, Jiron moves down the hallway to the right. Running quickly with no pretense of being quiet, they turn left when the corridor does and see more soldiers coming toward them.

As Jiron stops next to a door on their left, a cry goes up from the advancing soldiers as they break into a run to attack. Throwing his weight against the door, he bursts into the room. The rest follow, Lord Pytherian closes the door behind them. The dark room blossoms with light as James’ orb springs to life.

Lord Pytherian’s eyes widen slightly and James shrugs and says, “It’s useful.”

A slight smile breaks out upon his face as he says, “I would think so.”

“Here!” Jiron hollers as he tosses a poleaxe toward Lord Pytherian who uses it to brace the door. James comes over with another and they get them wedged in just as the soldiers begin pounding upon the door from the other side.

Miko comes over and says, “This might work better.” He reaches up and pulls an iron bar from the door jamb and sinks it into a recess on the other side. With the added strength of the bar, the door will hold a long time.

They turn to look at the room they’ve found themselves in and discover they’ve run into an armory. Racks of swords, pole arms, bows, and every other type of weapon imaginable are lined in racks along all the walls.

“James, come here,” Miko hollers from where he stands next to a large barrel.

When James comes over, he sees the barrel is filled with the lead slugs he’s been using. Giving Miko a pat on the back, he proceeds to refill his belt as well as filling a pouch that was lying on a nearby table. It may weigh a little bit, but he feels better for having them. Once the pouch is bulging, he secures it to the belt around his waist.

They suddenly hear pounding as the soldiers out in the hallway try to beat their way in. But the door with iron bar firmly secured is strong enough to hold against them.

Jiron comes in from the only other doorway leading out of the room and says, “There’s just another room back there with shields and some armor.” He points to the door the soldiers are beating upon and continues, “That’s the only way out.”

Miko turns to James and asks, “Now what?”
A translucent bubble forms in front of James and Lord Pytherian asks, “What’s that?”

“It should show us a way out of here,” he replies. But the bubble floats around a moment and then goes over to
the door leading out to the hallway and the soldiers. “Damn!” exclaims James.

“No other way out?” asks Jiron.

“Doesn’t look like it,” he says.

“What are we to do now?” he asks.

James looks from one to the other and says, “Give me a moment.” He then begins considering the situation as
he starts to pace.

Suddenly, the sound from the door begins to change. A steady thumping sound starts to beat on the door. Lord
Pytherian says, “It won’t be long now. It sounds like they’ve found a ram.”

James’ pacing leads him into the other room. There he finds the area where the blacksmith would’ve worked on
fixing the broken or dulled weapons and armor. An anvil sits in the corner as does a bellows; a hole can be seen in
the roof that would allow the smoke to escape from the forge.

A large bucket of water sits on the floor and next to it is a depression in the stone with a small drain that would
allow the used water to drain away. Suddenly, an idea hits him and he sends out his senses beneath the floor and
realizes that there’s an open space beneath them.

From the other room, Lord Pytherian hollers out, “That door’s not going to stand much more of this!”

“Got an idea!” James yells back to him. “I need a few minutes.”

“Better hurry,” Jiron says from the doorway.

James glances over to him and nods. Then he begins tracing the creases around one large stone in the floor with
his finger, letting the magic flow as he loosens the bonds holding it to the ones next to it.

When Jiron sees what he’s doing, he nods his head as he remembers how they’d escaped the jail back in
Mountainside. He turns to the others and says, “Let’s move as much of this stuff before the door to slow them down
once they’ve broken through.”

Everyone begins moving tables and pulling racks of weapons off the walls as they create a blockade in front of
the door. By the time they’ve created a pile extending several yards away from the door, they hear James holler from
the other room, “I need your help!”

Jiron is the first to enter the room and sees James standing there with a sledge hammer. “Grab a hammer or
something and help me smash this block down,” James tells him.

James then begins slamming the sledge hammer down upon the stone block. The others see what he’s doing as
they come into the room and move to help him. Pytherian holds back a moment, doubting the usefulness of this
course of action. But then when he sees the block move down half an inch from the blows raining down upon it, he
grabs a war hammer and adds his strength to the endeavor.

Inch by slow inch the slab moves down until it falls into the room beneath it. “What’s down there?” asks Miko
as he looks into the black hole.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Jiron says as he moves to the lip of the hole and begins to lower himself over the
edge. James moves the orb over the opening and they see the floor of the room is about fifteen feet away.

“Be careful,” James warns him.

He swings over the edge and hangs by his hands a moment before letting go. James watches as he lands on the
floor and then looks back up to him. “Come on!” he hears him holler out of the hole.

James looks to Lord Pytherian and says, “Your next milord.”

Lord Pytherian moves to the edge and just like Jiron, swings over the edge and lands next to him.

“Okay Miko,” James says as he indicates the hole. As Miko is lowering himself into the hole, James hears the
door crash open. Smashing and clattering comes from the other room as the soldiers begin removing the haphazard
barricade they’d erected before the door.

“What was that?” Jiron asks from below.

Nervously, James replies, “They’re in the armory.”

When Miko hits the floor, James moves to the edge and begins to swing down when from the doorway, he sees
a soldier appear. Letting go, he falls and then feels hands grab him to slow his descent as he lands on the floor.

“Thanks,” he says.

From above them, they see soldiers looking down at them and then another begins to swing over the edge.

“This way!” Jiron hollers as he leads them from the room through a doorway.

Once everyone has exited the room, he slams the door and drops a bar across it that was built to hold the door
secure.

In the light of the orb, James can see they’re in a passage and by the looks of it, one that hasn’t been used in a
very long time. “This might be a part of the dungeons,” he guesses.
“If so then maybe we can get back to the sewers,” Jiron states.
From the other side of the door, they again hear pounding as the soldiers attempt to get through.
Jiron takes the lead with Lord Pytherian close behind. The passage leads on for a hundred feet before ending
where another passage crosses from the left to right. Jiron looks back to James who says, “Left!”
Turning to the left, they race down the hallway for several hundred feet, passing openings into other rooms.
After a brief examination, they discover each is just another storeroom with no other way out so they continue on
down.
Moving along for several minutes, they come to a door at the end of the passage. As James comes up behind
Jiron and Lord Pytherian, he sees Jiron take out his knife to begin working on the lock.
“I’m sorry I had my doubts about you,” Lord Pytherian says to James while they wait for Jiron to open the lock.
“We’re not out of here yet,” James tells him.
“You’ve done better than I could’ve expected or hoped for,” he continues. “Frankly, I’m surprised we’ve
managed to make it this far.”
Click!
Jiron opens the door and turns to them, “If you guys are done, let’s go.”
“After you,” James says to him.
Turning back, Jiron moves through the doorway and pauses as they go past him. Then he shuts the door,
locking it once more. Rushing to take the lead again, he follows the passage as it twists and turns three times before
coming out into what looks to be a storage room.
It’s a large dark room with boxes stacked on all sides. To their right, a stairway extends up and on their left is a
doorway. In the middle of the room are two bodies. As they move into the room, closer to the bodies, they discover
they’re guards and by the fresh pool of blood they’re lying in, were killed recently.
“James, this is the room just above the cells,” Jiron suddenly says.
Looking around, James nods his head. Indicating the guards on the floor, he says, “These two must’ve been
killed when the prisoners escaped.”
“That would make sense,” Jiron agrees.
“Then that’s the way out!” exclaims Miko, pointing to the opening opposite the stairs. “What’re we waiting
for?” Moving quickly, he hurries through the doorway and begins to descend down the stairs.
James and the others move quickly to follow him, taking the stairs quickly.
They catch up with him at the bottom of the stairs where he’s stopped and peering around the corner. “Look,”
he says, pointing down the hallway to the room of the holding cells.
Lights can be seen within and silhouettes moving around. “They must be investigating how the prisoners
escaped,” guesses James.
Jiron’s knives leap to his hand at the same time as Lord Pytherian’s sword leaves its scabbard. Jiron turns to
Miko and says, “You better stay here and look after James.”
“Alright,” he says.
Jiron glances to James who gives him a nod in understanding as they move to the room at the end of the
hallway.
“Looks like there are just a couple,” Lord Pytherian whispers to Jiron as they get closer.
“That’ll just make it easier,” he says.
They’re able to come to the end of the hallway without being seen due to the preoccupation of those inside.
Within the room they see two guards and a civilian.
Jiron glances to Lord Pytherian who gives a nod and they burst into the room. Pytherian strikes down one guard
before he even knows they’re there.
The remaining guard moves to protect the civilian as he draws his sword. Jiron begins deflecting his attacks as
Lord Pytherian joins him. Facing the two of them, the guard has no chance and is soon cut down.
The civilian makes for the door, but Lord Pytherian moves and blocks his exit. He places the point of his sword
to the man’s chest and hollers back out to James and Miko, “It’s clear, come on down.”
Turning back to the civilian, Lord Pytherian says, “So, what brings the aide to Lord Hazi Makali down here?”
“My Lord Pytherian,” the man says. “You are certainly the last person I expected to meet here.”
“I would guess so,” he replies, laughing. “Considering the circumstances of our last meeting.”
James comes to the cell room and when he sees the man at sword point, he asks, “Who’s this guy?”
“He’s the aide to Lord Hazi Makali, the military governor in charge of this city,” he explains.
“What are you going to do to him?” James asks.
Pytherian gazes at the man and then motions with his sword to the nearest cell, “Get in.”
The man moves toward the cell and enters. As Lord Pytherian shuts the cell door, the man yells, “You’ll never
make it out of the city!"

“I’d say the chances are fairly good,” he replies as he turns the key in the lock. Putting the key in his tunic, Lord Pytherian looks to the man and says, “Give my regards to your Lord and tell him I regret being unable to say goodbye in person.”

He turns to James and says, “Lead on.”

James nods to Jiron who moves toward the door leading to the torture chamber. James sees all the cell doors have been opened, proof that the fighters they’d seen from the tower window had in fact been those being held here. One of the dead guards they’d dragged in here had been pulled near one of the cells. There must’ve been a key or something on him that they’d used to open the doors.

In the torture chamber, the dead man still lies upon the table and the torturers upon the floor. “I see you have already been here,” remarks Lord Pytherian.

“Yeah,” replies James. “We came in this way.”

They exit the torture chamber and move down the hallway to the stairs at the end. Jiron doesn’t even hesitate as he begins to move down the stairs. Upon reaching the bottom, he waits for the others.

“Can you open it?” he asks James, gesturing to the wall.

“Open what?” Lord Pytherian asks.

“There’s a secret door here that we came through,” he replies as he begins to examine the wall. When he doesn’t find any sort of loose stone or anything, he says to Miko, “See if you can move that torch sconce there.”

Miko moves to the torch sconce on the wall across from the secret door and begins attempting to move it. He wiggles it first one way then the other. Suddenly, the sconce slides down and the wall begins to move to the side.

Once the opening is wide enough, they file through. A minute later, the door begins sliding closed once again, leaving the orb as the only source of light.

They descend the stairs to the next level and then down one more to the bottom level. Going through the doorway, they move down the passage until they come to an open door. Moving into the room, the smell of the sewer becomes strong.

Lord Pytherian sees the trapdoor there and asks, “The sewers?”

“If you don’t mind milord,” James says.

Smiling, he replies, “Not in the least. I prefer it over my last accommodations.”

Jiron moves past him and goes down the ladder first, with James taking the rear. He closes the door to the room before descending the rungs. Once he’s gone down far enough, he closes the trapdoor as well then climbs down the rest of the way.

At the bottom, the others are waiting for him and once he’s down, Jiron sets off the way they’d come. It doesn’t take too long before they’re once again at the thick iron bars blocking the passage.

James come to the fore and Lord Pytherian watches in amazement as the bars begin to move, making a hole large enough for them to squeeze through.

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When they’ve all passed through to the other size, James again lets the magic flow as the bars move back to their original position.

“Hopefully they’ll spend hours looking for us in the Keep before realizing we are not there,” James says as he turns back to the others.

“If they do, it will give us enough time to get out of the city,” Jiron figures.

“I doubt if the city will be open,” Lord Pytherian states. “As a matter of course, they’ve most likely sealed the gates and put patrols on the streets, even if they believe we’re still in the Keep.”

“Then we’ll need to be most careful,” James says. “Let’s try to follow the sewer as close to the eastern gate as we can.”

“Why the eastern gate?” Lord Pytherian asks.

“There’s help there,” replies James. Then he looks to Jiron and says, “If they haven’t gotten impatient and done something stupid.”

“You never know,” adds Jiron.

As they move along the ledge next to the flow of the sewer, Lord Pytherian asks, “Who’s waiting?’

“Someone by the name of Miller,” replies James. “Do you know him?”

A smile comes to him as he nods and says, “Yeah, I know him and this is just the brash thing he’d try.”

They follow the sewer tunnel for several minutes before they come to where another large sewer tunnel joins the one they’re in. “Which way?” asks Jiron.

James looks to Lord Pytherian who shrugs, “I don’t know, I’m all turned around. Maybe we should move to the surface so we can be sure of heading to the eastern gate.”

“Alright,” agrees James. “That might be a good idea.”
They backtrack to where they passed the last set of rungs going up. Jiron climbs them as the others wait below. Several minutes pass before he climbs back down again. “We are still within the inner wall,” he tells them. “We need to continue further before we’ll be past.”

Lord Pytherian says, “Okay, then let’s go.”

Jiron leads them further down the sewer tunnel, and when they return to the branching tunnel, he passes it as he continues down the one they’ve been following. He moves past three sets of rungs before stopping before the fourth. “I think this should do it,” he says. “Wait here a moment.”

They watch him as he climbs up into the darkness above. A minute later they hear him call down, “Come on up, we’re past the wall.”

Lord Pytherian goes first with James again taking up the rear. As James climbs out of the sewer exit into the room, he can tell they’re in a building’s basement. Jiron is over at a doorway, fiddling with the lock.

As James gets closer to him, he returns his knife to his belt and slowly pushes the door open. On the other side, a short flight of stairs leads up to another door.

The others wait while Jiron moves up to the door where he puts his ear against it and listens for a moment. He waves the others to come on up as he slowly opens the door and peers around to the other side.

Opening it up further, he passes through and the others follow him, finding themselves in what looks to be a chandler’s shop. Upon various tables are goods for sale, one having cloaks and other travel gear.

They each take one of the cloaks and canteens, as well as other equipment they might need. James removes a gold piece from his pocket and places it on the counter. When he catches Lord Pytherian looking at him, he whispers, “I don’t want to be counted a thief.”

Nodding his approval, Lord Pytherian moves to a window overlooking the street. He ducks to the side as a patrol of ten soldiers pass by outside. Once they’re gone, he looks out again and turns back to the others, “It looks like they have put extra patrols on the streets.”

“That’ll make things interesting,” Jiron says as he looks out of another window. Seeing the street clear for the moment, he turns to the others and asks, “Ready?”

When he gets an affirmative from them, he moves to the door and opens it as he passes out into the street.
Once out on the street, they keep to the shadows as they make their way to the eastern gate. Jiron remembers which way they’d come from the southern gate in relation to where the Keep stands and is able to maintain a general eastern heading.

They duck down alleys to avoid the patrols roaming the streets, none of which seem very concerned about finding anyone. They seem more in the ‘patrol just to keep our presence visible’ mode than actively searching for them. This just leads them to believe that the powers that be believe them to still be within the Keep.

As they move from street to alley and back again, they notice that only the soldiers are on the street. James figures there must be a curfew in effect while they’re on the loose. So with the lackadaisical patrols the soldiers on the street are doing, it’s fairly easy to make it all the way to the eastern gate unnoticed.

Jiron brings them to a halt at the end of an alley which looks out upon the gate area. Twenty soldiers stand guard there in the courtyard before the gate with a dozen or more crossbowmen lining the walls above.

James catches his breath when he sees a brown robe there with them. For a world that doesn’t have many mages, the Empire sure seems to have more than their fair share!

Jiron notices the brown robe and glances to James who says, “I see him too.”

“What do you plan?” Lord Pytherian asks.

“Another distraction?” asks Jiron.

“Distraction?” says Lord Pytherian, glancing at James.

“May not have much choice,” replies James. Sighing at the inevitable, he turns to Lord Pytherian and says, “You and Miko stay here while Jiron and I arrange for some of the guards to be drawn away.”

“What are you going to do?” he asks.

James looks him in the eye and says, “You’ll see.” Turning back to Jiron he asks, “Ready?”

Giving him a mischievous grin, he replies, “You bet.”

To Lord Pytherian, he says, “We’ll be back in a few minutes. No matter what you may see and hear, don’t move from this spot. Understand?”

Lord Pytherian nods his head.

“Let’s go,” he says to Jiron as they head out.

Lord Pytherian watches them go back down the alley away from the gate. He asks Miko, “What are they going to do?”

Shrugging, he replies, “I don’t really know. When I first met James, he could hardly do anything without going unconscious or having horrendous headaches. But the last few weeks he’s been able to do the most amazing things.”

James follows Jiron through the back alleys until they’ve put some distance between the east gate and themselves. “You know,” he says to Jiron, “when this all begins to let loose, they’ll know we’re not in the Keep.”

“True,” he replies, quickly making his way along a dark alley. “But hopefully that information will come too late to be of much use.”

James comes to a stop and says, “Let’s pause here a moment.” A couple seconds later, five small bubbles appear and begin to float away.

“Now let’s see if we can find a building that’s not being used right now,” he says as he indicates for Jiron to resume leading the way.

Nodding, Jiron sets out and a couple blocks down they find a warehouse. Looking inside, they see it stocked with bolts of fabric and other valuables, but otherwise unoccupied.

“This’ll work,” announces James. He pauses next to the side of the building and ever so briefly, a spot on the wall lights up and then disappears. They go all the way around the building, stopping at each side for a moment until the light flashes just as it had on the first side before continuing on.

Once they have paused on each of the four sides of the building, they then move back closer to the eastern gate. One street runs almost directly from the eastern gate to the warehouse they just visited. They make their way carefully down the street until coming to within five hundred feet of the eastern gate, far enough away so that the lights from the gate won’t reveal them.
James pauses at one point on the north side of the street for a moment then moves down fifty feet where he again pauses for a second. Then he makes sure no one is looking before darting across to the other side where he does the same thing on the other side of the street, directly across from the two places he’d stopped at on the north side.

Satisfied, he gives Jiron a nod and they begin to move back to where the others are waiting. James grabs his arm as he starts to cross the area between the points where he’d just stopped those four times. When he looks at him, James whispers, “Not a good idea.”

Nodding, he moves back and skirts that area. Ducking down a side alley to avoid a patrol, they finally make it back to where the others are waiting.

Lord Pytherian sees them coming and waves them over. When James comes next to him, he says, “Nothing happened.”

“Just wait,” James assures him.

Suddenly, they see a shimmering bubble making its way slowly down the street toward the soldiers at the gate. The translucent bubble is hard to see unless you know what you’re looking for. As it gets closer, the mage there suddenly turns his head toward the bubble, sensing its magic resonance.

The mage says something to a soldier next to him who barks an order and everyone there comes immediately to attention. The crossbowmen on the walls are staring intently into the darkness of the street but fail to find anyone. The bubble abruptly turns around and goes back the other way. The mage, sensing the magic moving away from him moves to follow when from across the town…

Crumph!

…the warehouse erupts in a tremendous explosion throwing fire and stone into the air. The mage immediately begins moving toward the explosion, half the soldiers going with him.

James can detect several of the bubbles in the area, throwing off the senses of the mage as he tries to hunt down the source of the magic he’s sensing. He watches as the mage begins walking determinedly down the street, directly toward the place where he’d stopped those four times. When he reaches the center of it, four lights flare into being. The mage cries out as he falls to the ground and the soldiers with him try to run but are stopped by an invisible barrier that has sprung up between those four lights, boxing them in. Trapped, the soldiers begin crying out as they strike the barrier with their swords and fists but to no avail.

James takes some slugs out of the pouch at his hip and begins launching them up to the crossbowmen on the walls. One by one, they’re struck and begin falling off the walls, some landing within the courtyard, others falling outside the walls.

Pytherian glances to James with renewed respect as he continues launching slugs until the walls are cleared of crossbowmen.

With his knives drawn, Jiron says, “Milord, it’s our turn.”

Nodding, he pulls the sword from its scabbard as they move toward the soldiers guarding the gate. As Miko turns to follow them, James grabs his arm and says, “We need to open the gate.”

Snapping back to himself, Miko nods and follows James to the gatehouse. On the way, James takes out two more guards before Jiron and Lord Pytherian begin to engage them.

Within the gatehouse are several levers and James begins pulling them at random. Miko stands at the door to the gatehouse, sword drawn and keeping a lookout. A loud clatter suddenly can be heard coming from the gates and then they begin to slowly swing open.

“Let’s go,” he says to Miko as they leave the gatehouse. A horn sounds from the top of the wall as a soldier there warns of the gate beginning to open. James looks to Jiron and Lord Pytherian who have already disposed of half the remaining guards and are standing back to back as they hold off the last four.

Down the street, past where the soldiers are trapped by the force fields, James can see a band of cavalry coming.

“Crumph!” a voice cries out.

Coming through the east gate are Miller and his band who’re moving to engage the soldiers battling Lord Pytherian and Jiron. They quickly overwhelm them and secure the immediate area.

“My Lord!” Miller cries out as he reaches his side. “We must leave!” Behind Miller is an extra horse for Lord Pytherian.

As he gets into the saddle, Lord Pytherian hollers, “James! Come on!” More crossbowmen are running along the wall as they rush to join the battle before the gate.

Jiron mounts up behind his friend as James and Miko run toward them. Bolts begin raining down as some of
the crossbowmen on the walls near the gate.

James glances down the street and sees the cavalry already moving around the trapped men and racing toward them.

*Crumph!*

The ground under the leading horses erupts, throwing men and horses into the air and causing those behind them to come to a stop.

One of Miller’s band cries out as a crossbow bolt strikes him in the back, causing him to fall from his horse. James makes for the now riderless horse and quickly mounts. He reaches down and helps Miko up behind him as bolts continue falling among them.

Another man cries out as a bolt strikes him in the shoulder, knocking him to one side but is able to remain in the saddle.

When Lord Pytherian sees that James and Miko are mounted, he cries out, “Ride!” Everyone turns and makes a break for it through the gates.

On the other side of the gate they head straight away from the walls, putting as much distance between them and the enemy as fast as possible. Several more bolts fly by as they ride but all fly wide of their mark and they are soon out of range of the deadly missiles.

Horns begin sounding behind them and are answered by horns to their left and right. James looks and sees two armies moving to intercept them, but since neither has cavalry, they’re soon left behind.

In the moonlight they can see the mountains to the east of them and they make straight for them. They ride hard for an hour in silence, none wanting to take their attention off the ground ahead of them in fear of a horse putting a leg in a hole.

Lord Pytherian signals for everyone to slow down, to give the horses a breather. Riding next to Miller and James, he says, “I never thought I’d get out of there.”

“We weren’t going to just leave you there milord,” Miller says. “I’m glad we were able to affect your escape.”

“Yes,” he replies. Then he turns to James and says, “How can I ever repay you?”

“If we make it out of the Empire alive,” he tells him, “that will be thanks enough.”

Laughing into the night, he replies, “Consider it done!” Turning to Miller he asks, “Where’s the rest of the army?”

“Madoc’s forces are still in the field, last I knew,” explains Miller. “The rest of the alliance’s forces are falling away with your disappearance.”

“Damn!” he exclaims, all traces of the laughter gone. “What about the Kirkens?”

“Word came that hostilities had broken out along their border and were recalled to defend their own lands,” he replies.

“That’s true,” James tells him. “We ran into a band of Kirkens further south and they said something to that effect.”

“I must return quickly,” he states, “or Madoc and the north will fall to the Empire!”

“How far do we have to go to be past the Empire’s lines?” asks Jiron from behind them.

Lord Pytherian looks at Miller who replies, “A day of hard riding, maybe more if they’ve pushed north since we left to find you.”

“Getting there is the easy part,” Lord Pytherian says. “Getting through to the other side, now that will be the challenge.”

“Especially with another army on our heels,” they hear Miko say urgently from where he sits behind James. As one they glance back and in the moonlight see a large force of cavalry gaining quickly upon them. Spurring their horses back into a gallop, they race to stay ahead of the approaching force.

The man that had been struck with the crossbow bolt suddenly falls out of his saddle and hits the ground hard. One of Miller’s men stops near him for a brief moment and then quickly rejoins the others. “He’s dead,” he tells them.

“Damn!” curses Miller. Leaving the dead man behind, they press on.

James continues glancing back as they race through the night and watches as the leading edge of riders continues to gain upon them. Their horse and the one carrying Jiron and Fifer are beginning to lag behind the others who aren’t carrying double.

Leaning low over his horse’s neck, James hollers over to Jiron, “We’re not going to be able to stay ahead of them.”

“Milord!” James hollers up to Lord Pytherian.

Lord Pytherian slows and James is able to come abreast of his horse. “You and the others push on,” he hollers
to him. “We’ll never be able to keep up!”

Looking back at the riders, Lord Pytherian considers it a moment.

“You’re needed back in Madoc,” James tells him. “We’ll give you time to get away.”

“I’ll not forget this,” he tells him. “Madoc owes you a great deal young man.” Then he kicks his horse and then he and the others begin pulling away.

James nods to Fifer and they begin slowing as they turn to face the enemy. Once they’ve stopped, James dismounts and faces the onrushing horsemen. From behind him, he can hear Jiron say to Fifer as they dismount, “When the fighting starts, stay away from the boy.”

“Why?” Fifer asks.

“In the heat of battle, he sometimes can’t tell friend from foe,” he explains.

“Berserker?” Fifer asks.

“In a way,” Jiron responds.

As the riders approach, the moonlight reveals about sixty riders coming hard. “Man,” he hears Fifer say as he draws his sword, preparing to sell his life dearly.

James begins gathering the magic as the riders continue to approach. He reaches in and takes out several slugs that he holds in his left hand. Then, when the riders are close enough…

_Crump! Crump! Crump!_

…three massive explosions throw the leading edge of the advancing force into the air. They can hear the cries of men and horses as they arc through the air. When they crash back to the ground, very few can be seen moving.

“Damn!” comes Fifer’s exclamation from behind him.

The trailing wedge of riders veers around to the left and right of the scene of carnage as they continue coming for them. James begins tossing slugs and riders start to fall.

_Crump!_

The ground under the riders once more explodes upward and Jiron sees James take a step back, staggering, almost like he was about to fall. He turns to Fifer and says, “Whatever happens, we’ve got to keep them off of him.”

Fifer nods to Jiron as they move to put themselves between the few remaining riders and James.

Miko draws his sword and begins advancing upon the dozen riders still coming toward them. Four veer off in his direction, the others come straight to where James and Fifer are standing.

James manages to throw two more slugs before he sags to the ground. “Close your eyes!” he hollers and a split second later, a brilliant burst of light flashes between them and the riders.

“Ahh!” Fifer cries out as the light stabs like needles into his eyes. He hadn’t heeded James’ warning. The horses of the approaching riders neigh in fright, and come to an abrupt halt, throwing the riders to the ground.

Jiron had heard James’ warning and had shielded his eyes. Now he quickly moves forward and begins to dispatch the blinded riders. The first one he pulls from his horse as he stabs him with his knife. The next two he kills while they wretch on the ground, holding their eyes in pain.

The fourth one he comes to isn’t moving, a cursory look shows him to have broken his neck when he’d fallen off his horse. As he stands up from inspecting the dead man, a horse runs into him and knocks him over. The rider strikes out with his sword but in his half blinded state, misses by scant inches.

Jiron rolls out from under the horse’s hooves and quickly regains his feet. He moves toward the rider who is turning his head this way and that trying to locate him. The rider shakes his head and rubs his eyes in an attempt to clear them, enabling Jiron to move close without being seen.

He jumps the last few feet and pulls him from the horse, both tumbling to the ground. His knife flashes but the rider gets a hold on his arm, keeping the blade inches away from his face.

They roll and Jiron manages to kneel the man in the groin, taking the fight out of him. The rider’s arm loses strength and Jiron brings the knife down, puncturing the man’s throat all the way to the spinal column in the back. Jerking his knife out, Jiron rolls then comes to his feet as he looks around for another rider.

Miko stands amidst eight dead bodies, four men and four horses. His head swivels around as he looks for another to fight.

Jiron can hear the remaining rider as he races back the way they’d come, horn blaring. Answering horns can be heard further away in the dark.

Moving to where James sits with Fifer standing guard, eyes slowly regaining their night vision, he says, “There’s more on the way and not too far back. We gotta go!”

James nods his head as he gets to his feet, Fifer lends him a hand when he almost falls back to the ground. “I’m
alright,” he says to him. He sees Miko standing there among the dead and begins walking over to him. “Miko!” he calls out. When there’s no response, he calls his name again. Glancing to the others, he says, “Gather some horses.” Then he returns his attention to Miko.

Miko’s head turns in his direction and he begins walking toward him. James can see the sword still gripped in his hand.

“Miko! It’s James,” he says in a calm and soothing voice. Miko pauses a moment then continues toward him, his sword at a slightly less threatening angle. “You okay?” asks James.

“I think so,” he replies, his voice sounding tired and slightly distant.

“Good, we need to get going, okay?” he asks him.

Nodding, Miko approaches him and then stops as he wipes his sword off on one of the dead riders before replacing it in his scabbard.

Jiron and Fifer come over to them, each leading two horses. Once they’re all mounted, Jiron asks, “Which way?”

“Where did Lord Pytherian go?” asks James.

“He went more to the north, why?” replies Fifer.

“Then let’s move eastward and try to draw off those behind us and give him time to get through the lines,” he says.

“You sure?” Jiron asks.

“Yeah,” replies James.

They turn and begin moving toward the east, the sky there behind the mountains beginning to show the first signs of the approach of dawn.
As they push on eastward, they keep to a steady, mile eating pace that won’t overly tire the horses. When the sky becomes brighter, they see ahead of them where the terrain is once again turning into hills before finally becoming the mountains rising in the distance. It isn’t long before they leave the grasslands behind and enter the hills.

Behind them, there is still no sign of the approaching force, but they know they’re there. They come across a small spring in the lee of a hill and decide to pause for a short break to eat and give the horses a chance to regain their strength.

Jiron climbs to the top of the hill and looks to the west. “See anything?” Fifer shouts up at him from where he’s filling his water bottle at the spring.

Shaking his head, Jiron hollers back, “It doesn’t look like they’re following us.” After a few more minutes of scanning for the enemy, he returns back down the hill to the others.

James is lying stretched out on the ground, trying to rest for the few minutes they’ll be staying here. Jiron comes over and sits next to him. Gesturing over to Miko, he says quietly so only he can hear him, “Is it my imagination, or is he getting taller?”

Sitting up abruptly, James looks over to where Miko is sitting quietly next to Fifer. Nodding, he replies, “Maybe, I hope not though.”

“Why?” Jiron asks.

Lowering his voice so as to practically be unheard, he says, “If he is, it’s the Fire doing it to him and that can’t be good. The sooner we can get it away from him, the better.”

“Why don’t you take it?” asks Jiron.

“I don’t dare,” he replies. “It might be safe enough hanging in a pouch, but I might inadvertently reach in and touch it. From what the ghost of the priest of Morcyth said, that would be bad.”

“What if one of us takes it?” he suggests.

“No,” he replies. “I think it best if only one of us is affected by it.”

“So what are we to do?” he says as he glances to Miko.

“Nothing right now,” answers James. “Just hope nothing too bad comes of it. As soon as we’re back in Cardri, I’ll find somewhere to hide it.”

Changing the subject, Jiron asks, “Can you do your scanning thing to see where those forces that were following us went to?”

Sighing, he says, “Alright, but after that I’m going to need to avoid magic for a while. I’m starting to feel the effects.”

“Headache again?” guesses Jiron.

Nodding, James replies, “Yeah. It’s not too bad right now, but if I should need to call on the magic in an emergency, it could get much worse.” Getting up, he moves over to the spring and kneels down in front of it.

“What’s going on?” asks Fifer.

“He’s going to try to find the force that was behind us,” explains Jiron.

Interested, Fifer comes over and watches as the surface of the pool begins to shimmer and suddenly focuses on an aerial view of them.

James scrolls the image westward and it isn’t long before they see the large force of foot soldiers moving to the northeast. The image suddenly moves further to the northeast and they see Lord Pytherian where he’s stopped at the edge of a forest taking a short break. If the army continues on its present course, they’ll run right into him.

The image disappears as James stands up and says, “It looks like they’re moving straight for Lord Pytherian.”

He glances to the others gathered around him and continues, “We’ll need to convince that army to come this way.”

“How?” Jiron asks.

“We’ll attack,” he states.

“You’ve got to be kidding, right?” Fifer says in disbelief. “The four of us, against that?”

“I’m not saying that we’ll wade in with guns ablazing, no,” he tells him. “But, we could convince them to alter their course enough to bypass Lord Pytherian. Or at least slow their progress down.”
“How?” Jiron asks, intrigued at the prospect.

“Come close enough so they’ll send someone to investigate us,” he explains. “Then take them out. I’ll use magic so if there’s any mages within the group, they’ll know I’m here. That should give them reason enough to come after us.”

“You going to be up to that?” Jiron asks him.

Shrugging, he replies, “It’s an hour or so before we get to them, I should be okay for a little magic by then. Besides, if we don’t turn them this way, Lord Pytherian may not be able to get safely through the lines. He’ll be rushed to make it through with this force nipping on his heals and that could prove disastrous for him.”

“Then let’s get moving,” Jiron says as he walks over toward where the horses are picketed. Mounting, he waits while the others get up on their horses and then leads them along a route which should intersect with the route the army is taking.

Once they’ve left the hills behind, it isn’t long before they see the dust on the horizon the army kicks up as it marches. “Let’s maintain this distance,” James says after they’ve moved a little closer to them. “We’ll just move along parallel with them until they take notice.”

Keeping the Empire’s forces in sight, they maintain a leisurely pace. Their force is primarily foot with some cavalry mixed in. It takes a full ten minutes before the army finally realizes they’re there. Suddenly, they hear a horn blast and six horsemen break off from the main group as they gallop toward them.

“Seems we finally got their attention,” Jiron states.

“Told them long enough,” replies Fifer. “I thought we’d have to holler over to them to let them know we were even here.” Jiron gives out with a bark of laughter at that.

“Look,” Miko says, “the foot soldiers are beginning to move in this direction.”

“This might just work,” says James. He waits for a minute or two to allow the riders to come closer before he releases the magic.

_Crumph!_

The ground beneath the riders explodes upward, creating a large dust cloud. When the dust cloud dissipates, they find all six riders lying broken and still amidst their dead steeds.

More horns sound from within the host and suddenly the bulk of the riders break into a gallop northward as the foot turn and begin moving directly toward them.

“Where are they going?” asks Miko as the riders move out of sight to the north.

“Most likely trying to cut us off so the foot will have a chance to catch up with us,” replies James.

“But aren’t they worried about you doing more spells against them?” he asks.

He begins to feel the pricking sensation of magic and says, “They have a mage with them, and if he’s been following all that I’ve done, he should realize I haven’t much left in me.”

“Oh,” grunts Miko.

“Shouldn’t we be moving now?” asks Fifer as the foot soldiers begin closing the distance rapidly.

“Absolutely,” says Jiron as he turns back to the east. They all break into a quick gallop, making sure not to outrun the foot soldiers as they race for the mountains.

When they’re finally back among the hills, they make sure to pass over a hill from time to time to allow the pursuing army to keep track of their position. They continue this strategy for another hour, managing to keep the army behind them at a constant, yet safe, distance.

Suddenly from the north, horns begin sounding. From behind them, horns can be heard answering them. Topping a hill, they look to the north. James hears Fifer gasp beside him when he sees a force of riders approaching, with some foot soldiers mixed in. A force over twice the size they’d seen break off from the pursuing army earlier.

“I guess we know where those riders had been going,” James says.

“Yeah, to get reinforcements,” adds Jiron.

They watch as a large contingent of horse and foot begin entering the hills from the north. Numbering over a hundred horse and three times that number of foot, James realizes their plan may have worked too well.

“No more piddlefarting around,” he says as he turns his horse due east. “Let’s get the hell out of here!” The others follow as he rides down off the hill and begins racing through the hills.

They go no more than half a mile when a road appears between them as it makes its way eastward. Coming onto the road, they’re able to increase their speed as they fly toward the mountains.

From behind them, they continue to hear the horns of the two armies calling to one another. Scouts can be seen behind them from time to time as they crest hills in order to better direct the pursuing armies.

Up ahead of them in the road is a cart drawn by two mules, making its way toward them. Without stopping, they swing around it and continue down the road. The driver glances over his shoulder at them as they quickly disappear around the next hill. When he turns back, he’s startled to see the hills beginning to swarm with the
Empire’s forces as they close in.

“Maybe this idea wasn’t so smart!” James hollers over to Jiron as they race along the road.

“It worked though,” he replies. “They’re definitely not heading toward Lord Pytherian now.”

Behind them, they can see dozens of riders upon the road in pursuit. To the north, horns can still be heard as they call to those in hills to the west. The cavalry must be pacing them as they keep them bottled up for the foot soldiers.

The hills begin to grow steadily steeper until they finally meld into the mountains. The road now winds its way between two steep sides of the mountain, with no way to go now but forward.

Turning a corner, they come to a junction, either straight ahead along the main road, or they can follow a smaller one that winds steeply up the mountain to their right. Deciding on speed, they continue to follow the road which continues straight ahead.

Ten more minutes pass when suddenly a small village appears ahead of them. They pause momentarily at the edge of the village to determine where to go. The villagers watch them but make no move to approach.

The village is nestled in among the sides of the mountain, the only way to go now is to follow the road as it leaves the village to the south. With the horns behind them getting louder, they kick their tired horses into a gallop as they race through town to the southern road.

From where it exits the village, the road begins to dwindle in size as it begins to curve to the right. Further down, the road, soon narrows into a small path with ruts made from the many wagon wheels that have rolled through here. They’re forced to slow their horses as the footing begins to get uneven with all the ruts and they run the risk of a misstep.

The horns still sound behind them, almost as if they’re trying to drive them forward. Whether they are or not, they no longer have any choice but to go on.

Suddenly, the road ahead of them enters a box canyon with steep sides. At the end of the road is a mine entrance, a dead end.

“How what?” asks Fifer, dismay in his voice. The others pause as they consider what to do.

From the mine entrance, several men walk out holding picks and shovels, eyeing them suspiciously. They don’t look very friendly as they walk toward them. The one in the lead begins shouting something to James and the others as he brandishes his pickaxe.

On the road behind them, they hear the clatter of horses as the riders who’ve been herding them come into view. “Into the mine!” James hollers as he kicks his horse in motion and rides into the lead miner, knocking him out of the way.

The others follow him as they ride through the rest of the miners who are attempting to stop them by striking out with their picks and shovels. But their attacks are easily deflected by the seasoned fighters and are soon left behind.

Upon reaching the mine entrance, they quickly dismount and are faced with more miners coming out of the mine. Jiron takes the lead and moves to intercept them. One of the miners swings his pick at Jiron who grabs the handle and kicks out with his foot, connecting with the man’s chest. The miner falls backward into his fellows, knocking them off balance.

Fifer joins him and quickly engages a miner with a shovel. Striking with his sword, he lops off the head of the man’s shovel. The miners quickly realize they’re hopelessly outclassed and break away, running down the road away from the mine, toward the approaching riders.

“Move!” cries James as they race into the mine entrance. Upon gaining the safety of the mine, he turns to look back at the riders coming up the road. They’re slowing down and finally stop when they reach the miners. The cavalry officer barks over and asks a question and one of the miners replies, pointing toward them.

The officer barks out an order and the miners move further away from the mine as the riders move closer.

From behind him, he can hear Jiron and Fifer as they scuffle with more miners who were still within the mine. Looking back, he sees the last of three miners fall to the ground as Fifer pulls his sword out from the man’s chest. Giving Miko a nudge, they move further back into the mine until its darkness completely hides them from those outside.

When the riders reach the mine entrance, the officer stares into the mine and shouts something, most likely ordering them to come out.

In reply, a rock flies out of the mine and strikes the lead rider in the chest, exploding out the back. As the officer falls off his horse, total pandemonium erupts among the riders. One of them charges the mine entrance only to fall as another rock flies out and takes him through the chest. The rest of the riders turn their horses and move a hundred feet down the road away from the mine where they huddle together as they talk among themselves.

James glances at the others and says, “They’ll probably wait until that mage shows up before doing anything
“I think so too,” responds Jiron. Then he glances at James and asks, “There’s no way we’re going to make it out of here, is there?”

James shakes his head and says, “Doesn’t look that way.”

“Maybe not,” says Miko.

They all turn to him as he continues, “Back when I was in the mines, I saw shafts that they’d dug up to the surface periodically to allow fresh air in for us. If this mine has those too, then we could maybe use one to get out.”

“Anyone have a candle or torch?” James asks, suddenly remembering a scene from the movie Rambo.

“What do you want that for?” questions Jiron.

When they all shake their head no, he looks around and finds a narrow piece of broken wood about two and half feet long. He goes back and removes a shirt from one of the dead miners and wraps it around the wood. Motioning for everyone to move back away from the entrance, he concentrates and the cloth bursts into flame.

From outside the mine, they hear the talking increase as they see the makeshift torch come to life. Some move forward and James throws another stone out, this time trying not to kill. The stone strikes a man who’s knocked backward and the rest who were moving forward come to a stop.

Seeing that they’re not in any immediate threat of being rushed, James holds the torch steady and watches as the flame is fanned by a breeze moving toward the rear of the mine. Looking to Miko, he says, “You may be right.”

Miko breaks into a smile, relieved to both have helped him and that they might be able to get out.

Holding the torch out in front of him, James moves further back into the mine. They don’t get far before the mine branches to the left or right. He steps down each branch and pauses a moment to watch the flame of the torch. When he’s down the left branch the flame flickers the most.

“It’s down this way,” he tells them. Walking quickly, he moves further into the left tunnel.

Jiron looks back to the entrance and sees the soldiers are tentatively moving closer. There appear to be more out there, most likely both of the forces have met up. That means somewhere out there is a mage as well.

He hurries to follow James as he attempts to locate an air vent. “I think they’re starting to move toward the entrance,” he tells James when he catches up with him.

“If they don’t move fast, we should be able to get out of here,” he says, glancing back.

Jiron thinks this whole thing is doubtful, but trusts in James. In the short time they’ve been together, he’s managed to do some pretty impressive things.

The mine begins to get narrower and they find tools and other implements scattered about. In one spot, they come across a half filled ore wagon sitting to one side. They look at the ore within but are unable to determine just what the miners had been mining.

“It’s not iron ore,” Miko says when he gets close enough to the wagon to see its contents.

“Are you sure?” Fifer asks.

Grimly, he replies, “Very.”

They move on, the torch still indicating a breeze moving toward the back of the mine. Suddenly, a crossbow bolt strikes the wall right next to James. He whirls around, points the torch behind them and lets the magic flow.

A cone of fire shoots from the end of the torch like a flame thrower, Jiron has to dive out of the way as the flame sizzles past. It expands as it goes until it’s wide enough to touch the sides of the mine. Screams can be heard from the soldiers who’re caught in the fire as their hair and clothes burst into flame. As quickly as the cone of fire started, it stops.

Back down the tunnel, they can see several men running away, their clothes and hair aflame. As an added concern, some of the support beams used to keep the ceiling from caving in have caught fire as well.

Turning back, James says, “We better hurry.”

Fifer gazes at James, awe in his eyes as well as a little bit of fear. “How did you do that?” he asks.

“Oxygen will burn, but it needs to be in a purer form than what we breathe,” he explains. “I just changed it.”

“Oh,” he says, not really understanding, “right.”

James grins at him and continues down the tunnel. He glances back occasionally and finds that the soldiers have made no attempts to put out the fires consuming the old timbers shoring up the mine.

Another branching and he determines the breeze is continuing down the right, they turn to follow it. Shortly after taking it, the unmistakable sounds of men chipping stone away from the walls can be heard from up ahead.

A torch begins to be seen and soon three men are visible in the light as they use pickaxes to remove the stone from the wall. When they approach the miners, the men take notice of them and at first take them for their fellows, but soon realize their mistake.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” James says to them, holding up his hands. “Do you understand?”

They begin talking in the Empire’s tongue, not responding to what he just said.
“I guess they don’t,” says Jiron. He draws his knives and advances upon them, Fifer joins him with his longsword. Miko moves to join them but James stops him by grabbing him by the arm. When he looks at him, James just shakes his head, no.

As Jiron and Fifer approach the miners with their weapons held in a threatening manner, they make sure to leave open an avenue of retreat for them.

The miners stare in fright at them as they approach. When they realize there’s a way to flee, they don’t even hesitate as they throw down their picks and race past them to the front of the mine.

After they’ve disappeared down the mine, Jiron moves to the wall where they were mining and closely examines the stone. He takes the torch from the wall and holds it close. “Silver,” he announces, pointing to a silver vein. “They’re mining silver.”

“Too bad we can’t take some with us,” Fifer says, longingly.

“Come on,” James says to them, “we need to get out of here.”

Moving further down the mine, they come to a section where the breeze seems to intensify and suddenly the flame of the torch looks as if it’s being sucked straight up. James looks up to the ceiling and can see a dark hole extending upward. “I think this is it,” he announces as he tosses the torch to the ground.

“But how do we get up there?” Miko asks as he looks up.

Jiron tosses his torch up into the hole and the light illuminates a slanted narrow opening, about four foot square, ten feet above their heads. “If we can get up there, it looks like we can brace ourselves along the sides as we make our way up,” he tells them.

He looks to Fifer and says, “Lift me up.” He hands his torch to Miko.

Fifer comes over and cups his hands together to give Jiron a step up. When Jiron puts his foot in his hands, he lifts him up to the hole.

Jiron reaches up and is able to get a solid handhold within the hole. Getting a solid purchase with his foot as well, he begins to slowly move further up into the vent. They hear his voice coming down to them, “It’s not too steep, the sides are rough and give ample places to grip.”

They see him beginning to come back down but stops when he gets to the edge. “James, can you make an orb for me to use?” he asks.

A small circle of light forms in James’ hands and then begins to rise up to Jiron. It floats up until it comes to rest on his right shoulder. “Thanks,” they hear him say as he works his way back up the vent.

“Miko, you’re next,” James says as he cups his hands to give him a boost.

“I’m not so sure about this,” he says. He glances up to the vent, the light from the orb clearly showing the opening.

“You can do it,” James says. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Not looking too excited about the prospect of the climb, he tosses the torch to the ground. Coming over, he steps into James’ cupped hands and reaches for the opening as James grunts with the effort to lift him. Jiron is there and takes his hand as he maneuvers into the vent.

“Fifer, you better let James go next,” Jiron’s voice comes down to them. “He’d never make it on his own.”

Coming over to James, Fifer cups his hands. James places his foot in Fifer’s cupped hands and reaches for the opening as Fifer lifts him up.

Jiron has already moved further up the vent and Miko is slowly following him. James grabs hold of outcroppings and places his other foot in a crack in the wall. Lifting his foot out of Fifer’s hands, he begins to follow Miko as he moves up into the vent.

He goes another foot up before pausing. “How are you going to get up?” he hollers back to Fifer.

“Not a problem,” he hears him say from below. James hears several of the picks being moved around and then all of a sudden, Fifer’s head appears at the opening. Using handholds, he brings himself up into the vent.

From further toward the front of the mine, they hear a loud rumbling and the vent begins to shake. “Cave-in!” hollers Miko.

When the vent stops shaking, James says, “The beams that caught fire must have given way.”

“Or they collapsed the mine entrance, figuring to trap us here until we die,” suggests Fifer.

“It’s a possibility,” agrees James.

Moving slowly, they continue their way up the vent. Each holds with hands while they find a solid purchase for their feet and then brace their feet as they reach further up for another handhold. Back and forth from handhold to foothold, they continuously work their way up the vent. After what seems a long time, the vent begins to move more vertical and the handholds and footholds become more difficult to manage.

Aaaah!

From up ahead, they hear Jiron exclaim loudly. “What’s wrong!” hollers James.
He then hears Miko cry out as he loses his grip and begins to slide down toward him. Falling for several feet, he finally manages to grab a hold of an outcropping just in time to stop himself before crashing into James. “Sorry!” they hear Jiron holler from up above.

James is wondering just what is going on when a dead snake falls across his shoulders. Startled, he loses his grip and begins sliding back down the vent. Trying to stop his fall, all he manages to do is scrape some skin off his arms and legs. Fifer sees him coming toward him and braces himself for the impact. Holding tight to his handholds and having one good solid purchase for one of his feet, he’s able to maintain his grip when James slides into him.

“What’s going on?” Fifer hollers after James once more has a secure purchase on the sides of the vent.

“A snake,” James says to him. “Jiron must’ve killed one and dropped it on us.” Yelling up the shaft, James says, “Warn us next time!”

From way up he can hear a chuckle come down to him.

As Fifer maintains his hold, James begins to work his way further up. A few minutes later they hear Jiron holler down to them, “We got a problem!”

“What?” they all three ask at the same time.

“I gotta pee!” Jiron says.

“Don’t you dare!” Miko yells back up to him.

They hear his laughing as he replies, “Just kidding, I couldn’t help myself.”

James begins laughing too, as does Fifer. Even Miko begins chuckling at the thought.

They continue up for a while longer, just how long James has no idea. The pain in his hands, arms and legs is growing by the minute. The raw scrapes from his earlier slide down the vent throbs with every handhold and toehold.

Finally, they hear Jiron holler down to them, “I’ve reached the end! It’s not much further.”

Knowing the end is near gives them an added burst of energy and they climb with renewed vigor. Another ten minutes finds Fifer finally climbing out of the hole and collapsing upon the ground under the stars next to the others. Night had fallen since they entered the mines and it was getting cold. They find themselves high in the mountains, far off to the west below them, they can see the lights from the village.

Around the village they can see hundreds of fires from the soldiers camped in and around it.

They set up a watch schedule for the night, James takes first watch. He manages to get a fire going, a small one so as not to attract attention, so they won’t freeze during the night. The others lie down and quickly fall asleep, the rigors of the climb leaving them weak and tired.
Chapter Twenty Two

When the sun begins to rise the next morning, Jiron, who’s taken the last watch, allows everyone to sleep in. He’s kept an eye on the activities of those in the town below and it doesn’t look as if they’re coming in their direction. Must think we’re still trapped in the mine.

Smiling in satisfaction, he returns to the camp and sees James coming back from where he’d answered nature’s call. Speaking softly so as not to wake the others, he says, “It looks like they don’t even realize we’re out of the mines yet.”

“Good,” replies James. “Let’s hope they hold to that belief for a long time.”

“We’re going to need something to eat pretty soon,” he says. “There’s not much left.”

Nodding, James says, “Build up the fire a little more, and use the driest wood you can and no leaves. That way there shouldn’t be much smoke and from this distance it’s unlikely they’d notice it.” He begins making for the edge of camp as he continues, “I’ll see if I can’t scare up some rabbits or something.”

Jiron gathers wood that looks fairly dry and takes them back to camp. By the time James returns, he has the fire going well enough to roast the three small animals he’s returned with. They soon have them dressed and roasting over the flames.

The smell of the roasting meat wakens Miko, just as James thought it might. He comes over and joins them. He holds up his right arm and showing them the long scratches from his wrist to his elbow as he gives Jiron an accusing glare.

“I said I was sorry,” Jiron apologizes. “That snake startled me and when I killed it, it fell.”

By this time, Fifer had awakened as well and had joined them by the fire. “Hope Lord Pytherian made it through the lines by now,” he says.

“If he pushed on through the night, he’d be pretty close,” agrees James. “At least from what Miller said.”

“What’s our plan?” Jiron asks James.

“Keep on as we have been,” he replies. “Once we’re down off the mountain, try to nab us some horses and then ride like hell to the north.”

“Won’t they know we’re not in the mountain when we steal the horses?” Fifer asks.

Nodding, James says, “Most likely, but at least we’ll be on open plains and should be able to keep ahead of them. If we’re lucky, we’ll be able to make it through the lines before those at the lines know we’re there.” Turning to Fifer, he adds, “That’s where you come in.”

“How?” asks Fifer.

“Yes, you,” James tells him. “We don’t know the area, you do. Also, if we run into Madoc patrols, it’ll be your job to convince them not to attack.”

“What if they don’t know me?” he asks.

“Then we have a problem,” answers James. “But let’s just hope that isn’t going to happen.” He checks the roasting meat and finds it ready. Cutting off hunks, he distributes them to the others. Wrapping his in a leaf to prevent his hands from being burned, he walks over to the edge of the cliff and gazes down at the village below.

The army seems to be pulling out. He can see columns of men marching back along the road as they make their way out from the mountains. A sizeable force still remains within the village, probably on the off chance they somehow manage to make it out of the mine.

After they’re done eating, James has them dig up dirt to smother the fire, so it won’t produce a lot of smoke and alert everyone to their position. With Jiron again in the lead, they begin heading north as they make their way across the mountains.

They stay in the higher elevations as best they can, going down one side only to come up the next. Crossing streams and forging through ravines, they spend the day pushing on to the north. By the end of the day, they’ve managed to come a fair distance, the mountain they started from earlier in the day is far behind them.

Before the sun completely goes down, James takes down a large deer like animal, giving them plenty of meat that should last a couple of days. They cut strips off the carcass and cook them so it’ll be ready to take with them when they leave in the morning.

All through the night, the one on watch continues to feed the fire and cook the meat. By morning, they have
most of the meat cooked, some of it cooked too much, but enough to last them several days.

Each puts as much as they can in the various pouches and packs they’re carrying, except for the pouch with the Fire that Miko is carrying. They leave that one alone.

Jiron again takes the lead as they push for the next ridge in the distance ahead of them. It takes them the better part of the morning to reach it, and when they reach the top, they come to a halt.

The view is breathtaking on the other side of the ridge. The mountain gradually makes its way down to the rolling hills at its base, where they extend several miles further before turning into grass covered plains. Far off to the north they see a green forest that stretches to the horizon. A couple riders are moving along the plains between the hills and the forest. From this distance, they look little more than specks.

“The trees will give us some cover as we move down to the hills below,” announces James.

“But past the hills, there’s nothing to hide us from the enemy,” says Fifer. “Not until we make it to those trees way over there.”

“Then we better make it down to the hills before dark,” suggests Jiron. “And then we could try to cross over to the trees before dawn.”

“Alright then, let’s move,” James says.

They begin to move down the side of the mountain toward the hills below. Keeping within the cover of the trees, they’re able to avoid detection during their descent. It takes them until late afternoon to make it all the way down to the low lying hills.

The trees begin to thin among the hills the further toward the edge of the grasslands they go. Near the end of the hills, they have to move quickly from one grove to another in order to avoid being seen by the riders moving out on the plains. The sun is almost down to the horizon as they make it to the last grove of trees before they end completely.

James turns to the others as they settle in amongst the trees and says, “A short rest break will do us good before we try to cross the grasslands to the forest.”

Miko rests against the bole of a tree and says, “I’m for that.”

Jiron moves to the edge of the trees and looks out upon the plains, now currently devoid of any riders. James comes up beside him and asks, “What are you thinking?”

“Just that we have come a long way,” he says with a sigh. “I can’t believe all the things we’ve gone through since leaving the City of Light.”

“I know,” replies James. “If we make it back to Cardri, I’m going to find someplace and just rest for a month.”

Jiron looks sidelong at him and chuckles, “I doubt it. You don’t seem the type to just sit back and let the world go by.”

Shrugging, James says, “Perhaps not, but I do like to just have nothing to do once in a while.”

“What about Miko?” he whispers softly, nodding his head in Miko’s direction.

“He’ll probably stay with me, I like having him around,” admits James.

“He is a good kid,” Jiron adds.

“Yeah, he is,” agrees James.

“How long should we wait before we make for the trees over there?” asks Jiron as he points to the forest several miles away.

James glances to the setting sun and replies, “Probably a couple more hours, at least. Make sure we have the cover of night before we make the attempt.”

Turning back to the others, he says, “Then we should try to get some rest.”

They go back to where Fifer sits, sharpening his sword. Nearby, Miko has already fallen asleep, his snores sounding loud amidst the quiet.

“Thanks,” he says as he lies down. With the sun overhead, it’s awhile before he’s able to fall asleep.

Jiron awakens everyone once night has fallen. Even though he hadn’t had much sleep, he’s still alert. He knows that when he finally gets a chance to sleep, he’ll be out hard. “Let’s get moving,” he says as everyone stirs groggily, trying to come awake.

“How long has it been dark?” asks James.

“A little over an hour,” he tells him. “Unless we run into someone, it’s unlikely we’ll be spotted.”

“Anyone out there?” asks Miko as he stares out over the plains.

“A lone rider occasionally, but that’s it,” Jiron replies.

“That’s good,” says Miko.

Once everyone is ready to move, Jiron leads the way as they leave the cover of the trees. James is glad the
moon hasn’t risen yet to reveal them to any enemies who may be in the area. If they hurry, they can be to the trees in a couple of hours.

A half hour into their trek to the trees, they hear a horse approaching from the east. From the sound of it, it’s only a single rider but he’s moving in their general direction.

“I think he’ll pass fairly close,” Jiron whispers to James. “We should try to get the horse.”

“Why?” asks James, leery of giving away their position.

“We need horses if we’re going to break through the lines,” he replies. “This is a start.”

“Alright,” agrees James. “Just be careful.”

Jiron glances east toward the sound of the approaching rider. Taking Fifer with him, he positions them where he believes the rider will pass. Suddenly, the rider appears before them in the starlight and James watches as Jiron and Fifer jump him, pulling him down from the horse.

A cry breaks the silence of the night and is quickly silenced. Jiron and Fifer return with the horse.

Jiron again takes the lead, Fifer leading the horse as they continue across to the forest. Two hours later, they enter the outer fringe of the forest. Everyone relaxes now that they’re within the covering shelter of the trees. The density of the trees increases the further into the forest they move.

“How far do these woods go?” James asks Fifer.

“Not really sure,” he says. “The soldiers that had taken Lord Pytherian had gone around them. I do know there’s a range of mountains on the other side, though. We’ll have to move eastward around them to continue north.”

“What’s past there?” ask Jiron.

“ar the north of the mountains are more plains and that’s where the Empire’s forces were when we left,” he says. “If they’ve pushed north, they may be closing in on Lythylla, the capitol of Madoc. That’s where the Patriarchal Council lies.”

“The capitol would indeed be a prize,” adds James.

“Yes it would,” agrees Fifer. “If it falls, then all of Madoc is lost.”

“That’s why they captured Lord Pytherian when they did,” reasons James. “In anticipation of the attack on Lythylla.”

“If that’s the case, then let us pray Lord Pytherian succeeds in making it through the lines. For he is the only one that can keep the alliance together.”

They continue on through the forest for a couple more hours before they begin to see lights from a couple campfires in the distance. Jiron motions for them to stop as he continues on, moving silently toward the fires.

James and the others sit and wait until they hear his return. When he gets closer, he whispers, “Empire soldiers, ten of them sitting around a couple fires. They have sentries posted, but not this way, looks as if they don’t expect anything coming from this direction.”

“Can we get around them without being seen?” asks James.

“Probably,” he says then glances at all of them before adding, “question is, should we.”

“What do you mean?” Fifer asks.

“If we’re nearing their main force, we’ll need horses to move quickly enough to get through,” he explains. Pointing back to the soldiers, he says, “They have the horses we need, and they’re in a small enough group that we have a good chance of surviving the fight.”

He can hear James sighing in the dark. Jiron knows he doesn’t like to kill unless necessary, but he hopes he’ll recognize the necessity of it now.

“You’re right,” James says, much to Jiron’s relief. “We need the horses. But, I’m going to restrict myself to slugs only so if they’re any mages in the area, they won’t come to investigate.”

“No problem,” replies Jiron. “Fifer and I can take out most of them anyway.” He turns to Miko and says, “It might be a good idea if you stay back and guard James, just in case they get by us.”

Nodding, Miko says, “I can do that.”

“Good,” states Jiron, giving a sidelong glance at James.

“Should we give them some time to fall asleep before we fall upon them?” asks Fifer.

Shaking his head, Jiron replies, “No, we better do this quick and fast before others show up.”

“I agree,” adds James. “If we’re to do it, let’s do it!” He bends over and picks up several stones, when Jiron asks him what he’s doing, he replies, “Just saving my slugs.”

Fifer ties the reins of the horse to a nearby tree limb before they begin making their way further toward the encamped soldiers. Moving silently, they manage to work themselves within a dozen yards of the camp.

The soldiers are relaxing around the fire, talking and joking as they have their evening meal, obviously believing there’s no reason to be vigilant. Two sentries stand away from the others, but glance backward from time
to time to talk to the others.

James looks to Jiron who nods his head. He places one of the stones in his hand, takes a breath, and then throws the stone toward one of the sentries. Releasing the magic, the stone rockets forward and strikes the sentry in the back and explodes out his front.

Before the man even begins to fall to the ground, another stone flies and takes out the other sentry.

A cry comes up from the camp as they see the men fall. They’re looking to the north, thinking the attack originated in that direction. They begin to fan out away from the camp, swords drawn and at the ready.

Jiron and Fifer begin moving toward the camp as another stones flies and takes out the soldier closest to them. When he cries out and falls, the others turn to glance at their dead comrade and somehow fail to notice Jiron and Fifer moving toward them in the darkness.

Moving as silently as possible, they creep up behind two soldiers who have lagged behind their comrades. Moving quickly, they take the two soldiers out as another stone flies from the darkness behind them, killing another soldier.

The remaining four turn around and see Jiron and Fifer standing there, bathed in the light from the campfire, their dead comrades on the ground behind them. One soldier lets loose with a battle cry and then they all rush forward.

Jiron and Fifer move together, side to side to support each other as the soldiers attack. Fifer’s shield blocks a blow from one sword as his sword deflects the sword from the other.

After deflecting a thrust from one of his opponents, Jiron kicks out and connects with the man’s knee. An audible crack is heard as the man cries out and falls to the ground, his knee cap shattered.

Another slug flies out of the woods and takes one of Fifer’s opponents through the head, blasting off everything above the jawbone. The grisly sight stumbles backward and falls into one of the fires as its clothes and hair begin to burn, filling the area with a nauseating odor.

With only one opponent left, Jiron easily deflects the man’s sword as he thrusts with his other knife catching him across his exposed throat. The soldier stumbles backward as blood fountains from his severed jugular.

Fifer blocks and holds his opponent’s sword with his as he strikes out with his shield, knocking the man backward. Stumbling, he falls over his partner who’s cooking over the fire, and hits the ground.

Following after him, Fifer strikes down while the man is unable to defend himself and plunges his sword through his chest, piercing his heart.

Looking around, Jiron only sees the dead and the dying. Mercifully, he goes around and puts those who haven’t died yet out of their misery.

James and Miko come out of the forest leading their horse. “Everyone grab a horse and let’s get out of here,” James says as he pulls the man off the fire and begins kicking dirt on him to put it out.

Miko goes over to where the soldiers had their supplies and takes several pouches with food. He ties them on the horse he’s leading and then mounts up while he waits for the others.

James feels bad about the attack, but realizes there was little choice in the matter. He goes over to where the soldiers have their horses picketed and saddles one quickly. Jiron and Fifer do the same.

When the horses are ready, James and Jiron put the fires out to hide the evidence of their attack until morning. Mounting, they turn their horses again to the north as they move through the trees.

They don’t travel long before the trees open up onto plains again. They turn and follow the tree line as it moves to the northwest. As the moon clears the horizon, mountains can be seen ahead of them to the northwest.

“Are those the mountains you were talking about earlier?” James asks Fifer.

“Yeah,” he replies. “On the other side is where the Empire’s army was when we last went by.”

“How are you doing?” James asks Jiron.

“Tired, but alright,” he replies.

“Let’s go another couple hours,” James announces, “and when the sky begins to lighten, find a spot to hide throughout the day and rest. Tomorrow night, we can make the attempt to pass through their lines.”

“I’m for that,” Jiron says tiredly from where he’s riding next to him. The rigors of the last few days, not to mention lack of sleep, are definitely taking their toll on him.

They continue to follow the trees and soon the terrain turns into hills as they get closer to the mountains. When the sky begins to lighten, they search for somewhere to hide and rest until night.

Moving further into the trees, they come to a spot with a hill between them and the plains with the mountains behind them. Securing their horses, they set about making camp. Miko breaks out the food he’d acquired earlier and they have a meal of cold, stale rations along with the meat they still have from before.

The others allow Jiron to sleep the entire time as they take turns at watch. James again takes the first one with Miko following him in the dreaded mid watch.
During Fifer’s watch, he hears a commotion from the plains to the east and climbs to the top of the hill. Dozens of riders are riding to the north, fast. *Must’ve found the slain soldiers back at their camp.*

He continues watching them until they disappear in the distance. For the remainder of his watch, he remains sitting upon the hill overlooking the plains but sees no other riders passing during the afternoon.

When the light begins to fade, he comes back to the camp and proceeds to wake everyone up. Another quick meal and then they saddle up and mount. By this time, the sun has gone down and they’re able to leave the shelter of the trees without fear of being spotted.
Back to the edge of the tree line, they move out into the grasslands in order to make better time. They continue to follow along the tree line as it moves north through the hills. The mountains grow large ahead of them and after an hour of riding, they reach their base. Skirting around the tall mountains, they stay in the foothills as they continue north. The hours pass as they follow the mountains on their left. Moving along the foothills is fairly easy, the waning moon giving them ample light to see.

An hour or two before the approach of dawn, they round a hill and come upon a camp of enemy soldiers. In their haste, they fail to take notice of the enemy camp before one of their sentries sees their approach and calls out to them. When they fail to answer, the soldier fires a crossbow bolt and begins shouting, alerting those within the camp to their presence.

The bolt flies past Jiron just as he brings his horse to a quick stop. Turning their horses around quickly, they flee to the south just as a horn begins to sound from the camp behind them. Far to the south, an answering call can be heard.

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“Damn!” curses Jiron as he turns them eastward, riding fast away from the two forces. Horns blare behind them as they call to each other and in the moonlight, enemy riders can be seen racing out of the camp in pursuit. One of the riders sounds a horn when he catches sight of them fleeing across the grasslands, letting the entire countryside aware of their whereabouts.

It isn’t long before horns can be heard coming from ahead of them to the east as well. Having little choice, they turn to the north to avoid those ahead of them and ride hard as they try to outdistance their pursuers.

“James, can you do something?” Jiron hollers to him as he races close by.

“I can’t see them,” he replies. “I can’t be sure of being effective until I know just how many are back there and exactly where they are.”

“How far away is dawn?” Fifer asks.

“An hour,” guesses Jiron. “Maybe more.”

Another round from the horns behind them sound in the night. “We’ve got to silence those horns!” Fifer yells. “If we don’t, the armies ahead of us will know we’re coming and there goes our chance of sneaking through their lines.”

“How many do you think are behind us?” asks James.

“There were about twenty at the camp we almost ran into,” Jiron says. “Add to that the other two groups, maybe a hundred. More?”

“I can’t take out that many!” James exclaims. “Not in the dark anyway, I can’t be sure to even get them.”

As they continue to fly across the plains, he begins to get an idea. Hating to do it to the poor horses, but he’s got no choice. Concentrating hard, he begins creating a patchwork of holes behind them in the ground. Each is seven inches in diameter and a foot deep. Any horse putting its leg in it will have it broken, especially at the speed they’re going.

He creates his orb so the riders behind them will know in which direction to follow them. “What’re you doing?” cries Jiron. “We’re trying to lose them not attract them!”

“I want them to follow right behind us,” he says, voice strained from the effort to talk, and create the holes behind them at the same time. It’s taking far more out of him to create the patchwork of holes than he’d expected and it isn’t long before he begins developing the beginnings of a whopper of a headache.

Suddenly, a horse can be heard crying out in pain behind them as it sets its hoof in one of the holes. Then, several more cry out as they, too, get their legs broken.

“What’s happening?” asks Fifer as they slow a fraction.

“Sounds like their horses are in distress,” Jiron says as he glances behind them. More and more horses begin crying out as they step into the holes.

After several minutes of creating the holes, James stops and they ride on at a reduced pace for a few minutes. The horses behind them have quieted and the sound of pursuit has fallen off as well. “I think that slowed them down a little,” he says. From the sound of his voice, the others can tell that bit of magic had taken its toll.

“Sounds like it,” Miko says.
They ride on for another half an hour before the sky to the east begins to lighten up. Glancing behind them as the light increases, James is relieved not to see any sign of their pursuers.

The mountains begin to fall off behind them as the range moves more to the west. To the north, a large body of foot soldiers appears far in the distance ahead of them, moving to the northeast. They stop abruptly and turn around, moving southwest to avoid them. Soon the army is out of sight behind them.

Far off to the west, they begin to see smoke rising from a large structure sitting along the base of the mountains. “That army must have just come from there,” supposes Jiron.

“Think they left anyone there?” asks James.

“Why?” asks Fifer.

“If they didn’t, it might be a good place to hide until night,” he explains. “Why would they go back if everyone there is dead?”

“Good point,” says Fifer.

“But they might also be using it for a forward staging area,” Jiron says. Pointing in that direction, he says, “Look, you can see people moving around the structure.”

Straining to see, James nods as he makes out several people moving there. He says, “You are right. Better not chance it.”

Several miles to their north is another line of trees. Indicating them, Jiron says, “Maybe we could make it there before anyone sees us.”

“Maybe,” replies James as he sits there and thinks a moment.

“We gotta go somewhere,” Miko says in exasperation. “We’re kind of exposed sitting here.”

“To the trees then,” decides James and everyone nods agreement.

They turn their horses north and break into a gallop. To the east, they can see the tail end of the marching column of soldiers in the distance, but hold to their course.

It’s a very tense time as they make for the trees, James expects to hear horns from all direction when they’re discovered. But as luck would have it, they make it to the trees without being spotted. Or if they did, whoever saw them took them for their own. After all, they are behind the enemies’ lines.

They move deep within the forest and continue with their northward trek. The sun continues to climb in the sky as they forge through the forest, not making near the speed they had on the plains, but are definitely less likely to be discovered.

Deeper into the forest, they come across a small river as it flows southward. Tired and exhausted, they stop at a clearing near it and take a rest break. Breaking out their food, they have a quick meal before continuing on.

“How much further do you think before we reach their lines?” James asks Fifer.

“We’re already past where they were when we went south after Lord Pytherian,” he replies. “No telling how far they’ve pushed north since then. Lythylla is only a day or so to the north, I would think that’s where we’ll find the bulk of their armies.”

“That one we saw moving around the forest,” Jiron says, “do you think they could have been on their way there?”


Once they’re done eating and the horses have had a rest, they remount and begin moving north through the forest again. They decide not to follow the river northwest, instead they head due north, hoping to avoid anyone that might be using it.

The day progresses as they continue through the woods, sometime after noon they hear a rustling ahead of them. Suddenly, four men with longbows step out of the trees, arrows knocked and ready. Several others step out with them, one comes forward and says, “Stop and identify yourselves.”

“You Madoc’s men?” James asks.

Nodding, the man waits for their reply.

Fifer steps forward and says, “I’m Fifer, belong to Miller’s band.” Indicating the others, he says, “These here are friends.”

The man eyes him suspiciously and says, “Don’t know any Miller’s band and you’re not familiar. What business have you here?”

He glances to James and Jiron before replying, “We helped rescue Lord Pytherian from the Empire, got separated from him, and now are trying to get back to friendly territory.”

The man signals the archers who lower their bows. “Heard he disappeared,” the man says.

Nodding, Fifer continues, “He was taken in a raid, I believe there was treachery involved. We separated several nights ago. He went north while we diverted a force bent on capturing him to allow him time to get through to our side. Last we saw of him, he was heading in this direction.”
“You’ll have to come with us back to our camp,” the man tells them. “Our captain is going to want to hear what you have to say.”

Fifer glances to James and Jiron who both nod their heads. He turns back to the man and says, “Lead on.”

The man turns to one of his men and whispers something to him. His man then turns and begins to run northward, disappearing into the trees.

“My names Erwin,” he tells them. “Don’t be alarmed, he just went ahead to let them know you’re coming.”

James steps up, and offers his hand. When Erwin takes it, he says, “I’m James, and this here is Jiron and Miko.” Each nods their head to Erwin when they’re introduced.

Erwin begins to lead them through the forest, his men flanking them as well as bringing up the rear. “The camp’s not too far away, about a mile or so,” he tells them. They walk the rest of the way in silence. Soon, they begin to see a camp opening up in the trees ahead of them. From the looks of it, several hundred men call this camp home.

As they approach, they see a man in woodsman attire standing at the edge of the camp waiting for them. He’s flanked by several men, bodyguards by the looks of them.

“That’s Captain Alerin, he’s in charge of these woods,” explains Erwin.

“Captain,” he says when they come near to where he’s waiting, “these men here are James, Fifer, Jiron and Miko. They claim to have helped Lord Pytherian escape from the Empire.”

The captain’s eyebrows rise slightly when he hears that. “Great news indeed, but where is Lord Pytherian?”

James steps forward and replies, “We were separated from him several days ago. We drew off a group of soldiers in order for him to escape. Last we knew, he was heading in this direction.”

“He hasn’t passed through these woods, or I would’ve known it,” states Captain Alerin gravely. “Hopefully, he went around them and found a safe route that way.” He gestures for them to follow as he moves over to a large tent.

Coming to it, one of his men moves and opens the tent flap for him.

After the captain has passed within the tent, the man holds the flap open as the others file inside behind him. Within the tent are several tables with maps covering them, as well as several braziers burning throughout to give light.

The captain moves over to one table with a large map lying open upon it and gestures for them to join him. He indicates a section of the map and says, “This is the forest we’re in right now. Where was the last place you saw him?”

James comes over and begins inspecting the map. He sees near the bottom of the map the area where the mines lie. “Here,” he says as he points to a spot a little west of the mines. Then he brings his finger over to the town just west of the spot, “This is where they took him.”

“And you rescued him from there?” he asks incredulously. “Just the four of you?”

“Actually,” Fifer says, “I wasn’t with them at the time of the rescue. I was waiting outside the east gate with Miller and the rest.”

He glances at James, Jiron and Miko a moment then shakes his head. “That hardly seems likely.”

“Likely or not,” Fifer replies, “they did enter the city and they brought him out.”

“Do you have a mirror?” asks James suddenly. “Or perhaps a bowl of water?”

“Why?” he asks.

“I’ll be able to ascertain his whereabouts if you do?” replies James.

Fifer sees his confused look and explains, “He’s a mage.”

Eyes widening, Captain Alerin says, “Truly? When Fifer nods affirmative, he says, “Never met one before.”

“Do you have a mirror?” James asks again.

Captain Alerin reaches over to another table and lifts up some paper revealing a four inch square mirror. Picking it up, he hands it over to James. “Will this do?”

“It’ll do just fine,” he replies as he takes it.

Setting it on the table in front of him, he motions for the captain to stand next to him. Concentrating on Lord Pytherian, he lets the magic flow and the image begins to form. Suddenly coming into focus, they see Lord Pytherian in a room with others, talking.

“Ah,” he says as he sees the image, a smile coming across his face.

“What?” asks James.

“He’s made it to Olton,” he says. When he sees their lack of understanding, he explains, “It’s a town to the north of us and as far as I know it’s still in Madoc territory. The ones with him are leaders of the town, as well as a few others I don’t recognize.”

“Could they be members of the alliance?” asks Fifer.

“Maybe,” he says. “It’s been a while since I’ve been out of these woods.”
“Is Colton well fortified?” asks Jiron suddenly. “Could it withstand an attack?”

Shaking his head, he says, “Hardly, it’s not that big of a town. If anyone were to attack, it wouldn’t be able to last very long. Why?”

“We saw a large force of foot soldiers moving around this forest,” explains James, indicating the position on the map. “If they were to surround and hit Colton, would they be able to hold them off?”

Looking worried, Captain Alerin says, “Not a chance. It would fall in a day.” Moving to the tent entrance he hollers for one of his men. When the man comes close, he says, “Send someone to Colton, warn of immediate attack by a large band of men moving from the east around the forest.”

“Wait,” he hears James say. When he glances back to him, James says, “There may be a quicker way.”

“Have someone stand by,” he tells the man who runs off to carry out his orders. He turns and comes back over to James, “How?”

“I’m not sure if it’ll work, but I might be able to give him a message,” James explains.

Looking skeptical, Captain Alerin says, “Alright, let’s see if it works.”

“First, let me see where exactly that army is now,” he says as the image shifts. Suddenly, they see the forest and the image quickly scrolls to the east. When it reaches the edge of the forest, James moves it first southward and when he fails to find the army, he moves it north.

“There!” Captain Alerin exclaims when the army of foot appears in the mirror.

“Do you know where that is?” asks James.

“It’s near the northern edge of the forest,” he tells him. “It’s several hours away from Colton.”

“Alright,” James says as he concentrates. Again, the mirror refocuses on Lord Pytherian and they hear him mumble, “Now to get his attention.”

“We have got to get word to the others in the Alliance that I’m back,” Lord Pytherian says. “We must remain united if we’re to stop the Empire. How long do you suppose the rest of Madoc will last if we fail here?”

Suddenly, one of the men he’s talking to gasps. There on the table before Lord Pytherian sits a round glowing orb.

Astonished cries begin erupting in the room. Lord Pytherian raises his arms and shouts, “Quiet!” The room becomes quiet as he stares at the orb, something strangely familiar about it. “James!” he whispers in sudden understanding. He glances around the room expecting to see him there.

The orb suddenly winks out, eliciting another round of murmuring. Where the orb had sat there begins to appear a black mark. Lord Pytherian again calls for silence as he leans closer to see what is happening.

The black mark begins moving until it forms the letter ‘T’. Awed, he continues watching as the black mark continues writing. When it’s finished, he reads aloud what it says, “There’s an army three hours to the south, heading for you. Advise you leave!”

He begins nodding and says, “Gentlemen, it’s time to evacuate Olton…”

Head pounding, gasping from the effort, James almost swoons into unconsciousness. The effort to write that message had been harder than he’d thought. Must’ve been the distance. He holds the image until he sees Lord Pytherian nod and begin barking out orders.

When the image finally disappears, Captain Alerin says, “Do you think he understood the message?”

“He nodded, so I think he did,” James replies.

“Good,” he exclaims. He abruptly turns and leaves the tent. Outside, he hollers to one of his aides, “Get the men ready to march!” The man salutes and begins making the preparation.

“What do you plan to do?” asks James from the tent entrance.

“Harass that army, slow it down if I can,” he replies. “Give Lord Pytherian and the people in Colton a chance to flee before it arrives.” He looks to them and continues, “Could use your help, a mage would come in handy.”

Shaking his head, James replies, “We need to hurry north, stay ahead of the army as best we can.”

“I understand,” he says. He calls over one of his men, “Dorrin here will lead you through the forest to the north.” He glances to Dorrin who nods in understanding. “Now, we must hurry to catch this force before it draws close to Colton.”

James looks out at hundreds of men standing ready, each armed with a longbow. “Good luck,” he says to Captain Alerin.

“You too, James,” he replies. Then to his men he says, “Move out!”

He and his men begin melting into the forest and in no time at all, they’re gone.

“Grab your horses,” Dorrin says as he walks over and mounts the only horse left in the camp. “It’s not far to the northern edge of the forest, but we better hurry.”
They mount up and follow Dorrin as he leads them north through the forest. The trail he takes them on isn’t very noticeable and unlikely that they would’ve been able to follow it on their own. Without Dorrin’s help, it would’ve taken them twice as long to cover the same distance.

A half hour later, the trees begin to thin as they reach the northern edge of the forest. Dorrin stops them abruptly and signals for quiet. He points off to the east where the leading edge of the army heading for Colton can just be seen. They wait there a moment then horns begin to sound and they watch as the army suddenly turns and moves quickly back the way they’d come.

“The captain just let them have it!” Dorrin exclaims jubilantly. He turns back to the others, points to the north and says, “Colton lies a little over an hour north of here. Be careful, the Empire has patrols moving all along this area.”

“We will,” James assures him. Offering his hand, he says, “Thanks for your help.”

Taking the hand, he gives it a shake and says, “Glad to be of service.” Turning his horse back the way they’d just come, he kicks it in the sides and he bolts away, soon disappearing among the trees.

Looking out past the trees, they see open plains once again. The distant sounds of fighting can be heard coming from where Captain Alerin is attacking. “Almost there,” says James as he glances to Jiron.

“Never thought we’d even come this far,” he replies.

“We’re not there yet,” Miko adds.

“Come on!” Fifer urges. “This is not the time to be sitting and talking.” Kicking the sides of his horse, he breaks into a run as he leaves the shelter of the trees. The others get their horses moving quickly and catch up with him.

“Which way?” asks James when he comes abreast of him.

“There should be a road just ahead of us that runs east and west,” he explains. “It lies on that road, where a road from the north intersects with it.”

“Riders!” Miko yells.

Scanning the horizon, James sees a group coming toward them from the northeast. “Are they from Madoc?” he hollers to Fifer.

“Can’t tell,” he says, squinting in an attempt to see better.

“Should we wait to see?” asks Jiron as he watches the eight riders approaching quickly.

A moment later, Fifer exclaims, “No! They’re the Empire’s men!”

“Damn!” swears Jiron as they turn to the west and ride hard to keep ahead of them.

Riding fast, they maintain their lead but aren’t successful in widening it. “A road!” Miko cries as he sees it appear ahead of them.

“Which way to Colton?” James asks Fifer.

Pointing east he replies, “That way, I think.”

If they moved down the road to the east, the riders behind them would easily move and close with them. Giving up on that idea, they take the road to the west.

As they race westward, a river begins to come into view. A rather large army stands on this side of the river, facing to the west. Easily a thousand men strong, they stand before a bridge spanning the river.

On the other side of the bridge is another army, one from the Empire.

Horns begin sounding from both sides as the Empire’s troops move forward to claim the bridge, a hail of arrows flies from the defenders, mowing down the first line.

They slow their horses, James glances back at the riders behind them. When the riders see the army ahead of them, they come to a stop and then quickly turn around. No longer threatened from behind, they pause and take in the situation ahead of them at the bridge.

Bolts and arrows fly from one side to the other, bringing men down. The crossbowmen of the Empire outnumber their counterparts on the other side to devastating effect. Half of them appear to be targeting Madoc’s bowmen while the others are being more selective, helping to clear the bridge so their footmen can advance further across.

“I don’t think they’re going to keep them on the other side of the river for long,” Jiron says.

“They should’ve destroyed the bridge,” James adds.

“Probably didn’t have the equipment nor time before they showed up,” reasons Fifer. He glances to James and asks, “Can you do it?”

“Probably, but that would kill everyone from both sides who’re on it,” he replies.

From the rear section of the defending army, they see men begin pointing to where they’re sitting, watching the battle. A squad detaches itself and makes its way toward them.

“Recognize any of them?” James asks Fifer.
Shaking his head, he replies, “No, I don’t think so.”

Sighing, James says, “Let’s go meet them and hope they won’t immediately attack us.” He takes the lead, Fifer next to him as they move forward.

The leader of the approaching group comes close then raises a hand, indicating they should stop. “What’s your business here?” he asks.

“Busy?” asks James as the sound of the fighting by the river intensifies. The amount of arrows striking the attackers is beginning to decrease as the Empire’s crossbowmen continue taking out Madoc’s archers.

“Sort of,” the man replies. “Now, what’re you doing here?”

“We’re here to help,” Fifer explains, causing the man to gaze in his direction.

“Help?” the man laughs at them. “How can you possibly help?”

“If that bridge was gone,” Fifer asks as he points over to it, “would they be able to cross?”

Shaking his head, the man replies, “They’d not be able to ford the river for several more miles down stream.”

He gives them a closer inspection and continues, “But I don’t see how that can happen.”

Fifer glances to James who resignedly nods his head and says, “You get us close and we’ll take it out.”

He points back to the bridge and says, “Look! They’re almost on this side. We would’ve pulled out long ago but we got word they’re evacuating Colton and need time to get everyone out.”

“Nevertheless,” James tells him. “You get me close and that bridge is history.”

“Do you even need to be close?” asks Jiron.

Looking surprised like the thought had never even occurred to him, he gives him a weary grin and replies, “I guess not, but the closer I am the easier it will be.”

“Then let’s move closer,” Jiron says as he starts to move forward past the squad of men.

James follows him and the squad joins them as they move toward the river. When they reach the rear guard of the defenders, a place where the bolts of the Empire can’t reach, he stops.

“Now what?” asks the squad leader.

“Just wait,” says Jiron with a smile, “and watch.”

The squad leader looks to James as he closes his eyes. A cry erupts back at the bridge, he turns his attention to the river and sees that the attackers have reached this side and more are pouring across the bridge.

The defenders are being mowed down by the bolts sailing through the air and the swords of the men. What’s left of the order and discipline the defenders had is now gone as they turn and begin to flee the battlefield.

*Crumph!*  

Suddenly, the bridge explodes. A mass of men and stones sail through the air before landing among the soldiers on both sides.

The fighting halts momentarily as both sides stare in startled shock at what remains of the bridge. Then, the defenders who had been in a complete, panicked rout, erupt in a cheer as they see the enemy’s route cut off. The once routed defenders turn on the enemy who’d made it to this side of the river and begin attacking them with renewed determination.

Jiron looks to James and is glad to see him not slumping over or passing out as he usually does after such a display.

The squad next to them stares at James in awe and Jiron can hear “A mage!” being whispered among them.

Eyes still closed, James again concentrates…

*Crumph! Crumph! Crumph!*

…three consecutive explosions on the other side of the river rip through the ranks of crossbowmen as their deadly hail of bolts comes to a stop.

This time, he does begin to slump over. The past days of hard riding and little sleep is really taking its toll.

Calls to fall back can be heard from the other side of the river and the defending army begins to move back. An officer rides over to Jiron and the others, the squad leader salutes as he approaches. “What the hell happened?” the officer asks.

The squad leader points to James who’s sitting crooked in the saddle and replies, “He just showed up sir, and well, he blew up the bridge. He’s a mage!”

“A mage? And he just happened by when we needed one the most?” the officer asks.

“Yes sir,” the squad leader replies.

Another rider comes up and salutes the officer as he reports, “The enemy is falling back, sir. They’re regrouping west of the river and aren’t showing any signs of leaving.”

“Pull our men away from the river and have them rest,” he tells him. “With the bridge gone, there’s no reason
for all the men to stay here. Have half go to Colton to aid in the evacuation, I'll stay here with the rest and keep an eye on our friends over there.”

“Yes, sir,” the rider says as he salutes and turns back to the men as he carries out his commander’s orders.

“You might want to keep all your men here, sir,” Fifer says to him.

“Why?” replies the commander as he turns to him. “And just who are you?”

“Fifer sir, with Miller’s band,” he explains.

“Miller you say?” he says, thinking.

“Yes sir. We were with the alliance forces near Lythylla when Lord Pytherian had been taken,” he adds.

Understanding suddenly dawns on him and he states, “So, you are those guys.”

“Sir?” asks Fifer.

“Aren’t you the ones who helped Lord Pytherian to escape from the enemy?” he asks.

“Well, yes sir,” he replies.

“He said you might be coming through the lines,” he replies. “Also said to aid you in any way I could.”

Breaking into a laugh, he says, “Though it seems it turned out the other way around.”

“Sir,” a man says from behind him.

Turning around, he says, “Yes?”

“All the wounded have been loaded onto wagons and are making for Colton,” the soldier explains.

“Good,” replies the commander. “Send an escort with them.”

Saluting, the man turns and begins to arrange for the escort.

“Now, why should I keep the men here?” he asks.

“To the south a force is coming around the forest, where Captain Alerin is defending,” Fifer explains. “He is currently harassing them, delaying their march. But they should be here soon.”

Nodding, he signals another soldier who comes over. “Send a rider to Captain Alerin, tell him the bridge has been taken out and the enemy will likely be coming his way. May be unable to send reinforcements, he’s to remain at his discretion.”

Saluting, the soldier says, “Yes, sir.”

As the soldier moves to carry out his order, the commander turns back to them and says, “The main battle will be for Lythylla. The men will be needed there, that’s our first priority.”

“Sir!” a soldier hollers over to him as he points across the river. “The enemy is pulling out and moving south!”

Looking over the river, they see the army beginning to move south, keeping just out of range of Madoc’s bowmen.

“Captain Alerin is soon going to have his hands full,” he comments.

“Looks like it,” James says as he watches the soldiers marching south. “What do you plan to do?” he asks the commander.

“Follow them as they go south,” he says. “At least until they reach the forest, then they’re Alerin’s problem.”

He turns and signals another of his aides and says, “Get the rest ready to move, we got to keep them on that side of the river.”

The man salutes and then begins barking orders as he gets the men ready to march.

A soldier brings the commander’s horse over to him. Mounting, he turns to James and says, “When you see Lord Pytherian again, tell him Commander Eathan will hold the southern flank as long as possible. I’ll keep the bastards off them as they march to Lythylla.”

“Good luck, commander,” James says to him.

“You too, son,” replies Commander Eathan. “Ride fast, the Empire has patrols on this side of the river but no main forces north of here. So far, we’ve kept them on the west side of the river but that’s not going to last for long.”

“Move out!” he hollers to his men as they begin pacing the soldiers who are moving south on the other side of the river.

James and the others watch as the commander and his men move south, keeping the enemy from crossing over. Then they turn their horses north, following the river. They don’t get very far before they hear horns coming from the east. Answering horns sound from the army across the river.

From the east marches the army that Captain Alerin had been trying to slow down. “They’re going to catch Commander Eathan and his men against the river!” he exclaims.

“They’ll be cut to bits!” cries out Fifer.

They watch as the army moves toward the Madoc defenders. Commander Eathan forms his men to meet the charge, but from where James is sitting, he doesn’t stand a chance of surviving it. The army across the river has stopped its southern advance and its crossbowmen have come to the edge of the river where they fire a volley at the men caught between them. The bolts fall short, but if Commander Eathan is pressed backward much further, they’ll
soon be in range.

“We’ve got to help them!” Fifer says to James. “They’re dead if we don’t!”

Jiron watches as James ties himself to his saddle as he’s done several times before. That can only mean what he’s got in mind is going to be rough. “Stay close to James,” he tells the other two. “We’ve got to protect him and get him out of here once he’s done.”

They begin moving toward the advancing force. At first, they’re not noticed, so intent is the army on the trapped men at the river. When they get within a mile, a force of twenty men break off and head in their direction.

James glances to Jiron and says, “I’m already very tired.”

“I know,” he replies. “Do what you have to, we’ll get you out.”

Nodding, James tightens the rope binding him to his saddle before closing his eyes.

Crumpf!

The ground under the men explodes upward in the biggest explosion James has done so far. When the dust clears, none of the attackers are moving.

Fifer gasps as five translucent floating balls appear before James. As if propelled by a strong wind, they fly toward the Empire’s men. Barely seen, they reach the army and begin moving among them before they’re even noticed.

Arrows from Commander Eathan’s men begin felling the attackers as they come within range. Their longbows have a greater range and force than their counterpart’s crossbows.

As the enemy notices the orbs floating among them, they begin stirring and move away from them as best they can. The tightly packed formation doesn’t give them room enough to avoid them.

Suddenly, the enemy force is lit up as red lines flare between the orbs. The men begin crying out, all thoughts of attack forgotten. They see one soldier run and accidentally run across one of the lines. After he passes the line, he stumbles for a moment and then the top half of his body slides off the lower. The red line had cut him in two. Unable to move, caught within the boundaries of the lines, the bulk of the army comes to a standstill.

The arrows from Commander Eathan’s men begin taking a terrible toll.

As the balls move, so too do the lines. Jiron watches in fascination as two lines come together and the men trapped between them are agonizingly cut in half before his eyes.

James is slumped over his horse as he tries to hold onto consciousness long enough to complete what he’s got to do. He gives one last surge of power as he brings the balls together in the middle of the group of men. Every last one of them is cut in half, their cries abruptly silenced. Then he passes out and the balls disappear.

A cry goes up from Commander Eathan’s men as they surge forward to attack the remaining enemy soldiers who hadn’t been caught between James’ lines of death. Arrows fall as they rush forward to close with them.

The enemy turns tail and retreats, but is soon overtaken by a hundred horsemen that strike them down as they run. Some stand and fight, but don’t last long.

Jiron sees the commander waving at them. He waves back and then says, “Let’s go. We’ve got to get him someplace safe for a while.”

“What’s wrong with him?” asks Fifer as he comes over to the unconscious James.

“It’s what happens when he does too much magic,” he explains. “If he uses too much, he passes out and it takes some time before he can even do simple things again.”

“Oh,” he says.

They move down the road and quickly catch up with the wagons bearing the wounded and the men escorting them. “How far to Colton?” Jiron asks one of the soldiers.

“About an hour,” he replies. “It’s not too far.”

“Thanks,” he replies as they pull away, leaving the wounded behind.
By the time the town of Colton appears ahead of them, James has regained consciousness, although the dilly of a headache makes him wish he was still out cold. The scene before them reminds James of an anthill he’d stuck a stick into long ago, people are swarming everywhere. Carts and wagons, along with a multitude of people are making their way to the north along the road. As they approach the town, a rider comes out to meet them.

“Is Lord Pytherian still here?” James asks when the rider nears.

“Who are you?” the man replies.

“Name’s James,” he says. “These are my companions, we’ve just come from Commander Eathan.”

Shaking his head, the man says, “He left some time ago for Lythylla. Captain Kurk is in charge of the evacuation.”

James laughs in spite of his headache, and says “Where can I find ‘Captain Kirk’?” His friends exchange glances, thinking maybe he’s getting a little too light headed.

“You can find the Captain over at the Seasoned Ham,” the man replies, slightly annoyed at the way James is acting. He points into town, “You’ll find it further in.”

Still grinning, James holds up his right hand, spreads his fingers and says, “Live long and prosper.”

“Uh, you too,” the man replies. As James and the others ride away, the man continues watching them, and just shakes his head.

Once past the first buildings, Jiron says to James, “What was all that about?”

James glances over at him and begins to grin, “I couldn’t even begin to explain it to you.” And then he starts laughing once more. His friends look at him, worried.

Down the street they find several soldiers who are helping a store owner with packing a wagon. James pauses a moment as he asks one of the soldiers, “Where’s the Seasoned Ham?”

The soldier points further down the road and says, “Go down two more streets, then turn right. It’ll be the fourth building on your right.”

“Thanks,” says James as he gets his horse moving in the right direction. They continue down two streets and then turn to the right. Sure enough, four buildings down on the right they find a sign depicting a ham with steam radiating off of it.

They stop in front and he leaves Jiron and Miko with the horses as he and Fifer enter the building. Inside the main room, they find several soldiers there gathered around a map laid out on a table before them. A soldier stationed by the door stops them and says, “No one’s allowed in.”

“We’ve just come from Commander Eathan,” James says to him, “and would like to talk with Captain Kurk.”

“It’s okay,” a voice from inside the inn says. “Let them come in.”

Stepping aside, the soldier allows them to pass. The men that had been pouring over the map are now looking at them as they enter the common room. James steps up to them and says, “I bring word from Commander Eathan. I was supposed to deliver it to Lord Pytherian but since he’s no longer here, I’ll give it to Captain Kurk.”

One of the men says, “I’m Captain Kurk, what’s the message.”

“He said, ‘When you see Lord Pytherian again, tell him Commander Eathan will hold the southern flank as long as possible. I’ll keep the bastards off them as they march to Lythylla.’” James tells him.

“The bridge he was defending is no longer standing, and the enemy that had been trying to cross is now heading south,” he goes on to explain. “Another force had appeared on his side of the river, apparently coming around the forest where Captain Alerin’s forces are defending. They were successfully beaten back and I believe the commander had planned to follow the river south, pacing the enemy army, in order to prevent them from crossing over.”

Nodding, the captain says, “Good, I was wondering what was going on down there. The enemy has patrols on this side of the river and they’ve been intercepting our messengers.”

“There are several wagons of wounded coming to Colton as well,” James tells him. “They’re an hour or so behind us.”

Captain Kurk glances to one of the men near him and says, “Take care of that.”
Nodding, the man turns and leaves the room.

Turning back to James, he says, “You’re not with our forces are you?”

“No, I’m not,” he answers.

“But I am, sir,” Fifer pipes up. “I’m with Miller’s band, or was until we got separated from them.”

“Ah yes, the group from the City of Light,” he says. He glances around the others at the table before continuing, “They went with him when he moved on to Lythylla.”

One of the other men standing near the captain asks, “Are you James?”

Somewhat surprised, James nods, “Yes, I am.”

Pulling up the map, the captain reveals the message he’d written in the table to warn of the approach of the army. When he looks questioningly at James, James nods his head, “Yeah, that was me.”

“Intriguing,” Captain Kurk says. “Lord Pytherian said you might be coming this way and to give you any aid you may require. He also told us to ask you if you’d meet him in Lythylla as soon as possible.”

“Thanks,” replies James. “We were planning on doing that anyway.”

Captain Kurk says, “Lieutenant Rolger will see to your needs.”

A man steps forth and says, “If I may be of any assistance?”

James, feeling like he’d just been dismissed, turns to leave the inn with Lieutenant Rolger following behind.

Once outside the inn, he turns to the lieutenant and says, “We could use fresh horses and some supplies, food and the like.”

“Sure thing,” he says. “Follow me and we’ll get you what you need.” He takes them down several buildings before entering one with a crossed knife and fork embossed on a sign hanging in front.

Within, they find a nice restaurant. “This is the main mess for the troops while we’re here,” he explains. Many of the tables have soldiers eating their meals, or just taking it easy and talking with each other.

Lieutenant Rolger waves down one of the servers and says, “Get these gentlemen something to eat. They’re our guests.”

“Yes sir,” the man replies.

“I’ll see about fresh horses and some supplies while you’re eating,” he tells them.

“Thank you,” says James as the server leads them to a vacant table.

The lieutenant just nods his head and then leaves the restaurant.

Once they’re seated, the server says, “There’s not much of a choice, but I’ll bring you some of what we have.”

“We’d appreciate it,” James says as the man moves to return to the kitchen area.

“Man it’s nice to be able to relax again,” Miko says as he leans back in his chair.

“You got that right,” agrees James. “I don’t know how long it’s been since I could completely relax.”

The server returns with steaming bowls of stew and two loaves of bread. He sets them down on the table and then brings over a pitcher of ale and four mugs. “Enjoy,” he says to them.

Miko mumbles something through a large mouthful of food as the server leaves their table.

The meal is surprisingly good, made all the more so by the ability to sit at a table to enjoy it without the worry of being killed at any moment. Before they’re done, the lieutenant returns and says, “I took the liberty to transfer your things from your other steeds to the fresh ones. They’re waiting for you outside when you’re ready to depart.”

“Thank you,” James says appreciatively.

“Is there anything else I can do before you leave?” the lieutenant asks.

“Yes, I think of,” James assures him.

“In that case, I shall return to the captain,” he tells them before turning toward the door and leaves.

It isn’t long before they’re done with their meal. Leaving the inn, they find four good horses outside waiting for them, each with a new bedroll and saddlebags. And when Miko checks the bags on his mount, finds them full of travel rations. A new water bottle hangs from each of the saddles as well.

“I didn’t expect all this,” Jiron says as he climbs into the saddle.

“Me either,” agrees James after he mounts up. He looks at the others, everyone is looking tired and travel worn. Though he doubts if anyone is experiencing fatigue to the degree that he is.

“Tired as we are,” he begins, “we better make for Lythylla before stopping. I’m sure we’ll get plenty of rest there.”

“I hope so,” says Fifer.

“And a bath!” pipes up Miko. He grins at James when he glances in his direction.

“That too,” says James, returning the smile. “Let’s go.” As they move out, they see the wagons with the wounded going through the streets. It doesn’t look as if they’re going to stop here in Colton but continuing on down to Lythylla.

Once past the outskirts of town, they continue passing people on the move as they try to get to safety from the
coming armies. James is reminded of the traffic they encountered when they were approaching the City of Light. The faces of these people show the same lack of hope for the future that the others had.

Across the river they see patrols of the Empire riding along. They have complete control over there, the only thing keeping from being on this side is the river. It’s flowing much too wide, deep and fast for them to be able to make it across safely. Especially if there’re soldiers over here picking them off while they’re in the water.

The light begins to fade as they continue along. Riding hard, they pass several small towns along the way, each is in a stage of evacuation, soldiers encouraging and helping the citizens to leave.

When night has finally settled in and the stars have come out, they slow their pace so as not to ride over the people on the road. Even the dark of night isn’t stopping the refugees from fleeing. James feels sorry for them and hates those behind the wars that cause such grief.

Near midnight, they begin to see the lights from a great city appear ahead of them. “That must be Lythylla,” comments Jiron.

“I would assume so,” says Fifer.

As they continue to move closer, they’re able to discern campfires, thousands of campfires on the other side of the river. “There must be thousands of troops over there,” says Miko in awe. “Why are they just sitting there?”

“Might be they can’t get across the river without dying,” suggest Jiron.

“Or they’re waiting for something,” states James.

“Like those armies to the south?” Fifer asks.

“Probably,” he replies. “If so, they’ve got a long wait.”

He hears Fifer give a chuckle at that, “Especially if Commander Eathan has anything to say about it.”

To the east of the city are hundreds of fires and tents of those allies who’ve come to help defend Lythylla. The wall of the city itself comes right to the water’s edge. Anyone trying to cross the bridge there will face a massive barrage from those defending the walls.

“Looks pretty defendable,” says Fifer.

“That’s what they thought back at the City of Light too,” counters James. “And we know how that turned out.”

The area around the city is well lit with torches and campfires. No one could possible sneak in or out without being seen.

James thought they’d at least stop them and ask them some questions, but the guards at the gate just wave them on through with the other refugees entering the city.

“Should we go in search of Lord Pytherian?” Fifer asks.

“Yeah,” replies James. “He’s probably up at the castle.”

Moving through the streets, it isn’t hard to find their way to the castle. It towers over every other building in the city and they’re able to follow the streets that head in its general direction. Eventually they make it to the curtain wall which surrounds the castle area.

The guards at the gate leading into the castle area are not nearly as lackadaisical as the ones at the outer wall. When they approach, one of the guards moves to block them. As they come to a stop, he says, “No one is allowed within the castle area.”

“We’re here to see Lord Pytherian,” James tells him.

The guard looks him up and down and then glances at the others, obviously questioning the voracity of what James is saying.

“And why would you be here to see Lord Pytherian?” the guard asks him. “In the middle of the night?”

“I don’t see how it could possibly be any of your business,” replies James. “Just send a runner up to the castle and inform Lord Pytherian that James is here to see him.”

“James huh?” the guard asks, the other guards get up and come over. “You’re the third ‘James’ that has been here to see him today. Are you claiming to be the one who helped to rescue him from the clutches of the Empire too?”

James glances at the others, and sees them mirror his doubt and confusion on their faces. Turning back to the guards, he starts to reply when the guard continues, “The first one was brought expeditiously to Lord Pytherian and was soon exposed as an imposter. The other ‘James’ tried to attack him and kill him, his body now lies in a garbage heap somewhere.” Giving him a suspicious look, the guard asks, “Now, why should I believe you? I’ll not disturb his lordship again until I am sure.”

“I don’t believe this,” complains James.

“What’re we going to do?” Jiron asks him.

“Well, we’re definitely not going to fight our way through,” says James. “They’ll need every ‘fool’ on the walls when the Empire attacks. I’m just too tired to do anything about it at the moment.”

Turning back to the guard, he says, “I am the real James. With me are Jiron, Miko and Fifer who’s a member of
Miller’s band, the irregulars out of the City of Light. When someone asks you if we’ve shown up, please inform them that you turned us away.”

James turns his horse back toward the city and says to Jiron, “Let’s find a room somewhere and get some sleep. I’m about ready to fall off my horse. We’ll deal with that,” he says, indicating the guards behind them, “tomorrow morning.”

Moving away from the gates they head back into the city as they try to find an inn to spend the night. The first several they come across are all full, refugees have taken every available space.

They finally end up finding an empty warehouse with enough room for them and their horses. Bringing them inside, they shut the door and spread out their bedrolls.

“What do you think he meant when he said that two other ‘James’ have been here?” asks Jiron.

“I don’t know,” replies James. “But it can’t be good.”

“Who would know?” Fifer asks. When the others turn their attention to him, he continues, “I mean, who besides us would know to come here and say that?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” says James from where he’s lying down. “But we’ll worry about that tomorrow.”

Before he falls asleep, he glances over to where Jiron is looking out one of the windows. Glad he’s decided to take the first watch. Unbeknownst to him, the others are going to allow him to sleep through the night without a turn at watch.

The following morning, when everyone but James is awake, they sit on the other side of the warehouse from him as they talk quietly so as not to awaken him.

Jiron says to Fifer, “Think you could go and find someone from Miller’s band who could help us get in to see Lord Pytherian?”

“Maybe,” he replies. “I’m not sure if they’re even in the city.”

“I know,” says Jiron. “But it might be our only way without something spectacular.” He nods over to James, “If you know what I mean?”

Fifer flashes him a grin as he remembers the trip back and all the things James has done. “I understand,” he replies. “Better try to keep this low key unless we have no other option.”

“Exactly,” Jiron agrees.

“Need me to go with you?” asks Miko in the hopes of escaping the warehouse.

Shaking his head, Fifer says, “No, I better go alone. It’d be quicker that way.”

“Okay,” says Miko, disappointed.

Fifer gets up as he says, “I’ll meet you back here in a couple hours, whether I’ve found someone or not.”

“We’ll be here,” replies Jiron.

Fifer turns and walks over to the door and leaves the warehouse, closing it behind him.

“Now what?” asks Miko, sighing.

“Now, we wait,” replies Jiron who almost can’t stop himself from smiling at the despondent sigh Miko lets out. An hour later the door to the warehouse bursts open and three members of the city watch come in.

The sound of the door slamming open startles James awake and he sits up groggily as they enter the warehouse.

“What?” he asks, still not completely awake.

Jiron moves over to meet them as the first guard asks in a surly tone of voice, “What are you doing here?”

“We couldn’t find any inn with space for us,” replies Jiron. “We had to stay somewhere and since this was empty, we came in here.”

“Now what?” asks Miko, sighing.

“Now, we wait,” replies Jiron who almost can’t stop himself from smiling at the despondent sigh Miko lets out. An hour later the door to the warehouse bursts open and three members of the city watch come in.

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“We couldn’t find any inn with space for us,” replies Jiron. “We had to stay somewhere and since this was empty, we came in here.”

“Damn refugees,” one of them says.

“Well, you can’t stay here,” the first watchman tells him.

“But we’re waiting for the return of a friend,” Miko blurts out. “If we leave, he’ll never find us!”

“Be that as it may,” the watchman says, “this is a private building and it ain’t yours. So you’ll have to go.”

Now completely awake, James gets up and comes over to join the conversation. “Surely there must be some way that we can stay here?” he asks as he digs in and pulls out three silvers. “Maybe you could find the owner and give him this for us. Three should be enough for a days rent, wouldn’t you say?”

The watchman gazes at the coins in James’ hand a moment before reaching out and taking them. “Alright, I’ll get these to the owner. I’m sure he won’t mind if you stay here a few more hours to wait for your friend.” He quickly puts the coins in the pouch at his waist.

“Thank you,” James says. “We do appreciate it.”

“But don’t be thinking you can stay here forever,” the watchman tells them. “You better be out by sundown at the latest.”

“We will,” James assures him. “Rest assured, we will.”
“Okay then,” he grunts at them. Turning to the others of the watch, he says, “Let’s go.” They move toward the exit and are soon through it, the door shutting with a bang behind them.

“He’s not going to give that money to any owner,” Miko states.

“I know,” James replies. “I just wanted to stay here a little longer. I assume the friend we’re waiting for is Fifer?”

Jiron glances at him and says, “Yeah, it is. He went looking for someone from his unit that might help get us past the gate.”

Nodding, James says, “Good idea. Though should he come back without finding anyone, we’ll try the gate again. There’ll probably be a different set of guards there and we might get lucky.”

“Might,” agrees Jiron.

They wait for over an hour before the door opens up and Fifer walks in. The smile on his face says he’s got good news.

“You found someone?” asks Jiron hopefully.

“Ran into Shyn, he was with us when we found you that first time in the hills,” he explains. “He said the rest of the group is out on patrol and that he’d taken an injury and is recuperating.”

“Did he say if he could help us?” James asks him.

Fifer nods before replying, “He said to meet him at the gate in an hour and he could be there to vouch for us.”

“Fantastic!” exclaims James. Then he turns to Jiron and says, “There’s something I want you and Miko to do while I go to the castle.”

“What?” Jiron asks.

“The last time I was in a city on the verge of attack,” he explains, “things went bad fast and we couldn’t get out.” He glances to Miko who nods his head. “I would like you two to first get an idea where all the gates are, then see if there may be another way out in the event of an emergency.”

“Think they’re going to attack?” Miko asks.

“They’re not sitting over there just to get a tan,” replies James. “At some point, this city will be attacked. It’s not a question of if, but when, and I want us to be prepared.”

“I understand,” Jiron tells him. He glances over to Miko and says, “Up for a ride?”

Miko nods his head and says, “Anything to get us out of here!”

James laughs at his enthusiasm. “What time is it anyway?” he asks.

“The sun’s been up for several hours,” replies Fifer. “Jiron thought it best if you slept as much as you could.”

“Thanks, it really helped,” he tells them. The headache and fatigue are still there, just not so bad.

“Where should we meet you?” asks Jiron.

“Let’s say back here, a couple hours before sundown?” he suggests.

Jiron gets up and motions for Miko to join him, “Then we’ll see you in several hours.” They grab their horses and lead them over to the door.

“Good luck,” wishes James.

“You too,” replies Miko. They lead their horses through the door and once on the other side, mount up before heading down the street.

“Shall we go to the gate and wait there for your friend?” James asks.

“No point in staying here any longer than necessary,” agrees Fifer.

Leaving their horses in the warehouse, they step out onto the street and make their way to the gate. For a city about to be attacked, there sure are a lot of people here. Maybe if there’re enemy patrols out and about, they may not have much choice. With that army sitting on their front doorstep, the ones in charge probably don’t want to provide soldiers to escort civilians. They’ll be needed on the walls.

As they approach the gate, Fifer says, “Shyn’s already here.” He points to a man, vaguely familiar to James. Standing about five foot ten with red hair, Shyn waves a greeting at their approach.

He steps up to them and says, “Sorry about last night, lots of strange things been going on around here.” He turns to the guards and says, “It’s alright, these are the ones I told you about.”

The guards just nod as they pass on through, Shyn in the lead.

“So you’ll take us to see Lord Pytherian?” James asks him.

Shaking his head, Shyn says, “I don’t have that kind of access.”

“Then how did you arrange for us to get past the guards?” asks Fifer.

“It wasn’t easy, let me tell you,” he explains. “I tried unsuccessfully to convince the captain of the watch and he all but had me thrown out. Practically accused me of being party to the failed assassination attempt by that other man posing as you.”

“I finally got an audience with one of the members of the council. You see, I have a cousin who is one of his
assistants and ran into him as I was leaving the watch captain’s office. He agreed to take me to the councilman where I convinced him of who you were and from that point on it was a whole lot easier.”

“We appreciate your help,” James tells him.

“Glad to do it,” he replies. “Besides, Lord Pytherian wants to see you, the people around him must make sure it’s the right you. You understand, I hope?”

“Oh yeah,” agrees James. “I can see the need even if I don’t like it.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” he says.

They come to a large courtyard, at the end of which is the gates to the castle itself. Shyn doesn’t lead them there as James at first expected. Instead, he takes them to the right of the castle where a large four story building borders the courtyard.

Before coming to the door, he pauses and says, “This is the offices of the councilman I was referring to. He said that you should wait in here until the meeting is over. Then he’d either bring Lord Pytherian here, or have you taken to him, depending on the wishes of his lordship.”

“Very well,” James says as they enter the building. Shyn leads them up to the second floor and down the hallway where he stops before a set of double doors on the right. He opens them and they walk into a room with several tables laid out with food. Plush chairs and a couple couches are situated around the room.

“You can stay here until the meeting is over,” he says. “Help yourself to the food, it’s here for your enjoyment. It’s the least we could do for the ones who rescued his lordship.”

“Thanks,” James says as he goes over to a table laden with food. When he sees Shyn beginning to leave the room, he asks, “Aren’t you going to stay?”

Shaking his head, he says, “I need to inform the councilman that you’re here. I’ll be back shortly.”

“Okay,” says James as he turns back to the food. His stomach begins to growl as he realizes just how hungry he is. He takes a plate and fills it with bread and meat, making sort of a sandwich.

“Not bad,” Fifer says next to him through a mouth full of food.

Taking a bite, James nods and grunts in agreement. Then he sees on another table tarts, as well as other confectionary delights. *Man, Miko would’ve loved this!*
Chapter Twenty Five

Upon leaving the warehouse, Jiron and Miko follow the street until they come to the west gate overlooking the bridge. The gate is shut with many archers and soldiers lining the walls above it.

“I think we can forget about leaving through here,” Miko says.

“It might be a bit crowded,” agrees Jiron, chuckling.

They turn to follow the main thoroughfare along the wall as they continue their reconnoitering. “What exactly are we looking for?” asks Miko.

“Oh, I’m not really sure,” admits Jiron. “But getting an idea of where everything is, is usually a good idea.”

“I suppose so,” agrees Miko. “When the City of Light fell, James and I didn’t know where anything was. We just kept running around, trying to find a way out. Eventually we got separated, and you know the rest.”

“Yeah,” states Jiron. “Let’s hope this time things will work out better.”

All of a sudden Miko’s stomach cramps when he catches the delicious aroma of fresh baked bread. Looking around, he spies a probable source. Several buildings down a side street sets an inn with a sign hanging outside which may indicate a restaurant within. His stomach lets out another growl as he indicates the inn and says, “I’m hungry, let’s go get something to eat.”

“Good idea. I’m hungry too,” Jiron says as they turn down the side street and make for the inn. The odor of fresh baked bread gets stronger the nearer they get. As they near, they’re able to see that the sign shows a satisfied fat man holding his stomach.

They secure their horses to the post outside before walking in. A large fat man, similar to the one on the sign outside comes over to them as they enter the inn. “Welcome sirs, how may we help you here at the Satisfied Gent?” he asks with a broad, friendly smile.

“The mouthwatering aroma has led us here,” Jiron tells him.

“Ah, of course,” the man says. He gestures to the crowded common room and says, “Just find a seat anywhere and someone will be along momentarily to see about your needs.”

Jiron leads them into the room, and sighs when he finds the only table left unoccupied sits out in the middle of the crowded room. Really not wanting something out in the open like that, but not having any other choice, go over and take their seats.

A girl comes over, and after getting their order for the roasted beef and ale, returns to the kitchen. She returns shortly with their food and ale. “Enjoy,” she says as she places the food before them on the table. She then promptly moves to another table where a man is signaling for her.

“…now that he’s back, the alliance will stand firm…”

“…can’t stand the waiting! Wish it would begin so it…”

They sit and listen to the conversations around them while they have their meal. For the most part, the people seem none too worried about the army sitting across the river. From what they hear, the people in Lythylla have great faith in Lord Pytherian and the alliance.

“Hate to think what would’ve happened if Lord Pytherian hadn’t returned,” remarks Miko between bites.

“I know,” Jiron replies. “This city probably would’ve fallen already. From what we’re hearing, he’s their strength, their will to fight.”

They continue to listen to the conversations around them until they’ve finished their lunch. Miko sits back with a contented look on his face. “Ready to go?” asks Jiron.

“Sure,” says Miko just before letting go with a loud belch. He gives Jiron a grin, “That was good.”

Outside the inn, they again mount their horses and continue their way along the street bordering the wall. They eventually come to another gate situated on the south side, the one they’d originally come through the day before. The stream of humanity coming in through the gates continues, the guards doing their best to keep the gates clear.

“I don’t know if I would come here if I were them,” Miko says.

“They may have no choice,” Jiron replies. “A walled city with ample soldiers and a strong leader is preferable to being out there unprotected, even if the city is on the verge of being attacked.”

“I suppose so,” says Miko.

They move past the gate as they continue following the road. Some of the houses have been built against the
wall and may afford a way out, providing of course that the enemy hasn’t taken the walls yet.

The eastern gate, when they reach it, has a stream of people leaving the city. Some of the people have wagons and carts, while the greater majority carries bundles on their backs, holding what few possessions they can take with them.

“Jiron, over here,” says Miko pointing to their right.

Looking over to where he’s indicating, he sees a small grate set in the side of the street which allows excess water to flow into the sewers below. He dismounts and then moves over to inspect it. Kneeling down, he takes hold of the grate and then quickly looks around to see if anyone is watching. Once he’s certain of not being observed, he tries to pull up the grate.

Straining as hard as he can, he’s unable to budge it. “Not this way,” he tells Miko. “I think it’s bolted or secured in some fashion. It’s not going to budge.” Getting back on his horse, he leads them further down the street.

Now that they’ve seen one, they begin to see others of those grates positioned periodically along the side of the street.

“Too bad we can’t look inside of a house,” Miko says. “There could be an entrance to the sewers.”

“Possibly,” agrees Jiron. “But I don’t think we’d want the kind of trouble that could bring right now.”

“True,” says Miko.

Suddenly, Miko exclaims, “Tarts!”

Jiron turns in his saddle and glances over to him, “What?”

“Look!” he says as he points to a boy walking down the street eating a berry filled tart. He moves his horse over to the boy and asks, “Where did you get that?”

The boy looks up at him, some of the filling smeared around his mouth, and says, “Nannie down the street sells them.” He points back down the way he had come.

“Thanks,” he says to him.

“What’s that all about?” Jiron asks.

“I’m going to get me some tarts,” he explains. “I’ll get some for James too, he likes them.”

Jiron just shakes his head but since the shop is on their way, doesn’t argue. When they come to the shop with the tarts, he waits outside with the horses while Miko goes inside.

Several minutes later, the door to the shop opens and Miko walks out with a large bag stuffed with tarts. Smiling, Jiron asks, “Think you got enough?”

“Hope so,” he replies not even realizing Jiron was being sarcastic. He puts the tarts in one of his saddlebags before remounting. Having a tart in one hand makes mounting difficult but he manages it.

Once he’s in the saddle, they resume following the wall as it continues around the city. They find more houses built against the side of the outer wall, all fall short of the top by at least twenty feet. Jiron figures this might be due to a city ordinance designed to prevent unauthorized access to the top of the wall.

The northern gate is crowded with people leaving as well. Not too surprising, there’s no one here trying to enter. Anyone to the north of the city is moving deeper into Madoc, away from the enemy.

“It doesn’t look like there’s any other way out of here,” Miko says when they start to return to the warehouse.

“No,” agrees Jiron, “I didn’t figure there would be. At least we now have a fair idea of the city’s layout.”

“Hopefully James will be able to see Lord Pytherian soon and then we can get on our way back to Cardri.”

“Let’s hope so,” says Jiron.

They continue down the street, making as good a time as they can in the press of people. The crowd begins to grow thicker as they approach an intersection of streets. A wagon sits crooked with a broken wheel, effectively congesting the traffic flow down both streets.

Several men are trying to replace the wheel, all the while those passing by shout obscenities at them. Jiron feels sorry for those guys as he slowly moves forward, creeping closer to the blockage.

From where he sits next to him, Miko suddenly gasps and grabs his arm. “What?” he says as he turns to see what’s the matter. A shiver runs down his spine when he sees Miko’s pale face staring down the side street.

He never takes his eyes from where he’s looking as he whispers, “Look there!”

Jiron gazes where he’s indicating but doesn’t understand what he’s trying to show him. “I don’t see anything,” he tells him. Then he notices a group of men standing outside a store, talking among themselves. “That group of men there?” he asks, pointing to them.

Nodding his head, Miko says, “See the one there, the one with the patch over one eye?”

Giving the men a closer look, he nods his head, “You mean the one with the scar running across his face?”

“That’s him,” Miko says breathlessly. “He’s the one who poisoned the guards back at the City of Light and opened the gates for the Empire’s army.”

“Are you sure?” he asks.
"Positive," he replies. He glances at Jiron as he says, "He had me and James captured and was torturing James before we managed to get out." Lowering his voice, he continues, "He's definitely an agent of the Empire."

The crowd finally begins moving again and they make it around the blockage. Getting down from their horses, they take them to a post out front of an inn where they secure them. Jiron pulls Miko close and says, "We need to tell someone."

"But who?" Miko asks. "When James gets back, we can tell him and then go to Lord Pytherian. He needs to know about this."

"James might not be out for hours," he says to Miko. "We should follow them and see what they're up to. If we lose them, we might never find them again before whatever they're planning comes to fruition."

"Alright, but let's be careful," Miko says. He then follows Jiron as they move back to the corner of the street where he peers around to watch the group of men. The group is breaking up and most of them are moving together down the street away from where he's watching.

"They're moving," he says just before stepping around the corner as he proceeds to follow them. With the amount of people on the streets, it's fairly easy to keep them in sight without being spotted.

Ol' One Eye and the others are moving deeper into the city. As the group progresses down the street, the others with him begin to break off as they go down various side streets until finally only One Eye is left. When they come to realize where he's heading, they can't quite believe it. As he approaches the gate to the castle area, the guards on duty nod to him in acknowledgement before passing on through.

Jiron indicates an alley and they move into it, all the while keeping the gate in sight. "This can't bode well," he says to Miko. "If he has access to the castle, then there must be someone of rank here in the city behind his activities."

"Could whatever he's planning be what the army across the river is waiting for?" asks Miko.

"Could be," agrees Jiron. "We better get back to the warehouse and wait for James to return."

"What if One Eye decides to do something?" asks Miko.

"Nothing we can do about it right now," replies Jiron. "We're going to have to hope we can contact James before he does."

"We should tell someone!" he insists.

"And who would we tell?" Jiron asks. "If we tell the wrong person, we'll be silenced and then no one will know what's going on." Pointing back up to the gate, he adds, "Those guards up there knew him, or at least had seen him often enough to recognize him. I wouldn't know who to trust other than Lord Pytherian."

"I guess you're right." Not happy about it, Miko tries to think of an alternative to just sitting and waiting but is unable to come up with anything. Sighing, he looks to Jiron and nods.

They make their way back to where their horses are tied and then ride back to the warehouse. As they approach, the guards who had bothered them earlier in the day about being in the warehouse, are leaving from a side door. Pausing until the guards move further down the street and out of sight, they return to the warehouse where they get comfortable as they wait for the return of James and Fifer.

The closing of the door brings him back to consciousness, or something close to it. Opening his eyes, he quickly shuts them tight again as he shuts out the nauseatingly swirl of the room. His head feels foggy and he can't think straight.

A moan next to him tells him Fifer is in the same state as he, maybe worse. Hands suddenly grab him and sit him up straight on the couch he'd been lying upon. A hand slaps him hard across the face, and then someone pulls open his eyelid as he stares at his pupil.

The blurry face of the man is somehow familiar but he can't quite recall from where. His mind won't focus long enough to draw out the memory.

"They've taken too much," the voice says with impatience. "They'll be worthless for hours!"

"Forgive me," another voice begs. "We didn't know what they were going to eat so we laced everything. That they were so hungry was unexpected this late in the morning."

"Let me know when they're able to talk," the first voice says commandingly.

"Yes, sir," the second voice says, distraught over the dissatisfaction of the other. "First thing."

Suddenly the door opens and closes, and James is again resting in blissful silence.

"Where are they?" asks Jiron from where he's pacing back and forth in front of the warehouse window. He again stops his pacing as he looks outside, night has long since fallen and he's getting worried.

"Maybe we should inquire at the gate for them?" Miko asks for the third time.

Jiron turns from the window and says, "Alright." When he sees Miko going for the horses, he says, "Leave the
horses here, they’ll just get in the way.”

Miko stops and comes over to him as he opens the door to leave. Outside on the street, the crowd of people from earlier in the day has dwindled dramatically and they are able to move more rapidly than before.

Keeping their eyes open for One Eye, they move quickly toward the gate where they’d been turned away the night before. “Damn!” Jiron silently curses when he sees the same guard on duty from the previous night.

When the guard sees them coming, he gets a smirk on his face as he moves to meet them. “Back again?” he says. “I thought I told you guys you couldn’t pass through.”

“I understand that,” Jiron says, trying not to provoke anything. “But earlier, two of our friends were admitted to the castle area. We were to meet them but they failed to return. Could you tell us if you’ve heard anything about them?”

“You mean those other two guys that were with you the other night?” the guard asks.

“Yeah, that’s them,” replies Jiron hopefully.

“Sorry, haven’t heard anything,” the guard replies. He looks over to the other guards and asks, “You guys hear anything?” The others just shake their heads no.

“Don’t know what to tell you,” the guard says.

“Thanks anyway,” replies Jiron as he turns to leave. The guard watches them until they turn the corner and pass out of sight.

Miko says, “Now what’re we going to do?”

“I don’t know, but we’ve got to find out what happened to them,” says Jiron. “Wish I could do that mirror thing that James always did,” he tells Miko.

“Yeah, that would be nice right now,” agrees Miko. They walk a ways in silence before Miko says, “If Miller and his men were in the city, where would they be?”

“I don’t know,” replies Jiron, “probably back in the castle area. Why?”

“I don’t think they’d be there,” Miko says. “This place is overrun with guards and soldiers of the various alliance factions. They would have to be billeted somewhere out in the city, only the highest ranking soldiers would be permitted within the castle area.”

Jiron stops and looks at Miko as he contemplates his words. He begins nodding his head as he says, “You may be right. If that were the case, wouldn’t they be put in a cheap inn?”

“Most likely,” agrees Miko.

“Let’s try searching for them,” Jiron states. “It’s all we have to go on.”

An hour and fifteen less than desirable establishments later, they still hadn’t found them. The last place had tested even Miko’s limits on cleanliness. James must be rubbing off on him.

The next inn they come to is near the north gate. As they approach they find several soldiers and mercenaries standing around outside, which gives them some hopes they’ll find them inside. Jiron swings the door open and steps inside just as a bottle smashes into the door near his head. Instinctively ducking, he looks around the common room at the brawl going on. To their amazement and relief, Miller’s band is right in the middle of it.

One man, the proprietor most likely, is shouting for them to desist but only gets socked in the jaw for his efforts. Everyone but the participants in the brawl move to the side of the room, giving them some space. Those that were outside come in to watch the fight, calling out to the various fighters as they encouraged them on to greater endeavors. Jiron can see money changing hands as some of them bet on the outcome.

Miller’s band appears to be getting the better of the others as they’ve more men left standing, so Jiron and Miko just stay on the edge of the crowd. Miller and one of his men tosses one of the other combatants through the air, bystanders scramble out of the way as the man sails through the door and out into the street.

Miko waves at Miller when he sees him looking in his direction, distracting him just as a fist connects with his jaw. Flailing backward, he trips over a table and lands on his back. Rubbing his jaw, he gets to his feet quickly and rejoins the fight.

The last of the opponents fall fast until only Miller’s band is standing. A cheer erupts from the crowd and everyone moves back to where they were before the fight erupted. Miller comes over to them and says, “You made it? I really didn’t think to ever see your faces again.” He looks around and says, “Where’s that layabout, Fifer and that other guy, James?”

Jiron flashes a quick glance to Miko and then says, “Didn’t Shyn tell you we were here?”

“Shyn?” asks Miller, a dark look building upon his face. “I haven’t seen that rat since we entered the city, he disappeared shortly after we arrived. I’ll kill him when I see him!”

“We need to talk,” Jiron says as a foreboding feeling comes over him. “Right now and in private.”

Miller studies his face and says, “Let’s go to my room, we can talk there.” He hollers over to his men, “Be back
in a minute.” His men just give him a wave as they down more ale.

Leading Jiron and Miko down a dark dingy hallway, he takes them to a small room in the back. After they have entered and shut the door, he asks, “Now, what’s all this about?”

Jiron proceeds to tell him about the incident at the gate the first night. Then he goes on to tell of Fifer’s finding of Shyn and how he helped James and Fifer get into the castle area.

“Out on patrol?” Miller cries out. “Hah! We’ve been sitting on our butts in this damn inn since coming to this city. And if he’d suffered an injury, it’s nothing compared to what I’m going to do to him when I finally lay my hands on him!”

“There’s more,” says Jiron. He waits a second for Miller to compose himself then tells him of Shyn leading them into the castle area, and then of their failure to meet them again at the warehouse. “I think they may be in trouble, and Shyn is the key to finding them.”

Miller considers what he’d said a moment, then says, “Let me get my boys.” He opens the door and goes back out to the common room.

“You didn’t tell him about One Eye,” Miko says.

“Let’s worry about one thing at a time,” he replies.

Just then, Miller returns with his men and they all manage to squeeze into the small room before shutting the door. He gives them a rundown on what’s going on, several get dire looks on their faces and Miko almost feels sorry for Shyn should they ever find him again.

“Okay boys, here’s what we’ll do,” Miller announces. “Let’s quickly comb the city and return here in an hour. The one who brings Shyn to me gets a bonus, alright? Alive, preferably.” They all nod. “Okay, get a move on. Back in one hour.”

His men hurry out the door and quickly leave the inn as they begin combing the city for Shyn.

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“Think they’ll find him?” Jiron asks.

“If he’s not holed up somewhere,” Miller says, “they’ll find him.”

“Why have you just been sitting here in this inn?” Jiron asks.

“Orders,” he tells him. “We were told to stay here until word came for us to go on patrol or the enemy attacked.”

“Who gave you those orders?” inquires Jiron.

“A guard in the livery of the city watch,” he answers. “Why?”

“It just seems too convenient for you to be here at an inn that’s about as far from the castle as you can be,” he explains. “If Shyn’s up to something, or in with the enemy, it’s sure been helpful to have you all stashed here where you’re unlikely to discover whatever he’s up to.”

Nodding, Miller begins pacing the floor.

A little over an hour later, the door opens up and Shyn is shoved into the room from behind. One eye is swelled shut and blood is oozing from his nose and mouth.

“Where’d you find him?” asks Miller to his men as they follow Shyn into the room.

Uther, a tall brown haired man replies, “He was on his way back into the castle area. He’d almost made it to the gate before Jorry got a hold of him.”

Going over to where Shyn lies on the floor, Miller says, “Get up!” When he doesn’t comply, Miller kicks him hard in the side, “I said get up! NOW!”

Coughing from being kicked, Shyn gets on his hands and knees and uses a chair to help himself rise off the floor. Unable to stand, he collapses into the chair.

“What’d you guys do to him?” Miller asks as he looks to his men.

“He didn’t want to come with us at first,” Uther replies. “We had to convince him.”

“You damned near killed him,” accuses Miller.

Uther just shrugs.

Miko comes over and grabs Shyn by the shirt, “Make him tell what he did to James.”

Miller grabs his arm and has him let go of Shyn’s shirt, “We will lad.” Turning his attention back to Shyn, he says, “Well? Where are Fifer and James?”

Shyn raises his head and stares into Miller’s eyes defiantly, remaining silent.

Miller cocks his arm back and strikes him on the chin with his fist. Shyn’s head snaps back and when it comes forward again, fresh blood begins to dribble from the side of his mouth, as he spits a tooth out onto the floor.

Signaling to Jorry, Miller has him draw his knife and come over. “Now, I’ll ask you again. Where are they?”

When he again fails to answer, he nods to Jorry who, with the help of another of Miller’s men, grabs Shyn’s left hand and places the edge of his knife alongside his pinky.

Fear is evident in Shyn’s eyes as he stares at the knife ready to sever his finger. His eyes flick to Miller as
Miller again asks, “Where?”

Giving him a moment to reply, Miller says to Jorry, “On three, slice it off.”

Jorry nods his head as he readies himself.

Miller looks into the fearful eyes of Shyn as he says, “One.”

Sweat begins to bead on his face as he glances first into Miller’s eyes and then at the knife threatening his finger.

“We’ve got all night,” Miller tells him, no hint of mercy in his voice. “There’re nineteen more fingers and toes after this one, then other parts of the body.”

A few more tense seconds go by before he says, “Two.”

The sweat is beginning to drip off the end of Shyn’s nose. His breathing becomes more labored as he stares at the knife at his finger. Then his eyes look to Miller, he sees him to begin to say three when he cries out, “Okay!”

Miller motions to Jorry and the other guy to let go of his hand and back away. “Now, where are they?”

“They are in the castle area,” he replies.

“Where in the castle area?” Miller asks.

“In Councilman Rillian’s building,” he says. “I think they’re still on the second floor.”

“What interest would Councilman Rillian have in them?” asks Miller.

“Who’s this Rillian?” Jiron asks.

Miller glances at him as he replies, “He’s one of the members on the Patriarchal Council, very influential and powerful.” Turning back to Shyn, he says, “I asked you a question!”

“If I tell you they’ll kill me!” Shyn exclaims, looking to Miller for sympathy.

He’d sooner get blood from a stone than sympathy from him. “I’ll kill you now if you don’t!” he yells.

“Will you let me go if I tell you?” Shyn asks.

“If you can convince me you’re not feeding me a pack of lies, then yes, I’ll let you go,” he assures him. He suddenly draws his dagger and puts it to his throat and says, “But if you don’t, then you’ll be feeding the buzzards in the morning.”

Nodding, Shyn says, “Okay.”

“Now,” begins Miller as he replaces his dagger in his belt, “what part does Councilman Rillian play in all this?”

He glances from Miller to the others in the room as he says, “He’s been bought by an agent of the Empire.”

“Was it a man with one eye?” Miko bursts out.

Shyn nods, “Yeah, I think his name is Kirgin or Karrigan…”

“Korgan?” asks Miko.

“Yeah, that’s it,” he says.

“Who’s this Korgan?” Miller asks Miko.

“He’s been hounding us for awhile,” he explains. “Ever since James ran afoul of him back in Cardri. We also believe he was instrumental in opening the gates during the siege at the City of Light.”

“Is that why he’s here?” Miller asks as he turns his attention back to Shyn.

“I couldn’t tell you that,” he says. “I don’t know that much about him. I just saw him prior to taking James and Fifer there.”

“What part did you play in all this?” asks Miller.

“Back before the fall of the City of Light, I had been an agent for the Empire,” he explains. “I would pass on information I had heard to another agent who would then get the information out of the city. When the city fell, I fled with the other refugees until I stumbled upon your band and joined it.”

“Traitor!” One of the men behind him says. “You caused the death of thousands of innocent people.”

“There are no innocent people,” he replies. “Just allies and enemies.”

Miller signals for his men to remain quiet and hold their anger. Then he says to Shyn, “Go on.”

“After we arrived here in Lythylla, I saw another agent and met with him,” he continues. Looking to Miller, he adds, “That’s when I left you guys to help the organization here. With Councilman Rillian’s help, it was easy to put you here so you wouldn’t discover what I may be doing.”

“But you still haven’t said anything about James and Fifer!” Miko cries out.

“I’m getting to that,” he assures him. He points to a flagon of ale sitting on a nearby table and asks, “Can I have that?”

Miller hands it to him and after a long drink, he continues. “The return of Lord Pytherian was an unexpected blow to the Empire. The alliance which had stood against the Empire was beginning to fracture and fall apart. It was easy enough for Councilman Rillian to make the rifts wider by casting doubts upon first one faction then the other.”

“In fact, when I gave my report about his rescue and the role James had played, that was when they came up with the idea for imposters to attempt to assassinate him. Almost worked, too.”
“When it was reported that another ‘James’ had showed up at the gates, it was fairly easy to track you down. I made sure you were the ones who contacted me first, I just made myself available. Then it was simple to lead James into the trap that captured him.”

“What did you do to him?” asks Miko.

“Oh, he’s alive, to be sure,” he assures him. “They were most explicit in that regard. We set out some food laced with a drug to inhibit his magical abilities and told him to help himself while he waited for Lord Pytherian.”

“Now what?” Jiron asks as he comes closer to him. “What are they planning to do to him?”

Shrugging, he says, “I was never involved with that. My job was simply to get him there and make sure he didn’t suspect anything.”

“Is there anything else you’re not telling us?” Miller asks.

“No, I swear it!” he exclaims. “Can I go now?”

“What?” Miller says with a laugh. “I don’t think so. We’ll just hold you here until we’re sure you haven’t just fed us a bunch of cow dung.”

Miller turns to his men and says, “You guys stake out the gates leading out of the castle. There’re three of them so two to a gate. If you see James or Fifer leave, or anyone else leaving in an odd manner, one of you comes back here to me and the other follows them. Understand?”

His men nod and as they leave one of them hits Shyn across the back of the head causing him to cry out.

Jiron looks to Miller and says, “You staying here?”

“Someone’s got to watch this piece of trash,” he replies. “You?”

“I’m going to get into the castle area and find James,” he explains. “Miko, you stay here too.” Seeing him start to argue, he holds up his hand and says, “I may need to go where you can’t follow. Stay here and I’ll find him, okay?”

“Okay,” he says.

Jiron goes over to Shyn and asks, “Where is the building he’s being held in?”

“There’s a courtyard in front of the gates to the castle itself,” he tells him. “It’s the building on the east side.”

“Which room?” he asks.

“It’s on the second floor,” he says. “Follow the corridor down from the top of the stairs and you’ll find a pair of double doors on the right. Last I knew, he was in there.”

“If he’s not, you’re dead,” Miller says to him. To Jiron he adds, “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” he says as he heads to the door. After opening the door, he glances to a worried Miko and says, “Don’t worry, I’ll get him out.”

“When you see him, tell him One Eye is in the city,” Miko tells him, “he’ll understand.”

Jiron nods his head as he leaves the room.
Leaving the inn behind, Jiron moves quickly and silently through the dark streets. The castle rises up before him to the south, its spires standing tall behind the wall enclosing the castle area. If Shyn is to be believed, James is being held in a building on the far side of the castle itself.

He makes his way around to the nearest gate which lies on the north side. The gate is large enough for two wagons to pass through side by side and still have enough room for foot traffic. The area is well illuminated and there are two guards on duty.

The buildings of the outer area end a hundred feet from the wall. It looks like that continues the entire way around, most likely to give the defenders a clear killing area should the enemy make it this far within the city.

Crouched in an alley a little way down from the gate, he tries to determine the best way to enter. Suddenly, a hand touches his shoulder from behind. He turns around fast, knife in his hand and just before he strikes, recognizes Jorry and Uther. “Man, you scared me!” he exclaims quietly.

He hears a chuckle come from Jorry as Uther says, “Sorry.”

Indicating the guards at the gate, he says, “Just the two of them?”

“Yeah,” replies Uther. He glances at Jiron and asks, “You gonna try to get in?”

“I hope to and see if I can’t find James and Fifer,” he tells them.

Jorry spits on the ground and then curses, “Damn that Shyn!”

“Yes,” agrees Uther. “I can’t believe Miller’ll let him go.”

“He’s not loose yet,” Jorry says.

“True.”

He glances from Jorry to Uther and says, “Do you think you guys could draw them off for a minute?”

“And how do you suppose we’re to do that?” asks Jorry.

“Well, it depends on how convincing you guys can be and just how bored they are…”

Jiron waits in an alley on the east side of the gate. Suddenly, the crash of swords can be heard striking each other as Jorry and Uther come into the light on the west side of the gate. From where he’s standing, it looks as if they’re trying to kill each other as they shout obscenities and recriminations.

“Stop that!” one of the guards cries out as he moves over toward them. The other guard moves out a little from the gate as well to better see what’s going on.

Back and forth, Jorry and Uther move as their swords dance and sparks fly. As the guard approaches, they begin to slowly move westward away from the gate and closer to the wall. The guard near the gate moves several more feet further from the entrance, his attention firmly fixed upon the combatants. The guard’s back is toward where Jiron is hiding.

As Jiron slips through the gate, just feet behind the second guard, the other one reaches Uther and Jorry. Jiron hears the clashing of the weapons stop as he splits them up and tries to find out the reason they’re fighting. Whatever they tell him is lost as he passes through to the castle area.

Inside the walls, he finds the area well lit with oil filled street lamps spaced in fifteen feet intervals along the streets. Many people are still about, walking along as they go from building to building about their business.

To his left stands a large group of soldiers laughing and talking amongst themselves, effectively blocking the quickest way to where James is being held. Cursing his luck, he follows the wall as it curves westward to the right, which will take him on the other side of the castle courtyard from where the building he’s searching for lies.

Keeping to the dark shadows along the wall, he follows it as it curves around the castle area. Having to stop and remain motionless several times while someone passes nearby, it takes almost ten minutes to make it to where he’s able to see the courtyard on the south side of the castle. A quick glance shows him no one is in the immediate vicinity so he makes a quick dash across the street to the buildings bordering the castle courtyard.

Despite having oil lamps spaced about, there are still shadows he’s able to take advantage of as he makes his
way closer to the courtyard. He pauses a moment when he reaches the edge of the courtyard in order to appraise the situation. To his left lies the castle, imposing and majestic. Directly across the courtyard in front of him lies the building supposedly holding James.

The courtyard is crowded, guards and soldiers are everywhere. He sees so many different coats of arms on the various uniforms, he figures there must be a meeting of leaders happening within the castle and these are their escorts waiting for them. If he’s discovered now, there’s nowhere to hide.

Again keeping to the shadows, he begins moving carefully and silently around the courtyard as he makes his way over to where James is being held. A clump of bushes here, to a darkened doorway there, he keeps to the shadows as he moves from building to building, drawing ever closer.

Once, while he was standing in a darkened doorway as he waited for several soldiers to pass by, the door behind him suddenly opens. Diving out of the doorway to his right, along the side of the wall, he lands behind a midsized bush. A quick glance reveals the soldiers hadn’t noticed him and luckily, the person opening the door had been talking to someone inside so his attention had been directed back within the building and hadn’t seen him either.

Crouching behind the bush, Jiron watches as the man leaves the building and closes the door behind him. He breathes a sigh of relief when the man turns and begins walking to the courtyard, away from where he’s hiding. After the man has moved far enough away, he makes sure the coast is clear and then begins to continue around the courtyard. When he finally reaches the building that sits next to the one he’s after, he pauses as he figures out the best way to enter. The front of the building borders the courtyard and any attempt to enter through there would be discovered in no time by one of the many soldiers out there.

The building he’s crouched next to is the same height as the one holding James. He judges the distance between the two isn’t so great he couldn’t leap across it, roof to roof. It might be easier to gain entrance to this one and then jump across the gap.

He begins examining the exterior of the building and finds a ground floor window open not too far from where he’s standing. Moving quickly and silently, he runs to the window and then pauses while he checks to make sure no one is around. When he determines the area is clear, he grabs the windowsill and swings himself up and through to the room on the other side.

The room looks to be the office of a scribe. From the faint light coming in through the window, he sees a desk with paper and inkwells. Not taking the time to investigate further, he moves to the door and places his ear against it as he listens to the other side. Failing to hear anything, he opens the door a crack and looks out upon a darkened hallway. Leaving the room and closing the door behind him, he moves down to the right hoping to find the stairs.

All the rooms along this hallway are dark and empty so he moves quickly to the end where he finds a dark stairwell leading up. He begins moving slowly up the stairwell, all the while listening intently for the sound of anyone approaching, either from above or below.

When the stairs reach the next level, a hallway branches off to the left or he can turn and continue up the stairs. Down the hallway he sees some lights coming from two different rooms as he pauses a moment to listen before continuing up the stairs to the third level.

Again he finds a hallway extending from the stairs to the left, this time all the offices are dark, or he can continue following the stairs up to the fourth level. Not hearing anything, he continues on up to the top level.

At the top of the stairs, his only choice now is to go down the dark hallway. He begins checking room after room, searching for a trapdoor leading up to the roof. After searching the last room, he comes to the conclusion that there isn’t one. Or it’s so well hidden that he couldn’t find it.

In the last room at the corner of the building, he moves to the window and looks out. The window is facing away from the lights of the courtyard and is currently in shadow. Opening the window slowly, he carefully steps out upon the window ledge and reaches up to the roof. Able to gain a grip on the edge of the roof, he takes a deep breath and then swings out as he pulls himself up onto the roof.

The roof slants a little to allow rain or snow to flow off and makes for treacherous footing. Once up, he begins making his way around to the side across from the Councilman’s offices.

Coming to stand across from the Councilman’s building, he carefully looks down between them. Several soldiers are down there talking, giving no indication that they’ll be leaving anytime soon. Great! If he jumps, they may hear him. But what choice does he have?

He moves further up the roof to give him a little bit of distance to run. Then he takes four quick steps and launches himself across to the opposite roof where he lands with a thud. Quickly grabbing a secure hold as he starts sliding to the edge, he stops his downward slide and becomes very still while he tries to hear if any sort of cry has arisen from those down below. When none is forthcoming, he begins moving along the roof away from the well lit courtyard, and over to the darker side facing the opposite way.
Upon reaching the far side of the roof, he peers over the ledge to see if anyone is down on the ground below him. In the faint light, it’s hard for him to tell but he doesn’t think anyone is down there.

Hoping to find an open window just below him, he leans out a ways to get a better look. One of the windows to his left is partly open. Moving carefully, he scoots along the edge of the roof until he’s just above the open window.

After taking one more look down to make sure the area is clear, he swings himself over the edge, dangling four stories above the ground. He swings his foot toward the window and hooks it around the inside of the window sill, giving him some leverage. Then he brings over his other foot until he’s standing awkwardly on the ledge.

When his feet are secure upon the ledge, he leans outward and then jerks his body toward the window while at the same time letting go of the roof’s edge. One of his feet suddenly slips off the ledge and he suddenly loses his balance. He begins falling to the ground below and reaches out in a panic, grabbing the window ledge and succeeds in stopping his downward plunge.

Suddenly from below, he hears talking. Two men turn the corner and begin walking along the side of the building, directly below where he’s hanging.

His hands are gripped precariously and he’s afraid he might lose his grip but he remains still as they pass beneath him. Finally the men turn the corner on the far side and move out of sight. Breathing a sigh of relief, he readjusts his grip and begins to pull himself up.

Climbing in through the window, he pauses a moment as he catches his breath. Two floors down and I should be able to find James and Fifer. How I’ll get them out of here remains to be seen.

Very little light illuminates the room on the other side of the window and he has to feel his way over to the door. After stumbling across a stool and bumping his knee into the side of a table, he at last finds the door. Placing his ear against it, he listens for a moment before opening the door slowly. A hallway lies on the other side, dark and quiet down both directions. Leaving the room, he enters the hallway and shuts the door quietly behind him. Remembering the way the last building had been laid out, and hoping they’re laid out similar, he moves down the hallway to the end where the stairs should be.

Sure enough, at the end of the hallway he finds a flight of stairs leading down. Taking the stairs quickly and silently, he comes to the next landing. The hallway leading away along the second floor is dark as well so he doesn’t even pause before descending toward the next level. With any luck James and Fifer will still be down on the second level just as Shyn had said.

As he begins to descend the final few steps, he notices a light illuminating the stairwell from below. The closer to the second floor he gets, the brighter it becomes. The second floor landing is completely illuminated by a candle sitting in a wall sconce across from the hallway. Jiron slows down as he nears the landing, listening for anything that might indicate whether or not someone’s near. Step by slow step, he moves down the last few steps to the beginning of the hallway and then peers around the corner.

The hallway extends from the landing just as the others had. Candles in recesses line the entire hallway banishing away the shadows. He sees the double doors that Shyn told them about, a guard stands watch before them.

Sighing with relief, he knows that the presence of the guard can only mean they’re still in there. He ponders the situation briefly and realizes the only way is to rush the lone guard and hope there’s no one else around. The thought of coming in through the outside window entered his mind briefly, but the window overlooks the courtyard and there’d be no way to get in without being seen by those in the courtyard below.

Getting ready to rush down the hallway and take out the guard, he hears two people talking as they begin to come up the stairs from the floor below them. Backing up quickly, he moves up the stairs away from the landing until the shadows once more conceal him. The voices grow louder as their owners come nearer to the second floor.

“...don’t care, this must be done before the night’s over!” exclaims one voice.
“...I understand that milord,” the second voice replies.
“You have the antidote?” the first one asks.
“Yes, right here,” answers the second.
“Can you give the one called James enough for him to answer questions, yet not enough to allow him to use his powers?” asks the first one.
“Yes, milord,” he replies.

The two men round the corner of the stairs as they begin to move down the hallway toward the double doors. One is dressed richly with the trappings of rank and has a commanding presence. The other is dressed finely as well, though is obviously the other’s subordinate. Looking to the one with the trappings of rank, he thinks, Must be the Councilman Rillian.

He waits until they pass into the hallway and begin moving down to the doors before coming back to the landing. He peers around the corner and watches as they move toward the double doors. The guard standing in front sees them coming, straightens up and opens one of the doors for them. He stands at attention while they pass into the
room. Jiron suddenly realizes this is his chance. The guard is standing at attention and is facing away from him.

As the guard begins to close the door, Jiron sprints forward on the balls of his feet to avoid making any noise the guard might hear. He reaches him just as the door swings shut. Before the guard even realizes what’s happening, Jiron grabs his head and slides a knife across his throat, silencing him.

Jiron holds the guard as he gasps out his last breaths, preventing him from falling to the floor with a clatter and announcing his presence to those within the room. When the guard at last becomes still, he drags his lifeless body further down the hallway away from the door, and then quietly lays him down.

Moving back to the double doors, he puts his ear to them but the thickness of the doors muffles the voices from within.

Suddenly, one of the doors opens up and the Councilman’s underling begins to say, “Go down to the…” Then he realizes Jiron is there and tries to slam shut the door.

Throwing his shoulder against it, Jiron pushes the door into the room and follows right after. He grabs the underling and places a knife against his throat as he looks over to where Councilman Rillian is seated in a chair next to James.

The Councilman looks to Jiron in shock as he sits there. When he looks to draw a knife from his belt, Jiron says, “Don’t! I have no problems with killing you both if you try anything.”

Looking haughtily at Jiron, Councilman Rillian says, “Do you even know who I am?”

Nodding, he replies, “You’re the Councilman Rillian. A traitor to your people and a spy for the Empire.”

“Harsh words from someone intruding upon what he aught not to,” replies Councilman Rillian. He gestures to the window he’s sitting next to and says, “I can but call for help and a hundred men will be here in moments.”

“You could,” agrees Jiron. “But then you’d have to explain why you have friends of Lord Pytherian tied up and drugged here. I don’t think you could talk your way out of that.”

He narrows his eyes at Jiron and says, “It seems we are at an impasse. Surely we can work this out somehow?”

“All I want are my friends there,” he tells him, nodding over at the two comatose forms on the couch. “Then I’ll leave.”

“Just like that?” he asks. “I don’t think I can let any of you out of here alive.”

Then Jiron notices his eyes flick for only a brief moment to the hallway behind him. He suddenly kicks out with his foot and connects with a guard that had been sneaking up behind him. Glancing back quickly, he watches as the guard stumbles back a few paces and then draws his sword.

Jiron pushes the man he’s holding further into the room as he turns to shut the door before the guard has a chance to prevent him. With a bang, the door slams shut and Jiron turns the lock. The guard on the outside begins to beat upon the door, his cries coming through the door asking if Councilman Rillian is safe.

“It seems you’re trapped young man,” the councilman says from where he’s still sitting in the chair.

The beating on the door finally stops as the guard begins running down the hallway to get help. Jiron turns to the underling and says, “You! You have an antidote for the drug, right?”

The man looks to the councilman and then shakes his head as he says, “No, I don’t.”

“Don’t lie to me!” Jiron hollers at him. “I heard you say you did when you two were coming up the stairs.”

Pointing at James he says, “I want you to give it to him. If he dies, you both shall die.” Drawing his knife he puts the point to the man’s throat as he stares into his eyes.

From the corner of his eye, he sees Councilman Rillian begin to reach for the knife at his belt. Pushing the underling away, he rounds on the councilman and before he’s able to grip the knife, he takes hold of his arm. “Don’t even think about it, milord,” he says.

“Stop!” he yells to the underling when he sees him moving toward the door. “One more step and your boss here is dead. Understand?”

Turning his attention back to the councilman, he says, “I’m sorry to have to do this to you milord.” He removes the outer coat of Councilman Rillian and with his knife cuts it into strips which he then uses to secure him to the chair. All the while casting glances over to his underling to make sure he gets no closer to the door.

When at last the councilman’s secured and his knife rests with the others in Jiron’s belt, Jiron turns to the underling and asks, “What’s your name?”

“Stephen,” the man replies.

“Well, Stephen, get over there and administer the antidote,” Jiron demands. When he hesitates, Jiron places a knife at Councilman Rillian’s throat and says menacingly, “Now!”

Pulling a small crystal vial from within his jerkin, Stephen moves over to where James lies on the couch. “Don’t do anything stupid,” Jiron warns him.

Suddenly from the door, more banging can be heard as the guard returns with help. It sounds like they’re using a battering ram or perhaps a bench in an attempt to break the door down.
Jiron moves to the window and looks out over the courtyard. The soldiers in the courtyard below remain oblivious to the events taking place within the Councilman’s offices. He moves back over to the councilman, indicates the door and says, “So those are just your own personal guards eh? What, don’t you want everyone to know what’s going on in here?”

The councilman just glares at him, keeping silent.

Stephen has finished administering the antidote to James. When Jiron looks over to them, Stephen says, “It’ll take a few minutes to work.”

“How many?” asks Jiron as the pounding on the door increases. A crack begins forming in the heavy door.

“Shrugging, Stephen replies, “I’m not sure. The instructions I was given wasn’t that clear.”

“What did they tell you?” Jiron demands to know.

“That a few drops would bring him out of it,” he explains.

“How much did they say would restore his powers?” Jiron asks.

He glances over to Councilman Rillian and says, “Half again as much.”

“I assume you didn’t give him that much?” he inquires.

Shaking his head, Stephen says, “No, I didn’t.”

Jiron puts a knife to the councilman’s throat and says, “Do it!”

“Don’t!” Councilman Rillian orders.

“But he’ll kill you!” cries Stephen.

“If they get out of here, we’re dead anyway!” he exclaims then cries out as Jiron gently punctures the side of his neck, allowing a small drop of blood to trickle down his neck.

“Smash it!” orders the councilman.

As Stephen raises the vial high, Jiron screams, “Don’t!” He rushes toward Stephen to try and prevent the vial from being smashed, but is too late. With a crash, the vial is thrown to the floor and smashes into a thousand pieces, the precious antidote splattering across the floor.

“Damn you!” Jiron curses as he lashes out with his knife in anger.

Stephen cries out as the knife strikes his chest and pierces his heart. Jiron kicks out with his foot, knocking him off his knife. Eyes beginning to glaze over, he trips over a chair behind him and hits the ground with a grunt. His blood begins to spread across the floor as his life quickly leaves him.

Jiron bends down over the spilled antidote as Councilman Rillian begins to laugh. “Too late,” he cries out in glee. “Without his magic, you’ll never get out of here alive.” He pays no attention to the councilman’s words as the looks down at the shattered remains of the vial. In the center of the shards, he finds a small pool of antidote. Bending over, he dips his finger into it, gathering as much as he can upon its tip.

Getting up, he moves quickly over to James’ side all the while trying not to allow the liquid to drip off his finger. James opens his eyes as he inserts the antidote covered finger inside his mouth. Once he’s felt James suck the antidote off his finger, he says, “You okay now?”

James nods his head and says, “Better.” He tries to sit up, but the spinning of the room causes him to fall back down on the couch. “Not perfect, it seems.” The antidote hasn’t reversed the effects of the poison completely. Hopefully it won’t take longer than they have.

Just then, the door bursts open and they see four men holding a wooden bench as a battering ram come through the broken remnants of the door. The bench is dropped as one guard kicks out with his foot and clears the remaining portion of the broken door out of the way. Then the guards begin moving into the room.

Jiron moves to Councilman Rillian’s side and places a knife at his throat as he says, “Stop! Or he’s dead!”

“Milord?” asks the guard as he looks to the councilman.

“But…,” the guard stammers.

“You heard me!” shouts Councilman Rillian.

The guards glance among themselves and remain where they are.

“I said leave the room!” Jiron hollers at them.

James finds his head is becoming clearer by the second. Whatever that stuff was that Jiron had given him seems to be doing the trick.

From the hallway, a crossbow bolt flies through the door past the guards in the room, and strikes Jiron in the right shoulder. The force of it knocks him backward and away from the councilman. He stumbles for a few feet
before falling to the floor.

“Kill him!” Councilman Rillian shouts.

The guards begin rushing forward. A lit candle sitting upon a table before them suddenly flares up and a roar

“It’s the mage on the couch!” he cries out, indicating James with a nod of his head.

The guards see James sitting there on the side of the couch and start to move toward him. The flame from the
candle becomes greater as it forms a fiery barricade between them.

“Milord!” cries the lead guard, the heat from the fire too hot for him to come any further into the room.

Attempting to ignore the throbbing pain in his shoulder, Jiron gets back up as he sees the flame from the candle
shoot out to block the guards. Leaving the councilman where he is, he moves over to James.

“Can you walk?” Jiron asks him.

Nodding his head, he continues concentrating on the flame as he moves it to force the guards back out of the
room. His head is still fuzzy, but is able to maintain the spell as the antidote continues to remove the effects of the
drug.

The temperature in the room is rising from the heat of the flames. Everyone begins sweating and a nearby

Oxygen! I used up most of

He gasps over to Jiron, “Open the window, we’ve got to get some

With the bolt still sticking out of his shoulder, he makes his way over to the window and throws it open wide.

A breeze from outside begins circulating within the room bringing much needed oxygen to its occupants.

The men behind the invisible wall pick up the bench they used previously as a battering ram and begin

“What do you plan to do?” asks Jiron.

From his position on the couch, he replies, “Maybe I’ll just let everyone know that we’re here.” Pausing a

Oh, by the way,” Jiron says, “Miko said to tell you that ‘One Eye’ is in the city. Said you’d understand.”

“He’s here?” he asks incredulously. Turning on the councilman, he asks, “Is that why that army is sitting out
there waiting? For Korgan to open the gates like he did back at the City of Light?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he replies nonchalantly.

“Oh, by the way,” Jiron says, “I wonder.” He moves over to the window.

What do you plan to do?” asks Jiron.

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What do I care what a bunch of thugs do?” he states. “When they learn how you came in here and tried to

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“He’s here?” he asks incredulously. Turning on the councilman, he asks, “Is that why that army is sitting out
there waiting? For Korgan to open the gates like he did back at the City of Light?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he replies nonchalantly.

“If he’s here, we’ve got to get to Lord Pytherian now,” James states matter-of-factly.

“And how are you to do that when you can’t even get out of this room?” asks Councilman Rillian smugly.

“Like this,” replies James. Moving to the window, he creates his orb and tosses it out, causing it to increase in
size as it slowly descends to the ground.

As soon as the orb passes through the window, the soldiers below become aware of it. They back up as a
murmur begins to grow as more and more of the waiting escorts come over to see what’s going on.
Once the orb is on the ground, he has it flare to intense brilliance before disappearing abruptly. Framed in the window, James looks out over the faces gazing up to him. “Please inform Lord Pytherian that James is here and would like to meet with him. And ask him to hurry!”

His words produce another round of muttering and then one of the faces breaks off and runs for the castle.

“What are you doing up there?” demands one of the faces.

“I’ll tell that to Lord Pytherian and Lord Pytherian only,” James announces to the crowd.

James continues looking out over the crowd and finally sees a group of people coming out of the castle’s gates. Striding in front of them is Lord Pytherian himself. The crowd of onlookers parts as they allow him to come before James.

When he’s at last close enough to hear him well, James says, “Greeting milord.”

“This is a strange way to come for a visit,” Lord Pytherian says.

“Unavoidable, milord,” James replies from the window. “If you would come up here with some of your own guards, I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Very well,” he says. “I’m coming up.”
James watches as Lord Pytherian begins moving toward the entrance of the building. He calls out to guards in the area who fall into line behind him. The men he’d come from the castle with begin to follow him as well, but he pauses a moment to talk with them. When he again moves toward the building, they remain in the courtyard. Once he’s moved out of view, James goes over to a chair near Councilman Rillian and sags into it.

Jiron moves over to Fifer and attempts to bring him back to consciousness with little success. The throbbing from the bolt in his shoulder flares up periodically as he moves around.

From where he sits in his chair, James glances over to the councilman and is amazed at how calm he appears. “Aren’t you worried?” he asks him.

“Not especially,” he says. “You are the trespassers. You’re the ones who’ve spilled blood this night, not I.”

“But you lured us here and drugged us,” James accuses.

“It’s your word against mine,” he tells him. “And who are the people here going to believe?”

Just then, the beating upon the invisible wall blocking the doorway stops. James turns his attention to the doorway and watches as the men there put the bench down and begin backing away.

Lord Pytherian appears in front of the doorway and James removes the invisible barrier. “It’s clear now, milord,” James tells him.

Nodding, Lord Pytherian glances to his right and says, “Let no one in.”

A muffled reply could be heard. As he steps into the room, two guards take position in front of the shattered doorway. James can see Councilman Rillian’s guards standing in the hallway looking anxiously within the room.

“I want these men arrested!” demands the councilman. He indicates his dead underling lying in a pool of blood as he continues, “They killed my servant and tied me here. They were just about to begin torturing me when my men arrived.”

Lord Pytherian looks from the dead body, to Councilman Rillian and then to James. He moves over and begins to untie the councilman.

“What’re you doing milord?” exclaims James as he comes to his feet. “He’s a traitor to Madoc. He lured us here, drugged us, and was about to begin questioning us about who knows what before Jiron here showed up and foiled the whole thing.”

“Surely you’re not going to take the word of this thief and murderer, are you?” Councilman Rillian asks once Lord Pytherian has untied him. Coming to his feet, he adds, “I want them executed right now for what they’ve done here!”

“You know the law as well as anyone, Councilman,” Lord Pytherian says. “No one is to be executed until duly tried.”

“This is outrageous!” cries the councilman. “Then I demand them to stand before the council first thing tomorrow.” He stares at Lord Pytherian and says, “I want them locked in the dungeon where they can’t get away.”

“As you wish, Councilman,” Lord Pytherian says. Turning to the guards at the door, he says, “Come in here and take these men to the palace dungeons.”

Eight guards enter the room with their swords drawn and take James, Jiron and Fifer into custody. One of the guards slings Fifer over his shoulder.

James glares at Lord Pytherian and says, “But we rescued you! How can you do this?”

“I have no authority in civil matters,” he explains. “Councilman Rillian here is one of the ruling body of Madoc, he has the right in this matter.” Nodding to a guard, he says, “Take them away.”

“But we have proof! Miller is holding a man who works for him,” he says, indicating the councilman. “He’ll explain everything!”

“We’ll see,” Lord Pytherian replies. To the guard, he says, “Go ahead.”

“Yes, milord,” the guard says. Then to his prisoners, he says, “You heard his lordship, move.”

The guards follow as James and Jiron leave the room. Just as they begin to move down the hallway, they hear Councilman Rillian begin yelling at Lord Pytherian.

Down the hallway and then to the bottom of the stairs they’re led. When they exit the building, the crowd of people in the courtyard parts, allowing them to pass through to the castle.
James is trying to understand what just happened. He was sure Lord Pytherian would’ve believed them and been on their side. Strange things indeed must be afoot.

“James, can you get us out of this?” Jiron whispers as he leans closer to him.

“Too tired,” he replies quietly. “By morning, who knows?”

“Quiet you two!” orders the nearest guard.

They can hear Fifer groan from where he’s being carried by one of the guards, the drug must be beginning to wear off.

The front gates of the castle are twenty foot high and twice that wide. The classic moat runs around the outside with a drawbridge allowing access over it. As they cross the drawbridge, James notices a strong, iron portcullis hanging above them that would be dropped in emergencies, effectively blocking the entrance to the castle.

A forty foot tunnel leads from the gates to the inner courtyard. No doors lead from it, but there are arrow slits in the walls where defenders could fire upon any attackers caught in the tunnel. Above the tunnel, the ceiling contains holes, murder holes, where defenders could rein down rocks or burning oil to cost the attacker’s dearly.

At the end of the tunnel hangs another portcullis, similar to the one at the other end. Exiting the tunnel, they enter the inner courtyard of the castle, itself designed as a killing ground. Only two sets of doors lead out of it and they’re lead to the one on the right.

Once through the double doors, they proceed down a long corridor past several other closed doors before coming to a flight of steps leading down. The lead guard takes a torch that is burning in a wall sconce and begins descending the steps. James and Jiron follow close behind with the rest of the guards, the one carrying Fifer bringing up the rear.

The stair winds its way down until finally opening on a large room with cells on both sides. “This way,” the guard leading them says as he continues on toward the end where he opens one of the cell doors and directs them to enter.

The light from the torch illuminates a sizeable cell with several benches situated about the floor. He finds it empty, much to his relief.

Jiron follows him in and then the guard carrying Fifer comes and lays him on one of the benches. Then they proceed to remove all their weapons, Jiron looks like he’s ready to protest when they remove his knives but stands passively as they take them.

Once all their weapons have been removed, the guards leave the cell, closing the door behind them. They then proceed from the room in silence, taking the weapons with them. As they move up the stairs, the light from the torch gets dimmer and dimmer until they’re finally in total black again.

Light suddenly flares up as James’ orb springs to life in the palm of his hand. “I thought you were too tired?” asks Jiron.

“I am, but this is fairly easy to do,” replies James. “How’s the shoulder?”

“Hurts,” he replies. “I think the blood has finally stopped oozing out.”

James gets up and moves over to Fifer who’s beginning to groan once again. “Fifer!” he says as he sits next to him. Holding the orb close, he can see his eyes are open. “Can you hear me?” he asks him.

Fifer nods his head and says weakly, “Yeah.”

James helps him to sit up and has to hold him steady as he’s still not completely over the effects of the drug and it’s messing up his equilibrium.

“Where are we?” he asks.

“In the dungeon under the castle,” replies Jiron.

“What?” he exclaims. “How?”

James proceeds to relate the events since he woke up back on the couch. Fifer’s eyes widen when he hears the accusations being brought against them. “That’s absurd!” he cries out, the glow from the orb accentuating the anger on his face.

“We know that, and you can bet Councilman Rillian knows it too,” James explains. “But he’s just covering up his own hand in all this, at our expense.”

“What about that one eyed guy?” Jiron asks. “That one Miko mentioned?”

“We’ve got to get word somehow to Lord Pytherian about him,” says James. “Before it’s too late.”

James moves over to Jiron and takes a closer look at the bolt sticking out of his shoulder. “Can’t leave that in there to fester,” he says.

“I know,” he replies. “You better pull it out.”

“But we have nothing to close it with,” counters James.

“What choice do we have,” says Jiron. “It’s got to come out.”

“Alright,” agrees James as he gets in position to pull it out. Just before he takes hold of the bolt, the stairwell
begins to lighten up again and the sound of approaching footsteps can be heard. He takes his hand away as they all
turn to see who is coming.

Lord Pytherian, along with another man bearing a bag and a torch, move into the room. They come and stand
before their cell.

James glares at him from where he’s sitting next to Jiron.

“I believe you,” Lord Pytherian tells him. “Go ahead,” he says to the man with him who produces a key and
opens the cell door.

“He’s a healer,” he tells them. “He’s here to remove the bolt from your shoulder, Jiron.”

James gets up to make room for the healer. He then goes over to Lord Pytherian and asks, “If you believe us,
why are we here?”

“You must understand,” he explains, “I have no authority in civil matters. Councilman Rillian is a very
powerful member of the council with many friends. I could not side against him, it would’ve created severe
problems we can ill afford with that army sitting on our doorstep.”

A muffled cry escapes Jiron as the healer pulls out the bolt. They glance over to him as he begins sewing the
wound closed. Fifer is there giving the healer a hand.

“But we have proof,” insists James. “One of his agents is being held by Miller at an inn.”

“One man’s word still wouldn’t be enough,” he says. “If the enemy should launch an assault now, it’s all we
could do to simply withstand it. I cannot afford to have a rift in the council, as that would surely happen if this is
brought to light.”

“But he could be your biggest danger!” James exclaims.

“I know,” he says. “But as long as the illusion is held, his men will fight in the city’s defense should it become
necessary. I don’t think he’d turn on us outright unless he thought it would be to his benefit or if he had no choice.
As surely would happen if we pressed this matter.” Pausing for a moment, he then adds, “If he turns too soon, then
everyone on the council will turn against him. He can’t afford that right now so I believe he will attempt to sustain
the illusion of his patriotism as long as possible.”

“I see,” replies James. “What do you plan to do?”

“Keep an eye on him,” he explains. “Because of your outburst back there, he now knows I know. That will
make it harder to discover his plans, but not impossible.”

“Don’t you have the alliance for support?” asks Jiron, joining the conversation. He’s a little pale but the wound
is stitched closed.

“Some remain,” he replies. “I’ve sent riders after the others that have left, but how soon they’ll return is
anyone’s guess.”

“There’s an agent from the Empire here in the city,” James tells him. “A one eyed man named Korgan. He was
instrumental in opening the gates of the City of Light the night it fell.”

Nodding, he says, “My agents have reported seeing the man in the company of Councilman Rillian on several
occasions. But they didn’t know who he was. If we can find him, then we could possible lay charges before the
council.”

“How are you going to do that?” Jiron asks.

“No me, you,” he replies.

“Oh?” asks James incredulously. “How are we to do that from in here?”

“You’re not,” he states. “You’re leaving here right now.”

“But you told Councilman Rillian that you were going to lock us up,” Jiron says. “You’re not going to go back
on your word are you?”

“I said I’d lock you up,” he replies with a smile. “And I’ve done that. I never agreed to how long I would keep
you here.”

The healer comes to Lord Pytherian and says, “The wound is clean but will take a while to heal.”

“Thank you,” he says, taking the torch away from him. “On your way out, can you ask Henri to come in?”

“Yes, milord,” the healer replies. Giving Lord Pytherian a slight bow, he begins walking toward the stairs.

Shortly after the healer leaves the room, a guard enters and comes over to them.

“Yes, milord?” Henri asks.

“I want you to assist them to get out of the castle and into the city without them being seen,” he tells him. “And
make sure we return their weapons, they may need them.”

Giving him a bow, Henri turns to the prisoners and says, “Follow me.”

“How are we to get in touch with you?” James asks.

“Henri here will be at the north gate,” he says. “He’ll get you in to see me.”

“Okay,” says James as they move to follow Henri from the room. He glances back to Lord Pytherian when they
get to the stairs and sees him standing there by the cell, the light from the torch creating a circle of light about him. Then he turns to follow Henri from the room.

The other guards who had escorted them here are waiting at the top of the stairs. They return their weapons to them, Jiron is mighty happy to have his knives back. “Is there anything else you need before we leave?” Henri asks.

“Actually,” begins James, “a mirror would be most helpful.”

“A mirror?” Henri asks. “What do you need with that?”

“Just do,” replies James. “Can you get me one?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” he says. He nods to another of the guards who begins running down the hallway. “He’ll get one.”

“Thanks,” says James.

The guard returns a few minutes later with a small, hand held mirror. Henri takes it from him and as he hands it over to James. “Will this do?”

It’s three inches by four and fits snugly in his hand. “Yes,” he says, nodding, “this will do perfectly.”

“Then follow me,” Henri says as he begins moving down the hallway.

“How are we to get out of the castle without anyone seeing?” James asks. “Everyone out there saw us being marched in.”

“Leave that to me,” he says. He leads them through the castle’s back ways, keeping away from commonly used areas. Whenever they see someone approaching, he has them quickly move in a different direction to avoid being seen.

Finally, Henri comes to a door and opens it. He waves them in and follows once they’re within the room. The last guard in closes the door behind them. One of the guards had brought in a lit candle from the hallway and the light shows the room to be a storage room. Boxes and crates line the walls.

Henri goes over to a tall stack and says, “Here, give me a hand.”

James and two of the guards move to help him as he pushes the stack to the side. Behind the stack is a narrow doorway. Henri reaches into his tunic and pulls out a key. Placing it into the keyhole, he turns it and they hear a click as the door swings open an inch. Replacing the key inside his tunic, he says, “Follow this and it will lead to the outer edge of the castle. The corridor will end abruptly and there you’ll need to find a loose stone, three feet above the floor on the right side. Press it, and another doorway will open allowing you to leave the castle. You’ll have but a few moments to pass through before the door slides shut once again. There is no way to open it from the outside.”

“Thank you,” James says as they move to enter the secret passage.

“Just get Korgan before he can implement his plan,” Henri replies, “whatever that plan may be. I’ll be waiting at the north gate.”

“We’ll see you there,” James says and then enters the passage. Once they’re all in, the door is again shut and locked. They can hear the stack of boxes being slid back in front of the doorway.

The orb springs to life and James leads them down the narrow passage. When they reach the end, he finds the loose stone and presses upon it. Before them, the end of the passage slides to the side and they see faint light coming in through the opening.

“We better hurry before it closes,” James says.

Moving to the exit, he has to push his way through the bushes before the exit, the others following closely. Behind them they begin to hear the doorway close once more until it finally shuts tight.

Peering out from the bushes, they discover they’ve come out on the northeast side of the castle. James takes a quick look around and when he’s sure no one is near, steps out with the others following.

“Which way?” asks Jiron.

“One gate is as good as the other,” replies James. “I would guess the north gate seeing as how that’s where Henri is planning to meet us. Most likely, the other guards stationed there are loyal.”

“Possible,” Jiron says.

Moving with a purpose, they make for the north gate. They do their best to avoid others who are out and about on the streets. When at last the gate is in sight, Jiron sees the same two men on guard there as had been there when he’d snuck through earlier.

“No guts, no glory,” James says as he walks purposefully toward the gate.

“But they’ll see us!” Fifer whispers.

“True,” replies James. “But I’m counting on them not worrying about those leaving nearly as much as those entering.”

“I hope you’re right,” Fifer says as they come closer.

When they’re close, the guards take notice of them but otherwise say nothing as they pass through the gate. James nods in greeting to them as they pass by, the guards return his greeting.
“We made it!” Fifer exclaims quietly.

“Figured we would,” Jiron says. “People always see what they expect to see. The guards back there expected us to be okay, and since we acted the part, that’s what they thought.”

As they move away from the gate, two shadows detach themselves from the darkness. James sees them coming toward them and stops abruptly.

“It’s okay,” Jiron assures him as he recognizes Jorry and Uther.

“You did it!” they say, amazed.

“Yeah, but we don’t have time to talk about it,” he replies.

“What do you mean?” Uther asks.

Fifer quickly fills them in on what’s been going on.

Jiron says, “You guys go and get the others stationed out at the other gates and meet us back at the inn.’

“You got it,” Jorry says.

As they head out into the night to round up the others, James says to Jiron, “Now, take us to Miller.”

Giving him a nod, Jiron moves out toward the inn.

James follows closely behind and after a minute, asks, “How’s Miko?”

“Doing okay, last I saw,” he replies.

“I’m getting worried about him,” James says.

“So am I,” agrees Jiron.

They don’t progress very far before they begin to smell smoke. Not wood smoke from someone’s chimney, but more like from a building that’s burning or has just burned down.

As they near the inn, a large crowd can be seen gathered around a burned out structure. “I believe that used to be the inn,” Jiron tells him.

Hurrying forward, they see the crews working to extinguish the last of the fires. “What happened?” he asks one onlooker.

“They think it started in the back,” the man tells him.

Another man steps forward and says, “Yeah, this bunch came in through the front, a rough bunch by the looks of them. They went through to the rooms in the back and then we heard sword fighting. Then all of a sudden, we smelled smoke coming from the back. By the time we all got out, the fire was spreading pretty fast. In no time, the whole place was on fire.”

“Did anyone from the back make it out?” James asks anxiously.

Shaking his head, the first man says, “Not through the front, anyway. No one has said if anyone made it out the back. Seems dark deeds were done there this night.”

“Perhaps,” says James. “Thank you.”

The men nod and turn back to watch the crews as they finish putting out the fire.

They move away from the crowd and James asks, “You heard?”

Jiron nods, “Think he got out?”

“Under normal circumstances I’d say yes. But now, the way he’s been acting, I don’t know.”

“They said they heard sword fighting,” Jiron says. “That means Miko would have ‘woken up’, so to speak.”

“I know,” replies James, “that’s what has me worried.”

“Woken up?” Fifer asks.

“Never mind that now,” James says quickly. “Let’s move over to the rear of the inn and see if we can find out anything.”

“Okay,” Fifer says as he leads the way, scanning the faces of the crowd for any sign of Miller or Miko.

At the rear of the inn, the fire had gutted it pretty good. Only a few timbers and crossbeams remain. James begins to move in among the charred rubble before a guard blocks his way, saying, “It isn’t safe, you’ll have to stay back.”

James looks at the guard and says, “I know, but we knew someone who was back here. I just wanted to find out if they made it out or not.”

“It’s not a pretty sight,” the guard says.

“I realize that,” James says as he looks to the guard imploringly.

“Alright,” he says. “But be careful, it’s still very hot in there.”

“We will,” he says to the guard. To the others, he says, “Come on.”

The heat from the smoldering embers is quite hot, almost too hot. He begins moving into the charred structure when Jiron grabs his arm and says, “They were over this way.”

James nods and lets him lead the way.

Jiron steps through what’s left of a wall and then says, “This was the room.”
“I can tell,” replies James as he looks around at all the burned, dead bodies scattered about. The remains of the collapsed ceiling covers most of the bodies but he’s still able to make them out.

“Look here,” says Jiron.

James moves over and sees the remnants of a headless body that looks to have once been tied to a chair. Ropes bind it’s extremities to broken bits of burned wood. “This must’ve been Shyn,” Jiron explains.

“Good!” he hears Fifer say.

Using their knives to maneuver smoldering wood away from the bodies, they discover arms, legs and heads that are no longer attached to anything. Testament to the brutal battle that had occurred here shortly before the fire.

“See Miller or Miko?” James asks the others.

“Hard to tell,” Jiron replies. “I haven’t found anyone yet that would’ve been the same size as Miko.”

“If Miller’s here,” Fifer states, “I doubt if we would know for sure. They’re all burned too severe.”

“Fifer!” a cry can be heard coming from the crowd.

He looks up and sees Jorry and Uther returning with the others. “Over here,” he hollers, waving.

“Let’s get out of here,” James says.

When they finally make their way out of the burned building, the others join them. Uther asks, “Man, what happened?”

“Where’re Miller and that kid?” Jorry asks right after.

Indicating the burned out building, Fifer says, “They might be in there, hard to tell. Everything’s burned beyond recognition.”

“James, the mirror,” Jiron suddenly reminds him.

“That’s right!” he cries as he quickly moves to leave the area.

A guard stops them before they get too far and says, “Where’re you guys going?”

“Trying to find our friends,” James explains.

“I don’t think so,” he says. “We need to find out what happened here and you all seem the only ones who know anything about it.”

“I’d like to help, really,” James replies. “But this is an emergency.”

“Sorry,” he says. “I need you to stay right here until the watch captain shows up.”

“When will that be?” Jiron asks.

“Shouldn’t be too long,” the guard says. “He may need you all to come back to the jail to answer questions.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to decline the offer,” James tells him.

Three guards come over and stand next to the one talking to them. The guard says, “It isn’t a request.”

Miller’s band comes and stands behind James as he says, “Unless you want a fight, we’re leaving.”

Seeing the odds, the guard just glowers at James as he and the others begin backing away.

Once they’ve moved a sufficient distance from the guards, they turn and make their way quickly away from the fire scene. They find a quiet alley that’s away from people and move into it.

“What do you think happened back there?” Uther asks.

They all glance at each other for a moment then James says, “I think Councilman Rillian sent men there to get Shyn and things got out of hand.”

“Why?” asks Yern, a red haired member of Miller’s band.

“So we couldn’t use him as a witness against him I would expect,” James explains.

“But how did they know he was there?” Uther asks.

“I’m afraid I mentioned it when we were being arrested,” admits James. He reaches into his pack and pulls out the mirror. “If you guys will be quiet for a while, I’ll try to find out if Miller and Miko are still alive.”

He pulls out the mirror and everyone huddles around to watch as he tries to find Miller. The image flickers a moment and then they see the burned out remains of the inn. A charred corpse lies partially buried under the collapsed roof. “I’m afraid Miller is dead.”

The men begin cursing and Jiron shushes them up while James tries to locate Miko.

Fearing the worst, James lets the image of Miller go and another one begins to form in its place. He sees Miko walking as if dazed down a street, bloody sword in hand. He widens the image and sighs with relief when he fails to see anyone around him.

“Does anyone know where this is?” he asks. “It should be fairly close to where the inn was.”

He slowly scrolls the image until one of the men says, “Yeah, I recognize this place. It’s not too far away.”

James cancels the image and glances to Illan, an older man graying at the temples, and asks, “Can you take us there?”

Illan nods, “Sure, this way.”

Putting the mirror away, James follows Illan as he leads them down a side street. They cross two more streets
before turning down another side street. “He should be somewhere around here,” he says.

They move quickly down the street and sure enough, find Miko walking away from them. “You guys stay here,” James tells them.

He moves forward alone, and as he nears Miko, says, “Miko, you okay?”

Miko stops but doesn’t turn around. James says softly, “Miko, it’s James.”

Turning around slowly, Miko gazes at James with red rimmed eyes.

James suddenly realizes that Miko is several inches taller than he had been earlier, and broader as well. The Fire is having a dramatic effect on him. “You okay?” James asks him.

“What’s happening to me?” Miko whispers as he begins to move toward him. He can see tear tracks through the soot covering his face.

“I don’t know,” replies James. “But we’ll figure it out.”

When he comes near, James gives him a smile. Miko returns the smile with a small sad one of his own. Putting his arm around him, he walks him back to where the others are waiting.

Jiron’s eyes widen when he sees the changes in Miko. He glances to James, who only shrugs.

“James!” Miko exclaims, as he suddenly comes more alive. “Korgan is in the city!”

“Yes, I know,” he replies. “Now that you’re safely back with me, we can go take care of him.”
To what’s left of Miller’s band, James asks, “What’re you guys going to do now?”

“There’s a lot to be answered for,” replies Illan. “Fifer here says you’re going after the ones who did this to Miller?”

“That’s right,” states James.

“In that case, we’d like to come along with you,” he says. The others nod their heads, adding their agreements.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he says gratefully. Turning to Fifer, he says, “Let them know what’s going on while I try to locate Korgan.”

“Sure thing,” he replies, then huddles with his comrades as he fills them in.

James, Jiron and Miko move a little ways away from the group to give them time to talk while James locates Korgan. Taking out the mirror once more, he releases the magic as he gazes upon the surface.

The image begins to come into focus and they see Korgan’s unmistakable patch and scar. He widens the image and sees that he’s talking to another man in what looks to be a basement. What really surprises them is that the basement contains tables and racks filled with weapons.

“Looks like they could arm an army from what they have there,” remarks Jiron.

“Probably what they plan to do,” he says. “I wish this thing had sound!”

He scrolls the image around the basement where they see five others there with Korgan as well as the other guy he’s talking to. “Wonder what they’re saying?” Jiron asks.

“My guess is they’re making plans for the fall of Lythylla,” replies James.

“Then we better find them quickly,” Miko says from over James’ shoulder.

“I think you’re right,” agrees James.

He’s about ready to cancel the image when they see the meeting breaking up and all the men there begin to climb the stairs out of the basement. “Where’re they going?” asks Miko.

James suddenly turns and stares at Miko and says, “Say that again!”

“Where’re they going?” repeats Miko, confused at James’ request.

Miko’s voice has deepened, become more of a man’s voice than a boy’s. Recovering from the shock, James says, “Who knows? Let’s get Korgan and we’ll find out what’s going on.”

“He’s most likely heading to the castle again,” suggests Jiron. When James turns his head in his direction, he continues, “When Miko and I were out looking the town over as you requested, we spotted him. We followed him until he went through the gates to the castle.”

“Then we’ve got to get him before he makes it there,” says James. “Which entrance did he use?”

“It was the east gate,” he replies.

“Then let’s hurry,” he says. He goes back over to the others and says, “We think we may have a lead on him, but we need to hurry before he makes it back within the castle.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Uther asks.

James nods to Jiron who begins running toward the eastern gate leading into the castle area, the rest following right behind.

They have to duck down side streets twice to avoid patrols. They don’t know if they’ll be looking for them or not, but best not to take any chances.

Jiron brings them to a halt when they near the eastern gate, keeping to a side street overlooking it.

James pulls out the mirror and the view of Korgan appears. He’s still walking along the streets, one of the men is accompanying him. Putting the mirror away, he says, “Spread out and cover the streets leading here,” he says. “Let’s hope he’s going to use this entrance again.”

“What if he doesn’t?” asks Jorry.

“Then we’ll have to try something else,” he replies.

They quickly spread out, and station themselves where they’ll be able to intercept anyone heading for the gate.

James, Jiron and Miko watch the main street while the others cover the side streets. They wait for five minutes when, from down the street they can hear the sound of footsteps coming toward them. It sounds like there’re more than one person.
“Think that’s them?” Jiron whispers.
“It’s gotta be,” replies James. To Miko he whispers, “Go tell the others to get back here.”
Miko nods his head then melts into the darkness as he goes to get the others.
“How’s your shoulder?” James asks.
“Bad, but not much I can do about it now,” he states.
James can see one knife in his right hand as they wait for them to come closer. He looks back down the street, they can hear them approaching. The minimal light from the lamps doesn’t give enough illumination to make out more than approaching shadows.
As the others join him, he sends them around side streets to block off any possible avenue of escape. The two people who’re approaching pass through a circle of light from one of the lamps a little ways down the street. They can see that one of them definitely has a patch over one eye.

James hides in the shadows until they’re just about to enter the circle of light from the next lamp. Then he steps out in front of them with his knife drawn and says, “Stop right there!”
They take one more step before coming to a halt, which brings them into the circle of light. A woman screams and James can see they’re not Korgan and friend.

A middle aged lady and a gentleman who looks to have been a veteran of battle stand before him.
The man pulls out his sword and cries, “What’s the meaning of this.”
“My apologies,” James stammers, embarrassed. “I thought you were someone else.” Putting away his knife, he begins backing away from the couple.
The man keeps his sword out as they, too, begin backing away.

“The gate!” Uther cries out.
They all turn their attention to the gate as they watch Korgan and his friend run in through the gate. Korgan pauses momentarily as he looks in their direction, a grin upon his face. He says something to the guards, and one brings a horn to his lips and begins sounding the alarm.

“Move!” cries Jiron and they all begin running down the street past the couple James had accosted.
Ducking down a side alley, they try to lose any pursuit that may be forthcoming. They run to the end of the alley and break across another main thoroughfare to the alley on the other side.
Pausing a moment, they listen for any pursuit. When none is forthcoming, Jiron leads them further into the alley until the darkness within completely swallows them before coming to a stop.

“Now what?” he says as he turns to James.
“I don’t know,” he replies. “We might try to backtrack the way he’d come and see if we can find where that meeting was being held.”

“Whatever we do, we need to hurry,” Illan states. “When they come to get you out of the dungeon in the morning for the council meeting, they’ll know you’re not there.” Remembering the horn blast from the guard at the gate, he adds, “If they don’t know already. And dawn isn’t very far away.” They all glance at the sky that is beginning to lighten with the coming of the morn.

“Hopefully we can discover their plans before the army begins its attack,” Uther says. “Whatever they’re planning has to coincide with that.”

“I agree,” says James. “Do you remember the way?”
Indicating the direction with a nod of his head, he replies, “It’s this way.” He then leaves the alley and turns down the street in the general direction of where Korgan had been.

“How are we going to find out which house it is?” Jiron questions.
“Not sure, exactly,” replies James as they continue following Uther.
In the early morning hour, they’ve encountered relatively few people. No group has been greater than two or three and those were usually drunk. That’s why when he sees a group of twenty men coming their way from down a side street, James has them duck into a side alley to avoid being seen.

“What’s wrong?” Illan asks him when they’re within the shadows of the alley.
“Doesn’t it seem strange for such a large group to be about so early in the morning?” he asks.
“Now that you mention it, it does,” he replies.
“And the fact they’re in the area where all those weapons are leads me to think they may be going to retrieve those weapons,” explains James.

“Could be,” whispers Jiron.
They all remain quiet as the men turn onto the street James and the others had just recently vacated. As the men move away from them, James whispers, “My guess is, if we follow them, we’ll find that house.”
Several of the others nod their heads in understanding.
Letting the men move further down the street, James and the others quickly enter the street to follow them.
They continue following the men at a discreet distance until they come to a large house. Turning off the street, the men approach the front door, open it, and then go in.

“That’s the house!” exclaims Jorry excitedly. “Has to be!”

“We need to get word to Henri at the north gate,” James says. “If they’re moving to get their weapons, then the attack is imminent.” He turns to Yern and says, “Tell him there are likely other spots around the city.”

Yern nods and quickly heads off down the street.

“How’d they get so many within the city?” asks Fifer.

“Remember all those refugees that were pouring into the city when we got here?” James asks. When Fifer nods, he continues, “That’s how. I bet they’ve been trickling in over the last several days, disguised as refugees.”

“Damn!” he exclaims. “No telling how many there are within the city now.”

James has them spread out around the building, staying within the shadows as best they can. He’s keeping Miko close to hand.

Suddenly the door to the house begins to open and the men start filing out. Where they’d gone in without swords and armor, they’re now coming out fully decked out for battle.

James takes several slugs from the pouch at his hip and sets them in his left hand. Taking one in his right, he lets the magic flow as he throws it at one of the men exiting through the doorway.

The slug strikes him square in the middle of the chest and gore sprays on the man behind him as the slug exits his back. Still having momentum, the slug strikes the second man in the chest but its force had been greatly reduced by going through the first man, only knocking him back a step as the armor prevents it from punching through.

“Keep them in the house!” cries James.

The others spring into action as another slug flies toward the open doorway, this time taking out the gore coated man. They move to the exits and begin fighting with those attempting to leave.

James can see Miko next to him begin to slowly pull his sword out of his scabbard and says, “Not this time, Miko. They can handle this.”

Miko glances to him, his eyes regaining their focus as he nods and slides the sword back in the sheath.

The fighting going on around the house is becoming intense as those that were within begin to make their way out to engage Miller’s band.

Cries from the neighboring buildings fill the night as the residents take notice of the fighting going on around the house.

Suddenly, horns can be heard coming from the west as the Empire’s forces begin their assault.

James lets loose the power and…

**Crumph!**

…an explosion can be heard within the building. Windows shatter outward from the blast and all fighting ceases for a moment as the combatants stagger from the explosive concussion. The building begins to shake as the sides buckle and the entire structure collapses, burying those still inside.

The fighting resumes and the enemy that had made it out are soon dispatched. James does a quick survey and is pleased to note that all of them have survived. A few are bleeding from numerous cuts and Jorry has blood running down the side of his head.

“Come on!” he cries. “To the west wall, we can’t let them get a foothold inside the city!”

“How do we know that’s where they’ll make their move?” asks Uther.

“We don’t,” replies James, “but that’s where the horns are sounding.”

As one they turn and begin racing toward the western wall. Other soldiers can be seen running to the sound of the horns to aid in the defense. On their way, they meet up with Yern who decided to return once the horns began sounding. “I think Henri will know what’s going on now,” he says when he rejoins them. Running as fast as they can, they head to the west gate.

They find a battlefield at the base of the west wall. Dead and dying soldiers litter the area in front of it. A semicircle of men are holding off the defenders while several others are over at the gatehouse attempting to open the locking mechanism.

The men keeping the defenders from the gate house are falling fast and soon the way is clear. Soldiers of Madoc rush toward the gatehouse and begin beating upon the gatehouse door. James can see the door itself is beginning to buckle under the force of the pounding.

Suddenly, a clanking sound can be heard as the locks on the gate are opened. James looks to the gatehouse and sees one of the saboteurs lift a sledgehammer as he begins smashing the locking mechanism, making it so the gates cannot be locked again.
The door to the gatehouse finally buckles and shatters. The defenders rush in, killing everyone, clearing the
gatehouse.

“Bar the gate!” can be heard from the captain of the defenders as dozens of men throw their weight against the
gate, trying to prevent it from being opened.

Archers upon the walls are raining down a barrage of arrows upon the attackers as they work to push open the
gates from the other side. The Empire returns fire with their crossbowmen and James hears a cry as an archer
plummets off the wall, a bolt sticking out of his chest.

The prickling sensation of someone doing magic suddenly hits him. He looks around but it doesn’t look like
anyone close is the source. Then suddenly he understands, it’s from someone on the other side of the wall.

The feeling spikes incredibly as the gates suddenly burst open, crushing men caught behind them as they slam
into the walls.

“Beat them back!” James looks behind him and sees Lord Pytherian there in armor as he arrives with
reinforcements. Rallying his men, they move to beat back the enemy.

His men surge forward as they clash with the enemy entering in through the open gates. The fighting is fierce
and the defenders are slowly being beaten backward.

The remnants of Miller’s band begin to join the defenders but Jiron stops them. “We must stay and protect
James. He’s our only hope!”

Yearning to join in the defense, they understand and position themselves around James to protect him from
harm. Jiron nods to James and says, “It’s all yours.”

The prickling sensation begins again and James climbs up on a wagon to get a better look. He sees the mage
standing upon the bridge, arrows from the defenders seem to glance off a barrier of some sort surrounding him.

James concentrates on the bridge and meets resistance as the mage begins to counter what he’s trying to do. A
sudden thought comes to mind from a story he had read, ‘First mage casts a spell, second mage counters, third mage
casts spell to help the first, fourth casts spell to help the second, then the army shows up and cuts them all to pieces.’
If he wasn’t experiencing it, he’d laugh.

Two of the enemy break through the lines of defenders and come straight toward him. Jorry and Uther move to
meet this threat and quickly take them out.

The contest of wills between James and the Empire’s mage continues, as each tries to get the better of the other.
Suddenly, the resistance eases up and James is able to finish his spell.

**Crumph!**

The area in front of the bridge explodes upward, enemy troops are flung into the air. Suddenly, the prickling
starts again and before James has a chance to recover, a bolt of force strikes him in the chest and knocks him
backward off the wagon.

Hitting the ground hard, he has the wind knocked out of him. Coming to his knees, he tries to get his breath
back as Jiron comes to his side.

As Jiron helps him to his feet, he sees Miko running toward the fighting at the gate, sword in hand. “Miko!” he
tries to yell at him, but he can’t get the volume needed to be heard. He watches as Miko begins to wade into the
attackers, his sword moving so fast that the eye can hardly keep track of it.

“We’ve got to help him!” James cries out to Jiron.

“He’s too far away,” he replies. “We’d never be able to get to him!”

James watches a moment as Miko, in the state he’s in, inadvertently kills a defender that had been coming to
his aid.

The dust clears from where the explosion had occurred and they see that the bridge and the mage are still
standing. More troops are pouring across the bridge and working their way through the hole he’d just created to
continue the attack on the defenders.

The attackers fall like grain to the scythe as Miko strides into them, totally oblivious to the many minor cuts
he’s receiving. The line of soldiers that were pushing the defenders further into the city, buckles as Miko cuts a
swath through them.

James tears his eyes away from Miko and back to the mage. The prickling sensation spikes again and another
bolt of force flies toward him. Ready for it this time, he’s able to deflect its trajectory and it passes by harmlessly.

He throws two stones in quick succession but they bounce harmlessly off the invisible barrier. Though the
mage was untouched by the missiles, he does have the minor satisfaction of seeing them striking soldiers next to
him.

The attacker’s push into the city is at a standstill with Miko there. No one can stop him and the defenders are
rallying around him. More archers are arriving from their positions on other parts of the wall and their arrows are
having a devastating effect.
Lord Pytherian can be seen there amidst the line of defenders as he encourages them on to propel the invaders back. His sword is almost as deadly as Miko’s to anyone who comes close.

James sends his senses out to the barrier around the mage, trying to understand it and find a weak point that can be exploited. Suddenly, he finds it and realizes he should’ve thought of it before.

He redirects his senses, searching for what he needs. When he finds it, he lets loose an enormous surge of power. The one place the mage’s barrier does not cover is the soles of his feet.

Suddenly, an old root from a bygone tree breaks through the ground under his feet. The force of it hitting the mage’s foot sends him reeling, the unexpectedness of it breaks his concentration. When the prickling sensation stops completely, he knows the barrier is down.

He cocks back his arm and with another great surge of power, sends a slug speeding toward the staggering mage. The mage tries to erect another barrier but is too late. Striking his upper chest, the slug blasts through and he topples backward into the river.

A cry rises from the defenders when they see him fall, and Lord Pytherian shouts above the din, “Now! Beat them back!” With unbridled ferocity, the defenders wade into the attackers.

James, fatigued and staggering a little, looks over the battling fighters. Miko stands near the gate, momentarily still as the attackers keep their distance. They’ve learned that to come near him is to die. His sword periodically moves in a blur as it strikes a bolt out of the air as it flies toward him.

“Come on!” James cries to the others. “Now’s our chance to get him out of there!”

Running toward the fighting, James steers around pockets of fighting as he tries to get close to Miko.

Jorry, Uther and the others form a ring around him, taking out any attacker who gets close. Jiron, with knife in one hand, runs next to James. “Will he leave the battle?” he asks.

“Yes,” James replies. “If he gets out of the gate, we’ll never get him back!”

“James!” he hears Lord Pytherian shout. He looks back and sees him pointing out of the gate. Turning his attention to the gate, he sees a large group of Parvatis coming across the bridge. If they get in it might turn the tide against the defenders.

“Jiron!” he exclaims. “Stop them!”

“How?” he replies. “I’ve only got one arm!”

“You’re the Shynti, remember?” he explains.

Jiron suddenly understands what he’s talking about. Reaching into his tunic, he pulls out the necklace with the three stones. “Right!” he says. To Jorry and Uther, he says, “You guys come with me, the rest of you stay with James.”

Jiron makes for the gates with Jorry and Uther who deal with any attacker foolish enough to come close.

James hurries over to Miko where two attackers have engaged him. James is startled when he realizes he’s grown another couple inches and has developed muscle mass on his arms and chest. Battling is causing this!

Miko cuts the head off one and comes back with a slice that takes off the swordarm of the other. Before he has time to realize what’s happened to him, Miko strikes out twice more, taking off a leg and putting his sword through the man’s chest.

As the man hits the ground, he hears James and the others coming up behind him. He turns quickly and holds his sword at the ready.

“Miko!” James hollers to him, looking him eye to eye. It might be just his imagination, but it almost looks as if there’s a red flicker within his pupils.

Enemy soldiers attack James’ group while they’re standing there staring at each other but Illan and the rest move to engage them, keeping them back while he deals with Miko.

“Miko!” he cries one more time. Miko’s eyes blink and his sword lowers a fraction. “It’s James! Time to go!”

His sword drops lower as he says in a barely audible whisper, “James?”

Nodding his head, he says more softly, “That’s right, it’s me.”

A confused look comes over his face as he gazes at the dead stacked around him. When his gaze finally comes back to James, a tear begins to well in his eye and a frightened look comes over him.

Dropping the sword, he moves to James who puts his arm around his shoulder and leads him away from the battle. Illan and the others fall back with him until they’re once more behind the lines.

James suddenly remembers Jiron and looks to the gate. He sees him standing there in front of the Parvatis holding the necklace out to them. Jorry and Uther are watching his back as their leader pauses and examines the necklace. James can see him nodding his head.

“Milord!” he hears someone holler from the gatehouse. “It’s fixed!”

“Understood!” Lord Pytherian shouts in reply. “Fight ‘em back boys! Let’s get this gate closed.”

While Jiron and the Parvatis are standing before the gate talking, they’re blocking the way for the enemy
soldiers behind them who are trying to get through to continue the attack. As the last of the attackers fall within the city and the defenders begin to close the gates, Jiron says something to Jorry and Uther who move back within the city. Jiron goes with the Parvatis away from the gates, back toward the bridge.

The gates finally shut with a bang and the locks again fall into place. But Jiron is still on the other side!

“Stay here!” he tells Miko. When he gets a nod in reply, he runs over to Lord Pytherian.

“Milord!” he cries out to him.

Turning to see who it is, Lord Pytherian gives him a smile and says, “We did it! With you and your friend there, we got it closed!”

“But Jiron is on the other side!” he cries out.

The smile disappears from his face and a concerned look replaces it. “I know,” he says. “I don’t know how he did it, but stopping them most likely saved us all.”

“We’ve got to get him back,” demands James.

Shaking his head, Lord Pytherian replies, “The only way is to open the gate and we can’t do that while that army is camped out there.” He turns to an aide and says, “We got a man out there with the Parvatis, make sure the archers on the walls don’t hit him.”

“Yes, milord,” the man says before running toward the stairs leading up to the walls.

Turning his attention back to James, he says, “That’s all we can do now.”

From the wall over the gate, a man cries out, “Milord! They’re pulling back!”

“Where?” he hollers up to them.

“Back to where they were before,” the man replies.

“Let me know if anything changes,” he orders.

The man salutes him and goes back to watching the enemy.

James gestures for Fifer to come over. “You saw Jiron with the Parvatis?” he asks.

“Yes,” Fifer replies.

Pointing to the wall over the gate he says, “See if you can get up there and find out where he’s being taken.”

Turning to Lord Pytherian, he says, “With your leave milord?”

When he nods, giving his permission, Fifer runs to the access stairs to the wall.

“Still have a little problem with this Councilman Rillian,” mentions James.

“I realize that,” Lord Pytherian says. “But it’s doubtful anything will be brought against you and your friends now. The soldiers here saw you take out the mage and Miko there almost turned the tide by himself. He’s quite good isn’t he?”

“Uh, yeah,” replies James, “he is.”

“So I think you’re safe from any accusations he might make about you being agents of the Empire,” he assures him. “I seriously doubt if anyone here would give credence to it.”

“But what are you going to do about him?” James asks.

“That’s for the Council to decide,” he says, “and I’m not on the Council. I figure it’ll be taken care of quietly.”


“I hate to say it, but there’s nothing we can do for him now,” he replies. “We’re not going to take the fight to them for one man. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” James says, though not very happy about it. “I understand.”

“Good. Now I’ve got to see about the men and wounded, so you’ll have to excuse me,” he says.

“Yes milord,” he replies.

As Lord Pytherian begins calling for casualty reports and status, James goes back over to where Miko and the others are waiting. When he sees Jorry and Uther there he asks them, “What happened?”

“I thought we were dead for sure when I saw where he was heading,” Jorry replies.

“Yeah,” Uther adds. “But when he showed them that necklace, they stopped right in their tracks.”

“We heard those behind them shouting and screaming for them to move,” Jorry says. “But they just ignored them.”

“What did they say to him?” James asks them.

“There was too much noise so we couldn’t hear what was being said,” explains Uther. “But before he left with them he said to tell you that he’d be okay and that he’ll be back.”

Nodding, James begins to relax somewhat. “He’s their Shynti, that’s a rare honor among them,” he says. “I doubt if they’d let anything happen to him while he’s with them.”

James glances up to the walls and sees Fifer begin to come back down. When he joins them he says, “He went with them back to their camp.”

“Is he okay?” James asks.
“Looked like it,” replies Fifer. “The other soldiers out there were upset with them but they just ignored their cries of outrage and went back to their tent area.”

“The Parvati have some peculiar laws and customs,” James tells them. “Let’s find someplace to rest.” Turning to Yern, he says, “Would you mind staying here and keep an eye out for him?”

“No problem,” Yern says, nodding. “But how’ll I find you if he should somehow return?”

“Once we’re settled in, we’ll let you know where we’ll be,” he tells him.

“Okay,” he says then moves to the wall access.

To the others he says, “Now let’s find an inn.”
They find an inn with enough room for all of them, though it’s pretty pricy. Fifer and Keril, the youngest member of Miller’s band, went to relieve Yern on the walls. James and Miko have their own room while the rest are crammed into two others.

Once within their room, Miko lies down on one of the beds while James sits facing him on the other. “I’m so tired,” Miko says as he glances over to James.

“What’s happening to me?” he asks, voice revealing a trace of fear.

“Understandable,” replies James. “You’re going through a lot.”

“Can you do anything?” he asks, voice revealing a trace of fear.

“Lowering his voice, he says, “It’s the Fire. That gem you’re carrying.”

“What?” he asks. “How?”

“I’m not really sure,” James answers. “But every time you’re in a battle, it appears that the Fire is taking over. When the Fire has control, you are unbeatable on the battlefield.”

Miko’s eyes widen in wonder as he continues, “Today, your sword was moving so fast I had a hard time keeping track of it.”

“Unbelievable,” Miko breathes.

Nodding, James says, “I wouldn’t have believed it either if I hadn’t seen it myself. There’s something else going on too.”

“What?” asks Miko, worriedly.

“You’re growing,” he says. “Since you’ve been carrying the Fire, you’ve grown almost six inches. Heck, you’re almost as tall as I am now. Plus you’re gaining muscle mass faster than normal.”

Miko looks down at his arms and chest as he moves his hands over them, feeling the muscles beneath. He looks to James and asks, “What should I do?”

“When we get back to Cardri, we’ll find a place to hide it and you could possibly go back to normal once you’re rid of it,” he tells him. “At least you won’t change any more, I hope.”

“You hope?” he asks. “What does that mean?”

“It means that I really don’t understand what’s going on,” he explains. “I believe the Fire is some sort of a focal point of Dmon-Li here on earth. What it does, how it does it, or what it might do in the future, I have no idea.”

When Miko casts him another look full of worry and fear, he says reassuringly, “But as long as we keep you out of battles, nothing seems to happen. All the changes take place while you’re in battle and under the influence of the Fire.”

He lays his head on the pillow and says, “Okay.”

“Get some rest,” James tells him. “Not sure just what’s going to happen next, but we’ll need our rest.” He glances over and sees his eyes have already closed.

James lies back and rests his head on the pillow. Though he’s tired, thoughts of Jiron run through his mind as well as concern for Miko. Korgan is still on the loose as well, at least his plans were foiled, this time. Going to have to track him down if he’s still here. Not just because he’s a danger to the city, but because he owes him.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Suddenly brought out of a deep sleep by someone knocking on the door, James holds his head as a headache blossoms to life. Sitting up on the edge of the bed, he looks over to Miko, but he’s still asleep.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Getting up, he goes over to the door and opens it. “Yes?” he asks.

Outside the door is a boy about eleven or so. His clothes mark him as a page from the castle, he’d seen a couple of them when he’d been marched through the castle on the way to the dungeons. “Are you James?” the page asks.

“Yes,” sighs James, “I am.”

“Your presence is requested at the castle,” he says.

“My lord?” James asks.

“By whom?” he asks.

“Ah, alright, let me get ready,” James tells him.
“He said it was urgent,” the boy says, urging him to hurry.

Glancing back at Miko who’s still sleeping, he says, “Let me tell someone where I’ll be so they’ll not worry.”

Stepping out into the hall, he goes to the next door and knocks.

When Uther opens it, he says, “I’ve been summoned to the castle.”

Coming instantly alert, Uther asks, “Trouble?”

“I don’t know,” he replies. “The page said it was urgent. Lord Pytherian wants to see me.”

“Do you think we should come with you?” he asks.

Shaking his head, he says, “No, I don’t think that will be necessary. Besides, you weren’t requested, just stay here and wait for Jiron. When Miko wakes up, let him know where I’ve gone.”

Uther glances at the page standing behind him and then says, “Okay, good luck.”

“Thanks.” Turning back to the page, he says, “Alright, let’s go.”

With the boy in the lead, they leave the inn and work their way through the streets to the castle area. “What’s the enemy doing?”

“Rumor is they are waiting for reinforcements,” the page explains. “They’ve also begun constructing defensive fortifications and from what I’ve been told, it looks like they intend to stay out there for a while.”

“Since they can’t take the city, they’ll just maintain a presence there?” he asks.

“That’s what they’re saying,” he replies.

They pass through the gate leading into the castle area and when they get to the courtyard, he notices how they’ve turned it into an area for the wounded. Tents have sprung up and everywhere are men with bandages or lying on cots.

When they pass one tent, he’s startled when a man suddenly screams inside. The pile of amputated arms and legs lying just outside the entrance gives testament as to what is transpiring inside. James just shudders as he thinks of what these people are going through.

He feels a great sense of relief when they come to the castle’s entrance and they’re able to leave the scene of misery behind them. The page takes him down a long corridor and then up a flight of stairs to the next level. Then down another hallway where he stops before a single door.

“He said to wait in here,” the page says as he opens the door.

“Where have I heard that before!” Stepping through the door, he enters a room. A large table with several chairs sit in the middle of the room. The door the page is holding open is the only way in or out. Before closing the door, the page says, “He shouldn’t be too long, make yourself comfortable.”

“Thanks,” James says as the page closes the door. He walks around the room but other than the table and chairs, nothing else is in here. Taking a seat, he takes out a slug and places it in his hand, just in case. He isn’t going to be too trusting again.

Ten minutes later, the door opens and he looks over to see Lord Pytherian framed in the doorway. “See that we’re not disturbed,” he says to the guards who’ve accompanied him.

“Yes, milord,” one of them replies as he moves to enter the room. The guard shuts the door once he’s inside.

James knows he should stand, but he’s just too tired.

“Thank you for coming so quickly,” he says as he takes a seat across the table from him.

“The boy said it was urgent,” he replies as he replaces the slug in his belt.

Lord Pytherian notices him returning it and raises an eyebrow.

“After the last time, I don’t plan on taking any chances,” he explains.

“Understandable,” he says.

James asks, “So what’s the urgency?”

“One of our agents who has been watching Councilman Rillian suspects there may be an attempt made to either kill or capture you,” he replies. “We’re not sure when, but we do know it’s being worked out as we speak.”

“Why don’t you just arrest the councilman and be done with it?” he asks.

“Only by order of the Council can that happen, and he has powerful friends,” he explains. “There are some on the Council who believe, but they’re unwilling to act without proof.”

“So now what?” James asks. “You’re going to leave a known traitor on the ruling body of Madoc?”

“As I said, it’s not in my power,” he replies. “But since we know, and he knows we know, his actions will be much curtailed. He won’t do anything, or be a party to anything that might change the will of the Council.”

“But he’s coming after me!” James exclames. “What do they plan to do about that?”

“Nothing,” he says.

“Nothing!” he cries out. “How can they do nothing?”

“In their eyes, it’s a private matter, not one that affects Madoc as a whole,” he tells him. “Actually, if something should happen between you and Councilman Rillian, then it would fall to me to deal with it. So that’s
what I’m doing.”

“What are you doing?” asks James.

“Letting you know about it so you can take measures against it,” he says. “We owe you that much. Though I’d suggest you leave Lythylla as soon as possible to avoid any such attempts.”

“But Jiron is still out there with the enemy,” he reminds him.

“I know,” Lord Pytherian says. “That’s not working in your favor either. True, Jiron stopped the Parvatis when we needed him to. But he also went with them to their camp, some see that as a questionable act.”

Seeing the look on James’ face, he says, “I know, but there are those who will always believe what they want to believe.”

Sighing, James nods his head. “What about Korgan? Has there been any word since the attack?”

“No one has seen him,” he tells him. “We think he’s left the city since they know we know about him. Councilman Rillian definitely doesn’t wish to be connected to him.”

“I suppose not,” agrees James.

“Where do you plan to go from here?” he asks.

“We’re heading to Cardri,” he replies. “Jiron’s sister and others are waiting for us there.”

“How do you plan to get there?” he asks.

“Honestly, I haven’t thought that far ahead,” admits James.

“Maybe I can help you out there,” Lord Pytherian says.

“How?” asks James.

“It would greatly speed your trip if you sailed across the Sea of the Gods rather than made your way around it,” he explains. “I’ll send a letter to the inn where you’re staying that you can take with you. It’ll request that whoever reads it to help you in any way possible. With it, you should be able to get someone to ferry you across to the other side.”

Nodding, James says, “That would be quite helpful, thank you.”

“Like I said,” he says, “it’s the least we can do. I’ll have it over there by nightfall.”

“I don’t plan to leave until Jiron returns, anyway” he says. “But once he does, we’ll be gone.”

“Good,” he states. “I would hate to have anything happen to you before then.”

“So would I,” replies James.

Getting up, Lord Pytherian extends his hand to James who stands as well, taking it. “I must be off, there’re still things I must take care of,” he says, indicating the meeting is over.

“Thank you again, milord,” James says.

“You’re welcome, and good luck.” He goes over to the door and opens it. Stepping out into the hallway, he turns to the right and the guards fall into step behind him.

The same page that had brought him here steps in through the open door and says, “If you’ll follow me sir, I’ll take you back.”

“Very well,” James says as he comes around the table and follows the page out the door. He’s led back through the castle along the same route that he’d been taken on his way in. It doesn’t take them long to return to the inn and at his door, the page says goodbye before promptly returning to the castle.

He opens the door a crack so he can peek in to make sure Miko is still there. When he sees him sleeping on the bed, he sighs in relief and closes the door. Moving down the hallway to the next door, he knocks and it’s opened again by Uther.

Opening the door wide, he steps aside to allow James to come in the room. Everyone’s there except Jiron and the ones on the wall watching for his return.

“What happened?” Illan asks.

James relates what Lord Pytherian had told him. He can see their faces get red when they find out nothing is going to be done about anything. “We should take care of this ourselves!” Uther shouts.

“They kill Miller and we’re just supposed to walk away?” Yern asks incredulously. “I don’t think so.”

He can see everyone there is thinking the same thing: Revenge!

“Can’t you look in that mirror thing of yours and find out where this Councilman Rillian is?” asks Jorry. “Or maybe Korgan, the one eyed man?”

“Before I do,” James says, “I don’t want us to do anything until Jiron comes back. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Illan says, the others nodding their heads.

“Okay,” he says as he pulls the mirror out of the pouch at his hip. He takes a seat in one of the chairs and places the mirror on the table as everyone gathers around to look.

“Find that councilman first!” insists Uther.

James concentrates until the mirror begins to coalesce into an image of Councilman Rillian sitting at a table...
with six other important looking men. “Must be the Council,” he guesses.

The image begins to change as he starts concentrating on Korgan. When the image clarifies, they see him riding a horse through the grasslands. “He could be anywhere by this time!” he hears one of them exclaim. He lets the image go and the mirror reverts back to normal.

“It doesn’t look as if there’s anything that can be done now,” James states. He leans back in the chair and contemplates the remnants of Miller’s band. “What do you all plan to do now?”

They look at each other and Uther says, “We haven’t really thought about it.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Illan adds. “Miller was our leader, our heart and soul.”

“What are you going to do?” Jorry asks him.

“When Jiron returns, we’ll probably start heading back to Cardri as fast as possible,” he tells them.

“Why?” asks Uther. “I mean, Madoc could use you and what you can do.”

“I know,” he says, “but they’ll have to get along without me. There are other things that I must do.”

“Like what?” asks Yern.

He looks from one face to another and says, “I’m not entirely sure. I’m still trying to figure that out, but I’m sure it’s not to embroil myself in this war. I feel that to be true.”

“Will it be to the detriment of the Empire?” asks Uther.

“I don’t know,” replies James. “But since I’ve started on this path, I’ve done nothing but hurt them, though.”

“Yeah, that’s the truth,” Jorry says and then breaks out into a laugh that’s shared by all.

“We’ve been talking while you were at the castle,” Illan says. “If you wouldn’t mind, we’d kind of like to stay with you for a while. Miller’s gone so all we’d be doing is joining the regular army and none of us are cut out for that. Of course I can’t speak for the ones on the wall waiting for Jiron, but I’m sure they’d go along with it.”

James considers it a fraction of a second before saying, “I’d be more than happy to have you come along.”

“Great!” says Illan and the others offer other exclamations of jubilation as well.

“But, if you’re to follow me, that means what I say goes,” he tells them. “Will there be a problem with that?”

They all shake their head no. “In that case, I want you to forget about Councilman Rillian.” He sees their faces scowl and their expressions turn dark. “There may be a time of retribution, but that time is not now,” he tells them firmly. Looking from one to the other, he asks, “Okay?”

He gets their grudging agreement and then says, “We’ll need horses. Can someone go back and retrieve yours from that burned down inn?”

Uther gives him a grin and says, “Already done. They’re out in the stable behind the inn. We have Miller’s and Shyn’s as well, so we just need two more so everyone will have one.”

“The horses I came here on are who knows where,” James says. “Somehow, we’ll need to procure two more.”

“Not a problem,” Jorry says. “When the time comes to leave, I’m sure we can get them.”

Yawning, James gets up and says, “I need to get some sleep before we go. If they return with Jiron, get me up. And put someone in the hall to watch out for whatever Councilman Rillian may have planned.”

“Right,” says Jorry. “We’ll take care of that.”

“Good,” he says as he heads for the door. Once through the door and he's on his way back to his room, he can hear them as they discuss what he just said. He's glad they are coming with him, especially since Jiron's shoulder is hurt so badly. It's going to take him a while to fully heal and recover.

Before he opens the door, he can hear Miko's snores coming from the other side. Smiling, he opens the door and enters. Closing the door behind him, he goes over to his bed, kicks off his boots and lies down. When his head hits the pillow, he realizes just how tired he is. It isn't long before he's asleep.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Startled awake by someone at the door, James sits up in bed. The room is dark, night has already fallen. Glancing over to the other bed, he notices that Miko is no longer there.

Getting to his feet, he goes over to the door and finds Fifer there when he opens it. Suddenly excited, James asks, “Jiron’s back?”

“In a way,” he replies moving into the room. He goes over to the candle on the table and quickly lights it.

“In a way?” asks James, perplexed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sitting in a chair at the table, Fifer explains. “A group of Parvatis had escorted him back to the gates,” he begins, then starts to chuckle. “Apparently there was some disagreement about them doing that among the rest of their army. I thought they were going to begin fighting each other right then and there.”

“But the Parvatis are a sizeable part of their army so got their way in this. I’m sure there’ll be a reckoning at some time in the future about it. Anyway, as they were approaching, those of us on the wall began thinking they might be starting an attack. But then we realized the force approaching us was small and we could see Jiron among
the ones in front."

“Henri, who had been stationed on the wall just for this, hollers to open the gates and let Jiron in. Everyone was ready for a surprise attack or something like that, but Jiron walked toward the gate by himself and the Parvatis just turned around and walked back to their camp.”

“Where’s Jiron now?” asks James.

“Henri took him up to the castle to talk with Lord Pytherian about the enemy’s camp,” he replies. “Said he’d be back in a little bit.” Pulling out a letter with a seal at the bottom, he hands it to James and says, “This came from Lord Pytherian while you were sleeping, we didn’t want to wake you.”

Taking the letter, James says, “Thank you.”

“Uh, one more thing,” he says, looking a little embarrassed.

“What?” asks James as he puts the letter in his pouch.

“It’s Miko,” he begins.


“No, nothing like that,” he assures him. “It’s just that he makes us kind of, well, nervous.”

“In what way?” inquires James.

“It’s just that he is changing awfully fast, growing up quicker than normal,” he explains. “It’s kind of weird.”

“I know,” replies James, “it worries me too. But I assure you that he’s harmless. I know what’s going on but there’s nothing that can be done right now.”

“He fights way better than he ought to,” he says.

Nodding, James says, “I know, that’s a part of it as well. Just assure everyone that Miko is harmless, just as long as we keep him away from any fighting. Okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” he agrees, not sounding entirely reassured.

“By the way, where is he?” James asks.

Gesturing to the wall behind him, he says, “He’s in there with the others.”

Getting up, James says, “Well, we may as well all wait for Jiron’s return together.” Yern stands watch out in the hallway and nods to him as he leaves his room.

Fifer gets up as well and follows James out into the hallway and over to the other room. From outside the door, James can hear Miko’s voice. Opening the door, he finds Miko standing with his back to him as he’s talking to the others.

“…the torso came toward us and Jiron kept slicing it with his knives but nothing he did slowed it down. Then James holds up that medallion of his and a bright light shone from it. The light somehow caused the torso to die, how I haven’t a clue. Then…”

Noticing the looks of his audience, he glances around to see James standing there. “Oh, you’re awake?”

“Yes I am,” replies James as he enters the room. Fifer and Yern follow him in.

“I was just telling them about that place we found back in the swamp,” he explains.

“Yeah, I heard,” he says. Looking to all of the faces gazing at him, he says, “It’s called the Star of Morcyth.”

Pulling the medallion out of his shirt, he shows it to him.

“It’s one of those things I am trying to find out about,” he explains.

They come closer, looking at it and he asks them, “Has anyone seen or heard of anything like this before?”

Every one of them shakes their heads no. Once they’ve had a good look, he returns it to within his shirt. “How long has it been since Jiron was taken to the castle?”

“Fifer returned back ten minutes ago,” replies Illan. “So it hasn’t been long.”

“We have the horse situation taken care of,” Uther tells him. “We now have enough for all of us.”

“How did you do that?” he asks.

Gesturing to Miko, he says, “After he came in here, we started talking and the conversation got around to horses. He said that there might be two where he and Jiron had left them. When he and I went to look, sure enough, they were still there.”

“Great,” James says approvingly. “Now we just need Jiron back and we’ll be able to get out of here.” Moving over to one of the beds, the others scoot over, making room for him to sit down.

Miko glances over to him with a questioning look on his face and he says, “Go ahead and continue.”

“The torso fell to the floor and looked like it just melted away…”

Over the next hour they swap tales and James learns more of these people who’ve decided to tie their fates to his. Of course, Miko’s tales of his exploits made him feel uncomfortable. He did a somewhat accurate job in relating the details, only once or twice embellishing the story for effect.

By the time Miko had launched into the tale of them working their way through the mine after rescuing Lord Pytherian, they hear a knock on the door to James’ room. Everyone becomes instantly silent as they glance from one
to the other. They hadn’t forgotten Lord Pytherian’s warning that Councilman Rillian may try something.

James gets up and motions for them to be quiet, several of them grab their swords as he makes his way over to
the door. He hears the knocking again as he slowly opens the door a crack to look out into the hallway.

“Jiron!” he cries when he finally sees who it is. The page from the castle had brought him to the inn. Throwing
open the door, he comes out into the hallway.

Turning in his direction, Jiron says “I thought we’d missed you.”

Shaking his head, James says, “No, just in here with the others while we waited for your return.” Waving him
over, he says, “Come on in, we’ve got a lot to talk about.”

“Thank you,” he says to the page who then turns and heads back to the castle.

Once they are back in the room and the door is shut, James asks, “Okay, what happened.”

“When I got to the gate, I held aloft the necklace,” Jiron begins. Smiling, he continues, “You should’ve seen
the look on that Parvati’s face when he saw what I was holding. Shock would be too mild a word.”

“Coming to a stop, I could hear ‘Shynti’ being said several times. He asked me how I’d gotten it and while we
were there talking, the other forces behind them were screaming at them to let them by. But they just ignored them,
it almost seemed like we were old friends who hadn’t seen each other for a long time. It was a weird moment out
there by the gate.”

“When I realized the gates were shutting behind us, I told the Parvati leader that I had to go back inside. He
asked if I would come back to his camp. I was assured of safe passage back and having dealt with them before, I
knew they would keep their word. So I told Jorry and Uther to return within the walls before the gates closed.”

“When they took me back to their camp, the other enemy forces at first thought I was a prisoner. They became
quite agitated when they learned that not only was I not a prisoner, but that I was going to be honored and returned
unharmed. The others almost fell on the Parvati’s right then and there. One poor bastard actually called them
traitors, his head fell to the ground before he took another breath. After that, there was no more talk of them being
traitors.”

“We had a feast together, and I told them of our time in their homeland. Many of them haven’t been back for
quite a long time. When it was over, they walked me back to the gate amid loud protests from the other groups. I
asked them why they were doing this and possibly antagonizing the Empire. They said because I was Shynti, as if
that explained everything.”

“Back at the gates I was wondering if they’d even let me in with a force of Parvatis standing next to me. I was
sure surprised when the gates actually opened up and saw Fifer standing there.”

“Then Henri showed up and said that Lord Pytherian requested my presence at the castle. I told Fifer to come
back here and let you know what’s going on while I was meeting with him.”

“Basically, he asked me about troops, the makeup, how many, stuff like that. When he was satisfied I’d told
him everything I knew, he had that page bring me here.”

“What’s a Shynti?” asks Uther.

“A very special person to the Parvati,” he replies. “It basically means I’m one of them and that honor is seldom,
if ever, given.” Turning his attention to James, he asks, “What now?”

“Now we leave Lythylla,” he replies. “Councilman Rillian, we hear, is making plans against us and I want to be
out of here before he executes them.” He brings out the letter Lord Pytherian had given him and continues, “Lord
Pytherian wrote this letter for any and all to render us what aid we may require in getting to Cardri. He said to go to
a city on the Sea of the Gods and get someone there to ferry us across to the other side. From there we should be
able to make it to Dragon’s Pass in no time. Trendle isn’t far from there, I understand.”

“Good!” exclaims Jiron. “It’s been too long since I’ve seen Tersa.”

“I suggest we leave first thing in the morning,” says James. “Let’s post a watch in the hallway against
unwelcome visitors.”

Just then, they hear a floorboard squeak outside their door. Everyone becomes silent for a moment and then
they hear it again.

Uther gets up and slams through the door. A grunt is heard from the other side as the door knocks a man against
the far wall. “Get him!” Jorry cries as everyone springs into action.

The man rolls and comes to his feet fast. Without pausing, the man shoulders Uther out of the way as he races
for the stairs, Uther and the rest hot on his heals.

He takes the stairs four at a time and at the bottom, makes with all speed for the front door to the inn. Ramming
the closed door with his shoulder, he bursts his way through. Once outside, he dodges down a side alley and quickly
loses his pursuers in the dark.

They hunt for him for several minutes before they finally give up and return to their room. “Do you think he
heard everything?” Jiron asks.
“I don’t know,” replies James. “Maybe.”
“That tears it!” Uther exclaims. “Now they’re going to know our plans.”
“Perhaps, but if we move quickly enough, it might not make any difference,” states James. “Forget about waiting until morning, we leave now. Get your stuff together, we meet at the stables in five minutes.”
Having all of his things already on him, he waits while they gather their packs. Then they go down to the stables where they begin saddling their horses. Once they’re all saddled and everyone is mounted, they move out and head for the northern gate. The streets are fairly empty this late at night enabling them to reach the gate in no time at all.
The gates are closed for the night and a squad of guards is stationed there. When they approach, one of the guards comes forward and says, “Gates are closed for the night, you’ll have to leave in the morning.”
James produces the letter form Lord Pytherian and shows it to him. “We have urgent business and need to leave tonight.”
The guard takes the letter and gazes at it for a moment then nods his head. Shouting to someone in the gatehouse, he says, “Open it up!”
When the gates begin to swing open, he hands the letter back to James and says, “Good evening to you sir.”
Returning the letter to his pouch, James replies, “You too.”
Once the gate has opened wide enough to allow them to pass through, they leave the city. After the last rider has passed through, the guards close the gate behind them with a thud.
James turns to Illan and says, “Which way would see us to the Sea?”
He points to the northwest and says, “It lies there, about a day’s ride.”
As they get moving, James asks him, “Think there’ll be any enemy patrols along this side of the river?”
Shrugging, he replies, “Always a possibility in these times. But the bridges spanning the river in this area have
been destroyed, all but the one here by Lythylla, and there’re very few spots where an army can ford. Doubt if the
Empire would know of them. I hear we have watchers in those areas to give the alarm just in case.”
“That’s reassuring,” says James.
Illan glances over to James, gives him a quick smile with a nod and then continues riding.
Dawn is still many hours away, the sliver of a moon giving some light to dispel the dark, though it doesn’t
illuminate much.
They decide to break away from the road that runs along the river, figuring if any enemy were to be on this
side, they’d most likely be there. James sets Illan to lead as he knows the area around here far better than anyone
else. “There’s a town further north on the Sea at the base of the foothills called Seastar,” he tells them. “It’s not a
large city but does have a port that merchants sailing upon the Sea use from time to time. If we’re lucky, we’ll find a
ship there that will take us across.”
“Why Seastar?” asks Jiron.
“It’s far enough north that I’m hoping it will be free of any enemy incursions,” he replies. “Plus, I was born
there.”
“That might help,” James adds.
“Certainly couldn’t hurt,” he says.
They travel on through the night for several hours, riding fast and making good time. The few breaks they have
to rest the horses were short ones, the memory of the man who had been listening at the door back at the inn pushing
them onwards.
When the sky begins to lighten with the coming of the dawn, they see a patrol riding their way out of the north.
“It’s one of ours,” Illan assures everyone as he turns toward the approaching riders.
“Kylun!” Illan cries out as he recognizes the leader of the patrol.
“Ilan, you son of a dog,” Kylun replies as they meet and come to a stop. “I thought you were down by
Lythylla?”
“We’re, but a lot has happened,” he replies. As James and the rest draw near, Illan gestures to them and
continues. “This here is James, Jiron and Miko. The rest you know.”
Nodding, Kylun says, “Good to meet you all.” Then turning back to Illan, he asks, “What brings you to these
parts?”
“We’re on our way to Seastar to see about sailing across the Sea,” he replies. “Is the way clear?”
“Yes,” he tells him. “We have the Empire stopped at the river, though at times it’s touch and go. I heard a large
force is camped across from Lythylla.”
“It’s still there and looks like they plan to stay for a while,” he tells him. “An attempt was made yesterday to
open the gate from within, but it was stopped and the enemy beaten back. Councilman Rillian is rumored to have
had a hand in it.”
“Councilman Rillian?” he questions.
“That’s right,” replies Illan. “Though Lord Pytherian doesn’t think there’s enough evidence to move against
him, we know he was involved.”
“We’ve heard rumors too,” he says. “Though just vague things about possible dealings with the Empire before
the war, things like that. As you say, not enough to do anything about.”
Before Illan can say anything more, Kylun says, “Say hello to my family for me when you get there, okay?
We’re on our way to patrol this side of the river, making sure they haven’t managed to cross over.”
“Good to see you again,” Illan says.
“You too, and good luck.” Turning to his fellows, Kylun says, “Move out!”
Illan sits there a moment as he watches the patrol ride away before saying, “We grew up together in Seastar.”
As they begin moving again, James says, “Seems like a nice enough fellow.”

“He is,” says Illan wistfully. Then, coming back to the present, he continues, “At least we have little to fear as far as running into the enemy between here and Seastar is concerned.”

“That’s reassuring,” comments Jiron from behind them.

Resuming their previous pace, they ride through the plains as the sun begins to peak over the horizon. As they ride, they see other patrols moving along the plains. Every once in a while, someone would holler a greeting to Illan as they pass.

“You seem well known here,” comments Uther.

“I grew up here,” he reminds him.

When the sun has risen a ways above the horizon, they begin to see the glistening of the Sea ahead of them. James reflects back to the time when he was on the other side, now seeming so long ago. So much has happened since then.

Running north and south next to the shoreline is a well maintained road. Refugees from the south are plodding away on it as they seek safety to the north. Some with carts and wagons loaded with what belongings they were able to bring, others only having a pack on their backs. Children walk beside parents, often as not carrying their belongings as well.

One mother had three children who were pulling a cart with a fourth child lying within. When James comes abreast of the wagon, he sees the poor boy sick with a fever of some sort. Reaching into his pouch, he pulls out two gold coins and hands them to the woman. “Here,” he tells her, “use this to help your boy.”

With tears in her eye, she looks up at him and takes the coins, “Thank you good sir!”

“You’re welcome,” he says as he kicks his horse to join the others who had begun to pull away from him as they continue following the road north.

When he catches up with them, Illan glances from him then back at the mother and says, “That was nice of you.”

“We do what we can,” he replies.

“True,” agrees Illan. “Though most wouldn’t even have bothered themselves that way.”

“If you ride with James long enough,” Miko pipes up, “you’ll learn to get used to it.”

James glances back at him and sees him there with a big grin on his face. He returns the grin, but not for the reason Miko thinks. It’s because Miko is beginning to become more of his old self. It seems the effects of the Fire wear away after a while. Not the increase in size and muscle, but the effects it has on his spirit. It kind of dampens it, making him more solemn and serious. To see the adolescent side again gives James hope that Miko isn’t too far gone.

“How much further?” he asks Illan.

“Another hour, maybe two,” he replies.

Sure enough, a little over an hour later, they begin to see the outline of a city on the horizon. “Seastar,” Illan informs them. Several merchant ships can be seen out on the water, one’s pulling away from the docks and there are three others still moored there.

“Looks like we’re in luck,” Uther says when he sees the ships at the docks. “One of those should be able to ferry us over to the far side of the Sea.”

“I hope so,” says James.

Seastar has a defensive wall, though it’s not very high or thick. The road travels to the southern edge of the wall and passes through the gate there. Four guards are there, helping to keep the traffic of refugees and soldiers moving along quickly. Off to the east of the wall, a refugee camp can be seen. Hundreds, maybe thousands of displaced people mill around the makeshift camp. Soldiers can be seen in and around the area keeping order and generally helping the people. A couple wagons are unloading sacks and boxes of food to waiting people.

When they arrive at the gates, Illan hollers to one of the guards, “Shoen!”

Shoen looks up from where he’s supervising the others and breaks into a smile when he sees who just addressed him. “Illan!” he cries as he moves toward him, extending his hand. “Didn’t expect to see you for quite some time.”

Illan takes his hand and gives it a firm shake before saying, “Can’t stay and talk I’m afraid. We need to see about a ship to take us across the Sea.”

“There’s a couple at anchor, I know,” he informs him. “But don’t know whether they’ll take you all the way to the other side?”

“We have a letter from Lord Pytherian requesting any and all to aid us,” he explains.

Nodding, he smiles and says, “That should make some merchant happy.” They both begin laughing hard at that, several others standing around who hear that join in as well. “Good luck!” wishes Shoen. “It was good to see you.”
As Illan begins moving to pass through, he says, “You too, Shoen.”

Shoen waves them on through, then goes back to making sure the traffic continues to flow smoothly through the gate.

Illan leads them through and once on the other side, takes the street heading down toward the docks. “Let’s see about a ship first, before they have a chance to get away,” he tells them. “Once we have one to agree to take us, we can find an inn should we have the time.”

“Alright,” agrees James.

You’d think Illan had returned a hero the way everyone greets him as he moves down the street. He handles it all well, only slowing when absolutely necessary. “He sure is popular around here,” observes Miko as he watches Illan wave to the people on the streets.

“He’s well liked by everyone who knows him,” Uther comments when he hears Miko. “Never sure why he joined up with us, but I suppose he has his reasons.” Lowering his voice, he continues, “Some of us believe he lost his wife during the war and wants revenge. But no one knows for sure.”

Miko stares at Uther’s back and nods.

Looking down to the end of the street, they can see the water of the Sea and the masts of the ships at dock. The few buildings bordering the docks have the look of warehouses and Illan continues on past and stops at a small building sitting at the entrance to the docks. “Dockmaster,” he tells them as he dismounts. James and Jiron dismount as well, the others remain on their horses.

Illan steps up to the door with them right behind and pushes it open. Inside, they find a man sitting behind a desk covered in a disorganized pile of papers. He looks up from where he's making notations on one of them and a smile breaks across his face when he sees who it is.

Getting up, he says, “Illan! What brings you back here?” Moving around the desk, he gives Illan a big hug, careful not to get the ink on his fingers on the back of Illan’s shirt.

“Marko,” he says, returning the hug, “didn’t know you were the new Dockmaster.”

Releasing him, Marko says, “Have been for a year now, ever since Yeurn got married to that woman from the City.” Stepping back two steps, he continues, “It’s good to see you again.”

“I’m afraid I can’t stay long,” he explains. “We have need to reach the other side of the Sea and were hoping to be able to get someone to take us.”

His smile fades somewhat as he says, “Nothing serious I hope? The Empire isn’t on its way here is it?”

Shaking his head, he says, “Nothing like that. Our forces still have them on the other side of the Etterling River.”

“That’s good news,” he says with relief. “We haven’t had much news lately about the war. Just what the refugees tell us as they pass through.”

Gesturing to the ships at the dock outside, he asks, “Which one of those would be our best bet?”

“You might try the Sea Strider, it’s the one all the way at the end,” he says. “Derrin Nellix is the captain, and he’s leaving shortly for the far side. Don’t know if he’ll take on passengers, but you can try.”

“Okay, we’ll do that, thank you,” he says as he holds out his hand to his friend.

Taking the hand, Marko shakes it vigorously and says, “You’re welcome. If you’ll be staying in town, I’d love it if you could come and have dinner with me and Pauline.”

“We’ll see,” he replies. “Probably have to dine with my family first, though. They’d never let me hear about it if I didn’t.”

Marko laughs at that. “I think you’re right. Well, good luck.”

Illan nods his head and then turns to leave. James and Jiron back out, giving him room to pass through the door.

“Why didn’t you tell him about Lord Pytherian’s letter?” James asks. “Wouldn’t that have expedited it better?”

“Why use it if we don’t have to?” he asks. “Besides, he’s not the one we have to convince.”

Returning to where the others are waiting, he says, “Might be in luck, you just wait here while we go down to the ship to arrange things.”

“Alright,” Uther says for everyone. He gets down off his horse, the others following suit. “If we’re to wait longer, I’m not going to do it on horseback.”

“You got that right, man” agrees Jorry.

Illan leaves them behind as he, James and Jiron walk down to the end of the docks where sailors are busy transferring cargo from several wagons onto the ship resting against the dock.

Coming to the wagons, he catches the attention of one of the seaman returning from the ship for another box and asks, “Is Captain Nellix on board?”

The sailor doesn’t even pause as he replies, “Yes he is.” Grabbing another box, he starts to return to the gangplank.
“Can we speak with him?” Illan asks the sailor.
“I’ll ask him,” he says just before reaching the gangplank.
They watch as several other sailors leave the ship as they continue the transferring of cargo. The sailor they’d talked to returns to the top of the gangplank and begins walking down it to the dock. When he comes to where they’re standing, he says, “The captain said for you to go ahead and come aboard. You’ll find him at the cargo hatch going over the bills of lading.”
“Thank you,” Illan says.
He just nods and grunts before taking another box off the wagon.
Illan glances at James and asks, “Shall we?”
James nods and then follows Illan as he moves toward the gangplank. They pause at the bottom while two sailors leave the ship before walking up it to the ship’s deck.
They see a man, obviously the captain in question, standing at the cargo hold hatch going over the bill of lading just as the sailor had told them. He glances over to them as they begin walking over to him. “Yes?” he asks. “You wanted to see me?”
“We were hoping to book passage for us and our friends over to the other side of the Sea,” Illan explains.
“Don’t take on passengers,” the captain says. “They just get in the way.” A sailor comes on board with a box and pauses a moment while the captain checks it off. He gives the sailor a nod who then carries it on down into the hold.
“But our need is great,” insists Illan, “and we’d be willing to pay.”
“Don’t care,” he says. “I hate having people on board. Now, if you’ll get off my ship, I have work to do before we sail.”
“But,” James begins, “we have a…”
Illan shakes his head and waves for him to stop.
Confused, but willing to follow his lead, James doesn’t finish.
“Let’s go,” he says to them as he makes for the gangplank.
James and Jiron follow right behind. When they’re off the ship and have moved a short ways past the wagons, they stop. “Why didn’t you want me to mention the letter?” asks James.
“That would’ve seemed to be the smart thing to do,” adds Jiron.
“I don’t think it would’ve made any difference,” he explains. “We should try the other two ships and find out if they’ll be more agreeable.”
“Alright,” James says as he glances to Jiron who just shrugs.
The next ship they come to is a single masted vessel and looks to be deserted. The gangplank is up so Illan hollers, “Hello ship!”
When there’s no answer, he hollers again, “Hello ship!”
They wait a minute but no reply is forthcoming. He turns to the others and indicating the last ship says, “One more to try.” Moving down to the other end of the docks, they come to a twin masted vessel where several sailors are sitting around on deck, looking bored.
“Hello the ship!” Illan hollers.
One of the sailors looks over the rail and asks, “Yeah?”
“Request permission to come aboard and talk with the captain,” he says.
“Captain’s not here,” the sailor tells him.
“Where could I find him?” he asks.
“City jail I’d imagine,” the sailor replies.
“Jail?” asks Illan. “What’s he doing there?”
“Cooling his heals for a few days,” the sailor explains. Several other sailors come over and join him at the rail. One of them says, “He got in a fight with the wrong man and was arrested. They said he’d be in there several more days.”
“Thank you,” Illan says to them. Turning away from the ship, he begins making his way back to where Uther and the others are waiting. “This is perfect!” he exclaims.
“What is?” Jiron asks.
“Don’t you see?” he says. “Though the letter from Lord Pytherian wouldn’t have much pull with a ship’s captain, it will have with a magistrate. And if we use it to get the captain out of jail, then I would think he’d be happy to take us across the Sea.”
Nodding, James says, “Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.”
When they get back to the others, Illan explains to them what they’re planning on doing. “In the meantime, while we’re getting the captain out of jail, the rest of you go and find something to eat.”
Miko perks up at that, the mention of food always does.

“Go down the street until you come to the blacksmith,” he tells them. “Then turn down the road to the right. You shouldn’t have far to go before you come to the Flying Fish. The owner is a lady by the name of Mari, and the food there is very good. At least it was last time I was in town.”

“When will you meet us there?” asks Yern.

“Hopefully not more than an hour,” he tells him.

“Alright then,” Uther says. “We’ll see you there.”

“You may as well go too,” James tells Jiron. And then he lowers his voice to a whisper as he adds, “And keep an eye on Miko.”

“You got it,” he says as he joins the crew going to the inn.

The bunch going to the inn takes all the horses with them. Illan and James go down a different street as they make their way to the city jail.

More people pause when they see Illan walking down the street, most give him a friendly greeting or ask him a question. Begging lack of time to talk, he makes his responses short as he continues down the street.

At the next junction of streets, he turns to the right and points to a two story building on the right side. “That’s the jail.”

“Think we’ll have any problems?” James asks.

Shaking his head, Illan says, “I really doubt it.”

They walk down to where the front door is standing open and walk inside. Two guards are sitting at a side table sharpening their swords, another sits behind a desk and has the look of the one in charge.

The guard behind the desk looks up as they enter and says, “Yes? Can I help you?”

Illan walks over and asks, “We’re looking for the captain of the ship in the harbor. His men said he might be here?”

Nodding, the guard captain says, “He’s here all right.” Calling over to one of the guards at the table, he says, “Rullins, take these gentlemen back to the holding cells. They want to talk to the captain.”

Getting up, the guard named Rullins replies, “Yes sir.” To Illan and James he says, “If you’ll follow me.”

Turning toward a door in the side of the room, he takes out a key and unlocks the door. Opening it, he indicates they should follow as he moves past the cells on the side of the walkway.

Five large cells line each side of the walkway, two of them have prisoners. One has two men who look to have been beaten up pretty badly, the other holds a solitary individual. And it’s to the solitary individual that the guard is taking them.

As they draw near, the man in the cell turns and watches their approach. “These men want to talk to you,” the guard tells him. Then to Illan and James, he says, “If you need help, just holler. We’ll be able to hear you.”

With that, the guard turns around and leaves the cell area. He leaves the door to the outer room open so they could be heard should the need arise.

The captain comes near the bars and looks out at Illan and James. “Do I know you two?” he asks.

“Do what you want?” he asks.

“We want to talk about passage across the Sea, all the way to the other side,” Illan explains. The captain breaks into a laugh and says, “You may have to wait for a while.”

“How long are you going to be in here?” asks James.

Shrugging, the captain says, “I don’t know, could be a while I’m guessing. I got into a fight with a prominent personage of some sort. Of course I didn’t realize who or what he was at the time. I mean, really, who would’ve thought he’d be in a place like that.”

“If we could expedite your release,” James offers, “would you take us across the Sea?”

“How soon can you be ready to sail,” James asks.

“You get me out of here and we’ll sail within the hour,” he states.

“Alright,” Illan says, “we’ll see what we can do.” He begins to leave then glances back at the captain and adds, “We’ll be back shortly.”

“I hope so,” he says as they leave the cell area.

Illan walks over to the guard captain and asks, “How would we arrange his release?”

The guard captain laughs and says, “Man, from what I understand, he’s going to sit in there an awfully long time.” The guards over at the table can be heard chuckling as well.

“Still, who should we see?” persists Illan.

“Well, you could try Magistrate Harlan,” he explains. “He’s probably the only one who could arrange it.”
“Thank you,” Illan says as he makes ready to leave.  
“But don’t get your hopes up,” he tells them.  
Ilan casts him a quick glance, gives him a nod and then they leave the jail.  
Once they’re outside, James asks him, “Do you know this Magistrate Harlan?”  
“Oh yes,” replies Illan. “He’s a good man and we should be able to get things arranged through him.”  
“Good,” states James. He follows Illan as he leads him through town to the Magistrate’s offices.  
They continue along, turning once down a main thoroughfare where they walk past several side streets before it opens up onto a large courtyard square. Setting on the far side of the courtyard is a large, imposing structure, obviously the home of the Magistrate’s offices.  
There’s a wall separating the building from the rest of the courtyard. At the gate through the wall, a guard stands and smiles when he sees Illan approaching. Coming to attention, he salutes him as they pass through.  
Ilan returns the salute and the grin on his face is just as big as the guard’s is.  
As they approach the front doors, James asks him, “What was all that about?”  
Pausing, Illan explains, “He’s my son.”  
“Oh, okay,” replies James. Looking back at the guard at the gate, he can see the resemblance between father and son.  
Ilan opens the door just as another man is leaving. The bandage on his face tells them this must be the man whose nose had been broken by the captain. Without so much as an ‘excuse me’, he walks through the door and they have to step back to allow him room.  
The man walks straight toward the gate and passes through to the courtyard beyond. “Nice man,” James says.  
“Yeah,” replies Illan. “No wonder he got his nose broken.”  
James nods his head as they enter the building.  
“His office is up on the third floor,” he tells him.  
Leading the way like he’d been here a hundred times before, he follows the corridor to the stairs winding up.  
He climbs them until they reach the third floor and then follows a hallway down to a pair of ornate doors.  
Opening them, he walks right in, James following close behind. They find themselves in a reception area with several tables and couches. Another set of double doors across the room from them must lead into the magistrate’s office.  
Ilan crosses the room and swings them both open at the same time revealing a man sitting behind a desk with his feet propped up on top of it, snoring.  
James can hear a quiet chuckle coming from Illan as he enters the room and comes to stand before the desk behind which the man is sleeping.  
“On your feet soldier!” Illan hollers in his most commanding voice.  
The man behind the desk starts awake and comes to his feet, standing at attention. His eyes blink several times and James can see his body visibly relax as he begins to realize what happened and who it is standing before him.  
“Illan you bastard!” the man-shouts as he sits back down in his chair. He glares at him a moment before breaking out in an uncontrollable laughing fit. After a moment Illan joins in with him. Even James has a hard time remaining calm.  
“Good to see you again, Harlan,” Illan says when he’s calmed down some.  
“You too, Illan,” Magistrate Harlan replies as he, too gets his composure back. “Though you about gave me a heart attack,” he accuses.  
“Sorry, couldn’t resist,” he says, grinning.  
“What brings you back to these parts?” Harlan asks.  
“Need your help with something,” he says. He gestures for James to give him the letter which he does. Once he’s had a chance to read through it, he explains about the captain and how they need to cross the Sea.  
Harlan leans back in his chair and gives them a look which could only be called despondent. “If only it was for anything else,” he says.  
“Why?” Illan asks. “We have a letter from Lord Pytherian himself requesting any and all to help us.”  
“I know,” he replies. “But the letter is only a ‘request’, it’s not an order. So it doesn’t have as much weight here as you would think.”  
“What do you mean?” asks James.  
“That captain hit a very important person around here,” he explains. “Whether he knew it or not is immaterial. And this person is demanding the stiffest punishment allowable under the law.”  
“Which is?” asks Illan.  
“A year,” he replies.  
“A year?” exclaims Illan. “For hitting someone? That’s outrageous!”
“I know, but this man has a lot of influence in the area, not to mention he’s quite wealthy,” Harlan tells them.

“Who is he?” asks James.

“His name is Faetherton,” Harlan replies. “Though since he’s become so influential, he’s been taking to calling himself, Lord Faetherton.”

“Never heard of him,” states Illan.

“Not surprising,” he explains. “He arrived in these parts shortly after you left five years ago.”

“So there’s nothing we’re able to do about this?” asks Illan.

“I’m afraid not,” he says. Lowering his voice, he continues, “I have to admit, Faetherton has been such an annoyance, that I for one was glad that captain broke his nose.”

“So, hypothetically, if this captain was to disappear, it would sure upset this Faetherton?” asks Illan.

Harlan gives him a smile and says, “To be sure. Oh, and on a side note, the guard captain at the jail is a cousin of his as well.”

“I see,” Illan says. Then he extends his hand to his old friend and continues, “It was nice to see you again, hopefully next time I’ll have time to stay for awhile.”

“I understand,” Harlan says. “Sorry I couldn’t have been more help.”

“You take care,” Illan tells him.

“I will,” he replies. As they make to leave, Harlan says, “Good luck.”

Illan nods his head and gives him a brief wave as they leave his office. Out in the corridor, as they head for the stairs, James says, “I wish that had gone better.”

“What do you mean?” asks Illan. “I thought that went pretty well, all in all.”

“How can you say that?” asks James. “We still don’t have the captain.”

“No but we will,” he explains. Gesturing back to the offices they just left, he lowers his voice and says, “He all but told us to break that captain out of jail.”

“You sure?” James asks.

“Absolutely,” replies Illan quietly. “He even said the guard captain was a cousin, which to me means we can treat him roughly if we want.”

“I hope you’re right,” he says.

“Don’t worry,” he tells him.

As they leave the building, he stops by his son and says, “Tell your mother I’m fine, but things are moving fast and I won’t have time to visit.”

“I will father,” his son assures him.

Nodding, Illan continues on out into the courtyard and turns down one of the side streets. Keeping his voice low, he says, “Let’s go tell the others what we’re going to do.”

“What are we going to do?” asks James, afraid he already knows the answer.

“Break that captain out of jail,” he says.
At the Flying Fish they find the others, having just finished their meal. As they order theirs, Illan and James fill them in on what’s going on and what they are planning to do.

“Now, I can’t be a part of the jail break,” Illan tells them. Turning to James, he says, “You’ll have to manage that with the rest of these guys.”

“I’m sure we can do it,” Uther says.

“Yeah,” Keril says from where he’s sitting with Miko, “it’ll be easy.”

“Hope so,” James tells him. To Jiron he says, “You and Miko should stay with Illan, with your shoulder the way it is, you’ll not be much good should trouble develop. We’ll meet you down by the docks when we have the captain.”

Nodding, he says, “Alright. When do you plan to do this?”

“After I’m done eating,” he tells him. “There’s only three of them at the jail so we should be able to overcome them quickly. And once we’re down to the docks and on the ship, we’ll be safe. No one’s going to come looking for us anyway until they discover the guards at the jail and the captain’s missing. By that time we should be well under way.”

James can see Miko is somewhat disturbed by this whole plan. “What’s on your mind?” he asks him.

He glances around the table at everyone before returning his gaze to James. “It just doesn’t seem right somehow.”

“In what way?” James asks.

“Well, ever since I’ve met you, you’ve done nothing but what’s right,” he explains. “This just doesn’t seem like you, going against the laws and all. It’s not like we have to reach Cardri today, like it’s a life or death situation or anything.”

“I understand your point,” he says. “But with the letter from Lord Pytherian, we are justified.”

Illan breaks into the conversation. “That’s true, Miko. The magistrate all but asked us to break this guy out so we can fulfill the spirit, if not the letter, of Lord Pytherian’s request.”

“But it seems the only reason he did was just to spite that other guy,” continues Miko. “It just seems wrong somehow.”

“I understand your concern, Miko,” James says to him. “But I have my reasons for this. True, it’s not exactly as I would have liked it, but I have my reasons.” Like finding a place to hide the Fire before it consumes you.

Miko nods, trusting in him.

Turning his attention back to Illan, James asks, “Which town should we head for?”

Thinking a moment, Illan replies, “It would probably be best to dock at Fairview. It’s a little north of Dragon’s Pass and last I heard, the Empire’s forces haven’t progressed much past the Merchant’s Pass. It seems they’re making that their northern line, at least for right now.”

“What’ll we do for horses once we get there?” asks Jorry. “It didn’t look like the ship could hold them all.”

Looking to Illan, James asks, “Is there someone around here who would buy these from us?”

Nodding, he says, “My brother-in-law Michael deals in horses, I’m sure he’d give a fair price for them.”

“Then why don’t you, Jiron and Miko take care of that while we’re over at the jail,” he suggests.

“We can do that,” he says, “but it could take an hour or two to finish the deal. We do have a lot of horses and Michael may not be around.”

“Just do the best you can,” says James. “If you can get it done in the time allotted, then so be it. If not, then just give them to him and we’ll worry about acquiring more in Fairview.”

“Alright,” he says through a bite of the beef stew he’s having.

“We’ll give you an hour’s head start before we head to the jail,” James tells him.

Nodding, Illan says, “That should be enough time, I hope.”

They finish their meal and everyone goes outside to retrieve what they intend to keep from their horses before Illan, Jiron and Miko take them to his brother-in-law’s.

As they’re about to leave with the horses, Illan says to the rest, “Good luck! We’ll meet you at the docks in a little over an hour.”
“Don’t be late!” Uther shouts to him. He glances over to Uther and gives him a grin. To Miko and Jiron he says, “Let’s go.” Leading the horses, they walk away down the street.

The others gather around James as Jorry asks, “What are we to do for an hour?”

“Let’s make our way over near the jail so we’ll be ready when it’s time,” he tells them. Leading the way, he takes them through the streets until the jail comes into sight.

Stopping a little distance away, he turns back to them and says to Uther and Jorry, “You guys make your way around the building and look for any other exits then come back. When we do this, we can’t run the risk of anyone getting away to warn others.”

“Right,” Uther says. Nodding to Jorry to get moving, they begin making their way nonchalantly toward the jail. James and the rest move to the far side of the street across from the front entrance and try to act like they’re just hanging around, talking. He casts glances over at Uther and Jorry as he keeps track of their progress. As they disappear around the back he gets a little nervous. When they reappear on the other side, he breathes a sigh of relief, even though he knew it was unlikely anything would have happened.

Once they’ve made their way back to the group, Uther says, “There’s one door in the back and another on the side. But that’s it except for the main entrance.”

Nodding his head while he thinks, James turns to Keril and Hinney, the youngest of Miller’s band. “You two go and watch the back and side doors,” he tells them. “Don’t let anyone in or out.”

“No problem,” Hinney says.

“You can count on us,” assures Keril.

They wait until it’s been about an hour since Illan left with the horses. Looking around the gathered faces, James asks, “Ready?” When they all nod in reply, he turns toward the jail and heads to the front door.

Hinney and Keril break off from the group, Keril heading to the side while Hinney continues around back. James is a little nervous as he walks in through the front door. The same three men are there, this time they’re all over at the side table playing cards.

They look up when James and the rest walk in through the front door. “Here to see the captain again?” asks the watch captain.

James nods his head and replies, “You could say that.”

The watch captain points at one of the others who gets up and begins moving to the holding cells. James moves to follow and has Uther come with him. He gives Yern a meaningful glance and receives an answering nod.

The guard unlocks the door and precedes them through into the back. “You got company again,” he hollers back to the captain. When he turns around to leave, he comes to a quick stop. Uther’s sword is out of its scabbard and inches away from his chest.

James reaches out and takes the keys from him. “Thank you,” he says.

“You guys are crazy!” the ship’s captain hollers as he comes over with the keys.

“Probably,” replies James, “but we’re getting you out.” When he’s unlocked the cell door, the captain quickly leaves the confines of the cell. Turning his attention back to the guard, James indicates the now vacant cell and says, “Get in.”

As the guard turns and walks to the cell with Uther’s sword in his back, the watch captain and the other guard enter from the other room. Jorry and Yern have their swords out as they lead them down to join their comrade.

“Take us with you!” the other two prisoners plead.

“Sorry,” James says to them. “Only the captain here.”

“If you don’t, we’ll scream and let everyone know what’s going on,” warns one of them. Fifer comes in from the other room with some rope and cloth. “I’ll take care of this,” he says as he takes the keys from James and goes to their cell. Opening the door, he says to them, “If you yell, I’ll cut out your tongue. Cause me problems, and I’ll just kill you, understand?”

The two prisoners allow themselves to be tied up and gagged with little problems. He leaves the cell and then moves down to the guards where he does the same to them. Once everyone is secured and silenced, they begin moving back to the main room.

“Go get the other two and meet us out front,” he tells Jorry.

“Got it!” he exclaims as he moves to round up Keril and Hinney.

“Now captain,” James says to him, “let’s get to your ship.”

“Didn’t really believe you when you said you’d get me out of here,” he admits.

“Don’t blame you,” says James. “I wouldn’t have either.”

“How long will it take you to get underway?” Fifer asks him.
“Not very long,” he replies. Out front, they wait only a moment before Fifer returns with the other two, then they quickly make their way down to the docks.

On the way, the captain introduces himself as Merril Hawls. He had an office in the City of Light but is now working out of Pyrtlin, a city on the northern shore. “Once we’re underway, it shouldn’t take more than a day’s sailing before we reach Fairview.”

“That fast?” Fifer asks.

“Hopefully, but I seldom make the run all the way there from here,” he explains. “But, yeah, it should.”

As they near the docks, James is surprised to see that Illan and the others are waiting for them at the dockmaster’s office.

“Any problems?” Illan asks when they approach.

Shaking his head, James says, “No. How about you?”

He pats an extremely fat pouch at his waist and says, “He was there and quite willing to buy. Seems there’s an increase in demand for good horses so he gave us a good price. Of course my sister happened to be there and wouldn’t let him do otherwise.” He breaks into a short laugh at that.

The Dockmaster is standing there with Illan and when he sees Captain Hawls, he asks him, “Thought you were in jail?”

“Was,” he replies, “but these gentlemen arranged for me to be released.”

He turns an eye to Illan and says, “Oh?”

“We needed a ship,” he says, “and no one else was willing to accommodate us.”

To the captain, James says, “We better get underway quickly, before someone comes looking for us.”

“You got that right,” the captain says as he begins moving toward his ship. When he gets close, he starts hollering to his crew. After a brief exchange, his crew hops to it and begins readying the ship to sail.”

“Make sure he doesn’t leave without us,” James tells Fifer.

“Sure thing,” he replies. Taking several of the others, they make their way down to the ship where they cross the gangplank and position themselves on the deck.

“I better be getting over there too,” Illan tells his friend.

“You’re not getting yourself in trouble again are you?” his friend asks.

“Probably,” he replies with a grin.

“It was good to see you,” his friend says, giving him a warm hug.

“You too,” Illan replies. “May not be back in these parts for awhile, take care.”

“I will,” the Dockmaster replies.

“Let’s go,” Illan says to James and the others who are waiting with him.

James says his goodbyes to the Dockmaster too, and then follows Illan down to the ship. As they reach the gangplank, James hollers up to the ship, “Permission to come aboard.”

Captain Hawls comes to the side and says, “Granted, and thank you for that.”

“It’s your ship captain,” James says as he walks up the gangplank. “Wouldn’t want to presume.”

“Be ready in a couple more minutes,” he tells him.

“Very well,” James says as he joins the others. He watches the sailors as they make ready and when all are in position, two of them run down the gangplank and untie the guide lines from the dock. They toss them to others waiting at the rail and then hurry back across the gangplank, pulling it on board after them.

The sails come down and the breeze begins to fill them as the ship begins pulling away from the docks.

“James, look!” Jiron says, pointing to the dockmaster’s office.

A group of men led by one with bandages on his face are running down the street toward the dockmaster’s office. “It would seem they’ve discovered the guards,” says Jorry.

“Looks that way,” agrees James.

As the ship pulls further away from the docks, the men come running and stop at the edge. The man with the bandage glares at them across the widening gap between the dock and the ship.

“He doesn’t look happy,” observes Uther.

“No, I’d say not,” agrees Jorry.

The men on the dock turn around and run for the merchant ship at the other end, probably hoping to commandeer it to follow them.

The captain of the merchant must have been aware of the events transpiring on the docks, for his men hurry to pull in the gangplank before the men are able to reach the ship. A heated discussion ensues between the bandaged man and the captain. Obviously the captain is reluctant to have his ship used for such a purpose.

“He knows that his ship, fully loaded as it is, could never catch us,” Captain Hawls explains. “He might get in
some trouble for refusing but there’s really nothing that guy can do about it.”
“That’s good to know,” James says.
“Just get yourselves settled in and we’ll be in Fairview sometime tomorrow,” the captain tells him.
“Very well,” James says as he moves back over to where the others are still gathered watching the spectacle on
the docks. The merchant ship’s captain is standing defiant before the men on the docks. He’s even put two of his
men with bows beside him to prevent anyone from coming aboard.
Miko sees him coming and meets him halfway with a small sack in his hands. Reaching in, he pulls out a tart
and with a grin offers it to James.
Taking it, he asks, “Where’d you get these?”
“Back in Lythylla,” he replies. Taking out another, he begins eating it. “They’re a bit stale now.”
Taking a bite, James agrees. “But still good. Thank you Miko.”
“You’re welcome,” he says, pleased to have made his friend happy.

Late afternoon the following day, they spy Fairview on the horizon. An hour after that, Captain Hawls settles
his ship against the dock. Two of his crew tosses the guide ropes to waiting dockhands who secure them to the dock.
When the ship has come to a stop and the gangplank has been secured in place, James comes to Captain Hawls
and says, “We appreciate the ride, captain.”
“Anytime, James,” he replies. “I still owe you for getting me out of that jail. If you’re ever in these parts and
need a ride, just let me know.”
“I will, thank you,” he says to him.
Illan leads them off the gangplank and says, “There’s a horse trader not too far from here.”
“Perfect,” says James. “Lead on.”
They follow Illan down the streets until they come to a large corral containing dozens of horses. A large,
rambling building curves around one side, and that’s where Illan leads them.
Before they get to the building, a man is seen in the corral as he puts a horse through its paces. He holds the
tether in one hand as he has the horse run around in a circle.
Illan stops them at the edge of the corral just as the man takes notice of them. The man walks with the horse
over to the side of corral and asks, “Can I help you gentlemen?”
“We’re looking to purchase ten horses,” explains Illan.
The man’s face lights up when he hears that. Gesturing to the horses within the corral, he says, “We have many
horses here, I’m sure we can find ones to fit your need.”
“It looks like it,” agrees James. “How much for ten?”
“You can have your pick for seven hundred,” the man replies.
James looks to Illan who shakes his head negatively, indicating he doesn’t have that much. Letting Illan do the
haggling, James casts his gaze out over the corralled horses, he can see many fine animals there.
Illan works the man down to six hundred and twenty two, which is only five gold pieces less than what they
have. Fortunately, the price also includes saddles and all the gear they’ll need.
They move into the building, where they empty the bags of gold they received from the sale of their other
horses onto a table. Everyone also had to empty their own pouches in order to come up with the required sum.
Once the gold had been counted, they return to the corral where ten horses are rounded up. Sterrin, the horse
trader, has his apprentices saddle the horses for them while they wait.
“Is Dragon’s Pass still in friendly hands?” Illan asks the horse trader.
Nodding, he replies, “Last I heard. There have been incursions of the Empire’s men in the area when they can
sneak past our patrols. Mostly, though, it’s safe.”
“Good,” states Uther. “Hope it stays that way.”
“Me too,” Hinney adds.
“How far is it to the Dragon’s Pass?” James asks Sterrin.
“About two days,” he tells him.
One of the apprentices comes and informs them the horses are ready. Once everyone is mounted, they wave
goodbye to Sterrin and his apprentices before they leave the corral area.
“Better get some rations before we head out,” Illan tells them as he pulls up outside of a shop that deals in
travel supplies. He takes Uther, Jorry and the rest of their money into the shop while everyone else waits outside
on their horses. They return shortly with several pouches bulging with food and secure them behind their saddles.
After they get back in the saddle, Illan leads them westward along the road out of town. “If we follow this
road,” he explains to them, “it will take us directly to Dragon’s Pass. And from there, I think it’s perhaps another
day to Trendle.”
Jiron glances to James and says, “I hope everyone made it there alright.”
“I’m sure they have,” he assures him. “With Scar, Potbelly and the rest, what could possibly have happened?”
“True,” he says.
Moving quickly, they cover many miles before the sun begins to dip near the horizon. “Perhaps we should make camp now?” suggests Illan. “No need to push it hard.”
“Sure,” agrees James.
They find a good spot off the road and make camp. A fire is quickly built and enough wood is gathered to allow it to burn all night. Even though they’re in friendly territory, the words of warning from Sterrin convince them to post a watch. As Uther says, “You never know.”
The night passes without incident and they’re quickly underway shortly after the sky begins to lighten. James rides in the lead with Jiron on one side and Miko on the other. To Jiron he asks, “How’s the shoulder?”
Rubbing it, Jiron replies, “Hurts, but it’s getting better. At least it’s not oozing blood anymore. Another week or two and I’ll be able to use it again.”
“I’m glad,” says James. “I was worried it might’ve been injured permanently.”
“Won’t really know until it heals more,” Jiron says. “It doesn’t feel as if anything major is wrong with it.”
“What’s Trendle like?” asks Miko.
“Just a small farming community, really,” explains James. “Good people.”
“What’re we going to do there?” he asks.
“First of all,” James tells him, “I think we should all take a much deserved rest for a while. Give us time to fully recover from all that’s happened to us.”
“What about you?” Jiron asks. “Are you still going to search for more on Morcyth?”
“I intend to,” answers James. “But I need to rest and think about some things first. I want to be better prepared than I have been.”
“Makes sense,” nods Jiron.
“I have some ideas I’ve been thinking on the last week or so,” he says to them. “Ever since we left that complex in the swamp, I’ve been thinking about those crystals we found there.”
“Oh?” asks Miko. “Like what?”
“Not really sure, but I think I may be able to use them to harness and store magical energy,” he explains. “If I can, then there is really no limit to what I might be able to do.”
“How are you going to do that?” Jiron asks.
Shrugging, he replies, “I haven’t a clue. But I believe it’s possible so I’m sure I’ll be able to figure it out. Remember that large crystal above that lake?”
They nod their heads, and then Jiron says, “Yeah, I remember.”
“Well, that one had magic in it, or at least passing through it,” he tells them. “I just need to figure out how they did that.”
“I see,” comments Jiron.
James also remembers an encounter with that little creature, Igor. It always had seemed odd that they’d gone for pizza that time, but after seeing those crystals, he remembered how Mama had been watching Star Trek. It didn’t register at the time, but she had said how the episode was the one where they’d had to recharge the dilithium crystals.
Perhaps that was why he’d been taken there, to have him think in that direction. If so, why Igor didn’t just come out and say it remains a mystery.
The mountains to the west continue growing in size as the day progresses and near the end of the day they can see where the road enters the mountain range.
“Should be there by nightfall,” Illan announces to everyone.
“Are we going to make camp before entering the mountains?” asks Yern.
“That would probably be advisable,” Illan says. “I think it would be best to take the pass in the daylight, less chance of taking a misstep in the dark.”
“I was hoping we would,” says a tired Keril from the rear. He and Hinney had been back there all day and were tired of eating everyone’s dust. Those two had been friends long before joining Miller’s band and tended to stay together for the most part.
The grasslands stay fairly flat all the way to where the mountains begin rising up to the sky. They find a good spot to camp about a half mile from the pass entrance. As the sun sets, they go about finding enough wood to last the night and settle down to eat the rations they bought in Fairview.

A shadow, some distance away, watches their camp as the night deepens. Once he realizes they are staying put for the night, the scout remounts his horse and rides back to the main party, some miles to the south.
As the eastern sky begins to dawn, they have a quick bite to eat before saddling the horses. “Should make Trendle sometime tomorrow,” Illan tells the rest of them.

He takes the lead as they move toward the pass entrance. Appearing out of the pass entrance before them are about twenty horsemen. One of the riders brings a horn to his lips and blares forth three quick notes. Answering horns can be heard sounding from all around them. Illan brings them to a stop.

“James,” Miko says as he brings his horse closer to his, “what’s happening?”

From all sides, horsemen appear. Jiron’s knife leaps into his good hand as he takes in the hundreds of approaching horsemen who’re moving to surround them.

Suddenly, a familiar tingling sensation begins to make itself known to James. He looks to the pass and sees four horsemen detach themselves from the others. They begin moving down to where James and the others wait. One of them is dressed in armor and a shudder goes through him when he recognizes him.

“Abula-Mazki!” he breathes.

“What?” Jiron asks.

Pointing to the riders coming from the pass, James says, “Abula-Mazki. It seems he didn’t die when the catacombs collapsed.”

“Who is he?” asks Jorry.

“A warrior priest of Dmon-Li,” he replies. “I thought we’d rid ourselves of him some time ago.”

The surrounding riders move to within a hundred yards before coming to a stop. James recognizes the Wolf Clan, as well as patterns of two other clans from the Gathering.

“How did they know to be here?” Miko asks.

“I don’t know,” replies James as he keeps his eye on the approaching warrior priest. The others with him look to be the chiefs of the clans, James recognizes them from when he’d been questioned before the council.

“It looks as if they wish to parley,” Illan says as he glances to James.

“Should we?” Jiron asks.

“No, I don’t either,” agrees James. “But if it holds off an immediate attack, perhaps I should go and see what he has to say.” Turning to Miko, he says, “You stay here.”

“Okay, James,” replies Miko.

As he moves out to meet with Abula-Mazki, Illan and Jiron join him. He can see that the warrior priest did not come away unscathed from his ordeal in the catacombs. His face is horribly marred and his armor looks to have been crushed and then reshaped. Strong indeed must the magic of Dmon-Li be to allow him to survive such punishment.

Both parties come to a stop once they’re ten feet away from each other. The Chief of the Grey Wolf clan looks with undisguised hatred at James.


“I’ll make this simple,” the warrior priest says. “I want the one carrying the Star, the rest can go free. Resist, and you’ll all die!”

PULLING OUT THE STAR, THE WARRIOR PRIEST SAYS, “Why is this so troubling to you?”

Abula-Mazki’s eyes lock on the Star as he says, “Priest of Morcyth, I’d strike you down now if I didn’t need you alive!”

James contemplates the situation quickly and comes to the conclusion that there’s no way their party will be able to withstand the combined might of the clan riders and the magic of Abula-Mazki. Either one by themselves, maybe, but not together.

Then an idea begins to form in his mind, one he doesn’t care too much for, but there may not be another way.

“I have a proposition for you.”

“What is it?” Abula-Mazki asks.

“I propose we each chose a champion to decide the outcome,” explains James. “If yours wins, I go with you willingly. If mine wins, you allow us to continue, unhindered.”

A smile spreads across his face as Abula-Mazki listens to him. “Swear upon the Star, Priest of Morcyth, and I’ll
agree to your proposal."

    Holding the Star high, James says, “I swear to go with the warrior priest Abula-Mazki should his champion win.”
    “Very well, priest,” he says. “I agree.”
    “Give us a few minutes to prepare, and our champion will return here to this spot,” James says.
    “You have ten minutes, no more,” he warns him.
    Nodding, James replies, “That is agreeable.”
    Both parties turn around and return to the others waiting for them.
    When James, Illan and Jiron arrive, Uther says, “I know how they knew to be here.”
    Every eye turns to him as James asks, “How?”
    Gesturing to the group of riders in the pass, he says, “If you look, you’ll see the man who was outside our door just before we left.”
    They all turn and sure enough, the man who they’d chased out from in front of their door back at the inn in Seastar is among them. “Damn!” Illan exclaims. “I thought he was working for Councilman Rillian.”
    “So did we all,” Jiron adds.
    “Maybe he was,” Yern suggests. “What he’d heard could’ve been relayed from Councilman Rillian to them.”
    “True,” agrees Illan. “They must’ve almost killed their horses to get here so fast.”
    “So what happened?” Fifer asks.
    James fills them in on what was said and the deal he’d made. At hearing that, Jiron says, “James, there’s no way I can win a fight with my shoulder the way it is.”
    “Besides,” Illan says, “there’s only one person he’s going to select as champion, and that will be himself. The warrior priests are terrible foes, I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of one being beaten by another living mortal. Who among us could even hope of defeating a warrior priest of Dmon-Li?”
    He glances around at the faces looking to him until he settles on one, “Another warrior priest of Dmon-Li.”
    Staring back into James’ eyes, Miko takes a sudden intake of breath. “What? Are you crazy?” He glances around at the others assembled there and says, “I’m no warrior, let alone a match for someone like Abula-Mazki.”
    Illan glances from Miko, to James, then back to Miko. His head begins to nod slowly as he says, “Perhaps.”
    Miko turns his attention to Illan as he says, “You can’t be serious!”
    “I’ve seen you fight,” he tells him. He gestures at the rest of those gathered there before continuing, “None of us can even hope to match what you do. You’re the only choice.”
    “James,” Jiron says to him. “We can’t take that chance, not with…”
    “I know,” he replies. “But that’s just what I’m counting on. With it, Miko has a chance to beat him.”
    The others look confused, not understanding what they’re talking about. James turns to Hinney and says, “Give your armor to Miko. I think you’re about the same size.”
    As he begins removing his armor, James comes over to Miko and says, “You can do this. There really is no one else.”
    Miko’s eyes show the fear and doubt that he’s feeling inside. James leans closer and whispers so only he will hear, “The Fire will aid you. It already has in every battle you’ve fought.”
    Coming back to look him in the eye, he says, “I believe you can do it.”
    “But, what if I lose myself for good?” he asks. “It’s been harder each time to come back out of it.”
    “I won’t let that happen,” James assures him. “I promise.”
    Jorry and Uther come over and begin to help him in putting on Hinney’s armor. “Let me have your sword,” James says.
    “What’re you going to do?” Miko asks as he hands it over to him. A pile begins to form at his feet from all the excess equipment they are removing from him in order to make room for the armor. The only pouch he retains is the one containing the Fire.
    “Make it stronger, better able to withstand whatever he may do,” he replies. He holds the sword out before him and begins concentrating as he readies the magic. Hopping he remembers enough from the shows on television he’d seen about metallurgy and sword making, he lets the magic begin to flow as he works on removing the impurities and strengthening the iron into steel.
    He stands there for five minutes as he works on the sword. When he at last feels it’s complete, he stops the spell and hands the sword to Illan. “Tell me what you think.”
    Taking the sword, he tests it for balance and weight, all the while nodding his head approvingly. Then he checks the edge by running his thumb along it. The barest of pressure cuts through the skin and a drop of blood begins to form.
    He holds the sword out and then turns to Fifer, “Take out your sword and strike it.”
    Fifer removes his sword and while Illan holds the sword in a blocking position, strikes it hard. When his sword
strikes Miko’s, it rings out and Illan says, “Again!”

Strike! Strike! Strike!

Three more times Fifer hits Miko’s sword, after the third strike, Illan nods his head and gestures for Fifer to halt. Turning to where Miko stands, now dressed in armor, he says, “This sword is better than any other I’ve ever seen.” Handing it to him hilt first, he continues, “It will serve you well.”

“Thank you,” he says, taking it. Placing it within the scabbard, he glances to James. “I’m scared.”

“I know,” he says. Then a horn sounds from those within the pass and they turn to see Abula-Mazki returning on foot with the clan chiefs. “It’s time,” he tells Miko.

James, Illan and Jiron accompany Miko out to where the duel will take place. With dread, Miko advances toward the spot where he will meet Abula-Mazki in combat. I can’t do this!

When the two groups meet, Abula-Mazki says, “So, who plans to die today?”

“None of us, actually,” James says. He gestures to Miko as he continues, “Miko here will meet your champion.” Looking around at those with Abula-Mazki, he adds, “And which one of you will be brave enough to meet him?”

The clan chiefs break out into a gruff laugh as Abula-Mazki says, “I had thought this to be a serious match.”

“It is,” James assures him. “He is far better than you’d imagine.”

Looking upon Miko, Abula-Mazki’s expression shows he seriously doubts his abilities. “Okay,” he says, “so be it. I will be my own champion for there is no other better than I.”

“Just one thing before we begin,” James says.

“What?” he asks.

“Should we win,” he replies and then points to the clan chiefs, “I want your word they will not attack us. Nor will they try to seek any sort of vengeance against us.”

With an amused smile upon his face at the very thought, Abula-Mazki says, “You have it.”

“Very well then,” says James.

The clan chiefs back away from Abula-Mazki as he draws his sword.

James can feel the prickling as he calls the magic. He puts his hands on Miko’s shoulders and looks him in the eye. Miko looks back with naked fear at the thought of facing him in battle. “You can do this!” asserts James. Then in a hushed whisper, adds, “The Fire will protect you.”

“How can you be sure?” Miko asks.

“I am,” James replies. “Trust me.” He continues gazing at Miko until he gives him a barely perceptible nod.

Miko turns to face the warrior priest. Drawing his sword, he steps forward as James and the others step back.

He watches as Miko closes with Abula-Mazki and begins to notice how his movements are slowly changing, becoming more streamlined and relaxed. The Fire is beginning to take control.

With sword at the ready, Miko waits for Abula-Mazki’s attack. When it comes, it’s so incredibly fast that no one even realized he’d even attacked before Miko’s sword moves and blocks it.

The ringing of the clash of swords slowly dies away, and the clan chiefs begin murmuring among themselves. They cast looks from Abula-Mazki and then over to where James waits with the others.

As he watches Miko and Abula-Mazki begin to circle each other, Illan says, “He might be able to win.”

“Let’s hope so,” James says.

“If he does,” says Jiron as he points to the clan chiefs, “do you think they’ll abide by Abula-Mazki’s word?”

“I doubt it,” replies James. “But let’s worry about that after Miko wins.” He looks to Jiron who gives him a nod.

Clang! Clang!

Their swords move at speeds so fast, the eyes of the onlookers aren’t capable of following. Then suddenly, Abula-Mazki disengages and backs up. He looks at Miko with a new found respect. This isn’t any ordinary foe, he realizes.

Suddenly, the tingling James has been feeling since the beginning of the match spikes. He tries to call the magic forth to help Miko but is too late. A ball of fire flies the short distance from Abula-Mazki to Miko, and explodes in a giant fireball.

When the smoke clears, Miko is still standing there, untouched. James can faintly see a reddish shell begin to dissipate from around him. He glances to the warrior priest and sees the look of utter amazement upon his face. Smiling in satisfaction, James hollers, “Go Miko!”

Miko doesn’t acknowledge his support, instead, he strides forth and begins attacking. With incredible speed, he launches into a series of attacks that Abula-Mazki successfully blocks. But instead of pausing, he keeps on attacking and actually succeeds in making him back up two steps before ending the series of blows.

Enraged at the temerity of this boy, Abula-Mazki lashes out with his magic again and watches as the bolts of
energy are deflected by the red tinged barrier. Using an attack combining both magic and sword he goes on the offensive. The magic is countered while Miko’s sword blocks the attacks.

At this time, Fifer and the others have come and joined James’ group. “Incredible,” he says to James as he stands next to him.

“Glad I’m not in there,” admits Yern.

A jubilant cry from Abula-Mazki and they watch as Miko’s sword goes sailing through the air and lands point first into the dirt ten feet away.

“Miko!” cries James.

Then suddenly, the sword is no longer in the ground, but once again in Miko’s hand as he goes on the offensive again. A series of blows has Abula-Mazki giving ground and in disbelief, everyone watches as Miko’s sword rips through his armored leggings and slices the thigh beneath.

_Miko has drawn first blood!

Abula-Mazki takes a few steps back to gather himself, a strange expression now upon his face. He glances down at the blood beginning to drip from the cut on his thigh. It’s not deep and will hardly even slow him down. But to score on a warrior priest, inconceivable! Never has such happened to Abula-Mazki.

He looks at his opponent and sees the glazed look in his eyes, eyes that look as if they see nothing, yet do. His senses tell him that there’s nothing magical about this boy, but yet he has managed to counter everything he’s thrown at him. For the first time in Abula-Mazki’s very long life, he begins to believe he may have met his match.

During the brief pause in the fighting, James takes a look around at the riders who’ve surrounded them. Relieved to find them still in their original position, he turns his attention to the clan chiefs. The expressions on their faces show the fight is not going as they had anticipated. They had thought it would be quick and decisive, now they have doubts as to whether Abula-Mazki will even win. He sees them huddled together talking while at the same time keeping their attention fixed on the fighting.

“I think they’re planning something,” James says to the others.

“Would they go against the agreement made?” asks Hinney.

“Wouldn’t put it past them,” he says. “From the little I’ve been around them, I haven’t known them to be all that honorable.”

“What should we do?” asks Uther.

“If Miko falls, I’ll go with them and hope Abula-Mazki will hold to his word,” he explains. “Should Miko prevail, we better be prepared to fight.”

“I believe you are correct,” agrees Ilan.

The clash of swords brings their attention back to the fighting. Abula-Mazki has launched another series of blows which Miko is blocking successfully. A line opens up on Miko’s forearm where Abula-Mazki’s sword scored. Not very deep, but they can see a small amount of blood beginning to run down his arm. Miko doesn’t even act as if he knows he has been struck.

That small victory gives Abula-Mazki an impetus to win the fight. Launching into a series of blinding attacks, he actually manages to push Miko back several steps.

But Miko doesn’t move back very far before he begins to go on the offensive once again. In disbelief, Abula-Mazki is beginning to almost not be able to block the blows raining down upon him. _How can he move so fast?

Blow after blow he successfully blocks, but each time he has been almost a fraction of a second too late.

Not stopping, the blows keep coming, and as unbelievable as it sounds, they’re increasing in speed. He gasps when he sees twin fires in Miko’s eyes, flames of unholy light. Light that is familiar somehow.

Then suddenly, he recognizes the truth. The Fire! It’s no longer hidden and is in the hands of this infidel. Once he realizes that, he understands that he cannot win this battle. But there is one more act he must perform for his god before the end comes.

He disengages from the battle and sees Miko’s sword slow down as he moves backward. Ready himself, he watches as Miko approaches, sword ready to resume the battle.

From the sidelines, James watches as Abula-Mazki takes a few quick steps backward and comes to a stop. The prickling suddenly begins to intensify and he knows the warrior priest is about to cast a spell of mammoth proportions. He readies the magic to counter whatever he may try to do.

Suddenly, a psychic cry of tremendous power rips through his head like a knife. _The Fire walks with the Star!

Everyone around him suddenly cries out from the pain of it as they each grip their head in an attempt to ease the pain.

Through eyes blinded with tears of pain, James looks to the combatants and watches as Miko strikes out at Abula-Mazki who, caught up in the spell, fails to defend himself. His sword strikes him through the chest and the psychic cry is abruptly silenced.
Miko pulls out the sword and hacks his sword arm off before following through with a slice that severs his head from his neck.

When the psychic cry stops, so does the pain it caused. James looks up in time to see Abula-Mazki’s head strike the ground. He hears a cheer from Hinney and Keril as they begin running over to congratulate Miko. “Stop!” he orders commandingly.

They both stop and turn to look at him. “Don’t go near him yet,” he tells them. Moving past them, he brings himself near to where Miko is standing motionless. He walks around until he’s standing face to face with him.

“Miko?” he asks as he gazes into his eyes. He can see more changes the Fire had wrought. All signs of Miko’s childhood are gone. What stands before him is a man in his early twenties at least. “Miko?” he asks again, in a soothing voice. “It’s James.”

James can see the fires burning in his eyes, and for the first time, he’s worried his friend may not come out of it. “Miko, come back to me,” he says as he reaches his hand out.

Then his eyes take notice of him there and his sword moves to a guard position. James backs up a step and holds his hands up, showing he’s not armed. The fires burn as the eyes come to rest upon him.

Pointing to a sack lying in the pile that had been removed from Miko, James yells to Jiron, “Toss me the sack!” Not sure at first what he is talking about, Jiron looks down and then understanding comes. Picking it up, he throws it to James who catches it.

“Would you like some tarts?” James asks as he pulls one from the sack, holding it up for Miko to see. Miko’s expression changes subtly and the fires begin to diminish. “Tarts?” he says in a far away voice.

“Yeah,” James says, lowering his arm. “Here, have one.” He watches some sort of internal struggle taking place within Miko. Suddenly, the fires in his eyes go out and he knows that it’s his friend who’s now looking out at him.

“Oh, James,” he says and takes a step forward before collapsing to the ground.

He moves quickly to catch him before he hits the ground. Laying him down, he waves the others to come join him.

Upon reaching them, Illan says, “James, we got problems.”

Looking up at him from where he kneels next to Miko, James asks, “What?”

Pointing to the pass, he says, “Look.”

Turning his attention to the pass, James sees the clan chiefs have returned and mounted their horses. One of the riders with them brings a horn to his lips and two loud notes sound. Answering horns come from all sides as the riders who had waited patiently at a distance during the fight now begin moving toward them in a decidedly hostile manner. Hundreds of riders are quickly closing the gap, swords are being drawn and bows readied.

James grabs Jiron’s arm, causing him to look at him. “You know what I must do?”

Jiron nods his head and gathers the others around while James prepares to defend them. “Form a circle around James, let nothing get close to him that may disrupt his concentration,” he tells them. Once he sees that they understand, he continues, “We may yet live through this.”

“Arrows!” hollers Fifer as over fifty archers release their deadly arsenal.

“Shields!” Illan hollers and those with shields raise them to protect James. The others hide behind them as best they can. They watch as the arrows arc in the air as they begin to descend toward them. Then suddenly, they bounce off a barrier that surrounds them.

“What happened?” asks Keril.


They still remain behind their shields as the deadly rain continues to fall, harmlessly bouncing off the invisible shield.

The sky begins to darken as clouds move rapidly from all directions to merge together in the sky above. Those guarding James look nervously out at the rapidly changing sky, Illan calls out to them. “Stand fast!”

The front line of riders comes crashing into the barrier that had so successfully stopped the rain of arrows. Horses and men cry out as they strike it hard, bones of some can be heard snapping. One man is actually thrown upward from his horse and lands on the barrier itself. The defenders inside watch as he slowly slides down the outer side to the ground.

Hinney cries out when a dozen translucent orbs suddenly appear among them.

“Don’t worry,” Jiron assures him. “James has lots of tricks.”

The orbs begin floating away from them in various directions. When they reach the barrier, they pass harmlessly through. The riders beating upon the barrier step back as the orbs float harmlessly past them before resuming their attempt to breach the barrier.

“What are those?” Yern asks.
“Something nasty for them,” replies Jiron. “You can be sure of that.”
The riders have stopped the hail of arrows when they realize how ineffective they are. The wounded from when
the charge hit the barrier are being taken away and the mood among the riders is beginning to become one of unease.
In the sky above them, the cloud cover is now dark and the wind has begun to blow in earnest. Suddenly, a
flash of lightning strikes one of the translucent orbs, blasting over a dozen riders that happen to be near.

ZZZT! Wham!
Another bolt of lightning strikes an orb, and more riders are thrown from the force of the explosion.
“That was bigger than the last one!” Uther exclaims.

“Look!” Jorry says as he points to one of the orbs. “They’re getting bigger!”
Jiron glances to James and sees he’s beginning to pant and sweat is pouring down his face. Shouting loud
enough for all the defenders to hear him, he hollers, “Should James lose consciousness, the barrier will fall. Then it
will be up to us to finish this.”

“Bring it on!” Jorry hollers from where he stands shoulder to shoulder with Uther.

ZZZT! Wham! ZZZT! Wham! ZZZT! Wham!
Bolts begin striking orbs with more frequency and more riders are thrown only to fall lifeless to the ground.
Once the last orb has been struck, it becomes eerily quiet. The riders outside the barrier pause in what they’re
doing as they take notice of the quiet.

“Uther!” Fifer yells as he points to James.
James is tilting to the side and looks like he’s barely able to remain upright. “Help him!” Illan commands and
Fifer goes over and helps support him so he won’t fall over. To the others, Illan says, “It won’t be long! Be ready!”
From the clouds above, a swirling mass begins descending toward the riders outside the barrier. “What in god’s
name is that?” Uther cries out.

“A tornado!” Jiron replies, remembering the ones James used in their escape from Al-Kur.
The swirling mass of clouds smashes into the ground not far from them, riders and horses caught within it are
thrown and broken. It starts moving toward the pass and the chiefs waiting there.
A cry escapes James as the tornado splits in two, the second half moving quickly in the opposite direction
toward a large congregation of riders.
The chiefs see the tornado coming toward them and turn as they begin riding fast further up into the pass, trying
to outrun the approaching swirling mass of death.

“How is he?” Jiron shouts to Fifer.
“Not good!” he tells him. “His heart’s beating fast and he’s having trouble breathing.”
Jiron comes over and kneels down next to him and says, “James! You’ve done enough!” When it doesn’t look
like he’s getting through to him, he shakes him and hollers, “James! You can stop!”
Eyes suddenly pop open and a great cry of pain escapes him. Then he suddenly collapses into unconsciousness.
The barrier collapses and the tornadoes begin to dissipate. “Alright boys!” Illan hollers. “Stay together and
protect James and Miko.”
When the wind dies down and the tornadoes are gone, they take in the destruction James has wrought. Hundreds of men and horses lie dead or dying all around them. On the outskirts of the devastation, over twenty
horsemen can be seen still on their horses. They’re all that remain of the host which accompanied Abula-Mazki.
A horn from the pass announces the return of the chiefs and their men. They pause there momentarily as the
horn blasts again. “Here they come!” Illan says to the others as both the riders in the pass and the ones on the
outskirts break into a gallop as they move in to attack.
Two archers remain and they begin firing off arrows but none strike their marks. One manages to hit the ground
within a foot of Miko, the other was deflected off Uther’s shield.
“Strike the horses if you can’t get the men!” Illan tells them as they brace for the attack. “Remain together!”
Jiron positions himself over James and Miko while the others form a circle around them. Knife at the ready in
his good hand, he stands firm as he watches the riders thunder closer.
The area around where the barrier had been is littered with the dead and provides them some cover. Also, the
charging riders have to slow when they reach it to prevent their horses from stumbling.
Illan and the others move to attack while the riders are trying to move through the dead bodies. “For Madoc!”
the battle cry can be heard as Uther’s sword takes out the first rider.
Other cries are heard as the battle is joined. Hinney and Keril stand shoulder to shoulder as they manage to hold
their own against three riders.
One horseless rider manages to break through the ring of defenders and runs toward where Jiron is waiting. A
smile crosses the rider’s face when he sees a man with only one good arm and just wielding a dagger at that.
Striking out at Jiron with his sword, the man so sure of victory, is surprised when Jiron easily deflects it to the
side. Suddenly crying out in pain, the man falls to the ground after Jiron breaks his knee with a well placed kick. Trying to block Jiron’s next attack, he swings his sword wildly.

Jiron strikes out with his foot again and connects with the man’s groin. Then with his other foot he kicks the man’s swordarm, causing the sword to go flying. He then moves in with his knife and finishes him.

Standing up, he looks around at the battles going on around him. The defenders are taking a toll, especially Jorry and Uther who have a ring of bodies around them. Fifer has two dead while Illan and Yern have accounted for seven.

Keril suddenly cries out as a sword takes him in the side. Hinney quickly engages the rider as his friend falls to the ground. Other riders come and join the one fighting Hinney, Jiron knows he’s not going to last long.

Suddenly, to the south, more horns can be heard. Jiron looks and sees dozens of riders riding fast toward them. Damn! More reinforcements!

The horns sound again and an answering horn can be heard coming from the pass. The riders engaging the defenders suddenly break off and race to their awaiting horses. Leaping atop them, they join the riders coming fast from the pass.

Jiron can see the clan chiefs giving them an ugly look that says this isn’t over before they race off to the west. The large group of riders coming from the south breaks into two groups, the larger of the two turn to follow the clan chiefs. The smaller group approaches the scene of the battle.

“They’re ours,” says Illan when he can make them out. “Everyone alive?” he asks as he quickly takes stock of the situation. Coming over to where Hinney sits with Keril, he realizes Keril isn’t going to survive much longer. He kneels down as Keril turns his pain filled eyes to him.

“Did we win?” Keril asks.

“Yes, son,” Illan says to him soothingly, “we did. You fought bravely which saved the day.”

A smile spreads across his face.

When Hinney looks up at him, hope in his eyes, he shakes his head.

Illan gets back up, pats Hinney on the shoulder and goes over to see how James and Miko are doing, leaving him alone to share Keril’s last moments in peace.

Jiron sees him approaching and says, “They’re alive. Not sure if they will make it, though. James isn’t doing too well and Miko, well, I can’t even begin to guess about him. He doesn’t respond, though he only has minor cuts and bruises.”

“Keep an eye on them,” he says as he moves to greet the approaching riders, Jorry and Uther join him. He notices Uther has a blood soaked cloth tied around his arm and arcs an eyebrow in question.

“It’s not bad,” Uther tells him. “Just a minor cut.”

Nodding, Illan turns back to the riders. Once they’ve come close, he holds up his hand and says, “Thank you.”

The officer in charge says to his men, “Fan out and see if there’re any left alive.” As they move to comply, he gets down from his horse and greets Illan. “What the hell happened here?” The insignia on his uniform says he’s a Madoc cavalry captain.

“We were set upon as we were about to enter the pass,” Illan explains.

The officer gazes around at the hundreds of dead scattered about and the holes where the explosions had occurred. Then he turns his attention to Illan and his group. “You all there are?” he asks incredulously.

“Yes,” he replies.

“How did you manage to kill all these and only lose three?” he asks.

“Actually, we only lost one,” he tells him. Indicating James and Miko, he adds, “The other two are just unconscious.”

“I see,” the officer says. He holds out his hand and says, “Name’s Captain Herril.”

Taking the hand, Illan says, “Illan.”

“How did you do it?” he asks.

“Can’t really explain it,” he says. Changing the subject, he asks, “How did you come to be here?”

“Yesterday, the Empire’s forces launched a major offensive against our line,” he says. “This group here was seen to pass by while we were engaged with the others. Once reinforcements arrived and the line stabilized again, I was sent to track them down.”

“Fortunate,” Illan comments.

“Yes, it seems so,” Captain Herril says. “You wouldn’t know anything about why they’re here would you?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Illan says, straight faced.

“Uh-huh,” he says, not sounding convinced.

One of his men rides up and salutes, “A couple are still alive.”

“Take them for questioning,” he tells the man.
Saluting, the rider returns and with others, begins rounding up the survivors.
“Where do you plan to go from here?” the captain asks.
“Through the pass into Cardri,” Illan says.
“And then?” he asks again.
“Who knows for sure?” replies Illan.
Illan notices that someone, probably Jiron, had covered up Abula-Mazki’s body to avoid any questions there.
“We should be going,” he tells the captain. To Uther he says, “Go round up our horses, we’ll bury Keril first and then head into the pass.”
Jorry and Uther move away as they begin to round up their horses that had been scattered during the battle.
“I’d still like to know how you did this,” the captain demands, not going to be balked further in this.
Illan turns to where Jiron is sitting by James and hollers, “Get the letter.”
Nodding, Jiron searches through James’ pouch, finally pulling out the letter. Getting up, he brings it over and hands it to Illan who then hands it to the captain.
The captain opens it and begins reading the words written upon it. His eyes widen when he realizes whose signature is at the bottom. Finished, he returns the letter to Illan. “Okay then,” he says. “I’ll not press you further.”
“Lieutenant!” he shouts to one of his men.
A rider comes over and says, “Yes sir.”
“Get the men and the prisoners ready to ride,” he tells him.
Saluting, the lieutenant says, “Yes sir.” Then he turns back to the rest of the men and begins shouting orders.
Once his men are ready to ride, the captain mounts and says, “Good luck to you.”
“You too, captain,” Illan says.
Turning his horse south, the captain rides out with his men falling in behind. A string of horses in the middle of his men hold ten wounded clan riders.
As they ride away, Illan moves to where Hinney is still cradling Keril’s head in his lap. Even before he reaches them, he knows Keril is dead. “We have one more service to perform for Keril,” he says to him gently.
Looking up with tears running down his face, Hinney says, “He was a good friend.”
“Yes he was,” agrees Illan. “But it’s time we let him go.”
Nodding, Hinney comes to his feet and then picks up his friend. Over to the side, Jorry and Uther have already dug a grave for him. When Hinney gets closer, they gently remove Keril from his arms and place him within.
They fill in the grave and everyone gathers around as each tells of some experience they’d had with Keril.
When they’re done, they secure James and Miko to their horses. Mounting, Illan gets them moving toward the pass, and Cardri.
The first thing he becomes aware of is the fact that he’s lying in a bed. Odd, he doesn’t remember there being a bed by the Pass. He cracks his eyes open then closes them quickly when the light strikes his eyes like red hot daggers. Moaning, he brings his arm up and lays it over his face to block out the painful light.

“He’s awake,” he hears a voice say.

“Get Jiron,” another voice says and he hears a door open and close.

“James,” a soft, female voice says soothingly. He feels someone sitting on the bed next to him. Then a hand is placed on his chest as the voice speaks again, “James?”

He parts his lips to say something but is unable to speak.

“Here,” the voice says again, “try to drink some of this.”

Opening his mouth, he feels a cup being placed to his lips. Then, cool water slowly enters his mouth, soothing the parchedness. And when he swallows, the liquid eases the tightness of his throat. After the cup is pulled away, he’s able to croak out, “Where am I?”

“You are in Trendle, James,” the voice says and then he recognizes that it’s Mary who’s tending him. “You have been here several days. We were worried about you.”

“Miko?” he asks.

“Your friend is doing well,” she replies. “He is in Devin’s room and still very weak. We will let him know you’re awake.”

He nods his head. The door opens and then feels another person sit on the bed. Then he hears Jiron’s voice say, “Man, am I glad you’re back.”

“Me, too,” James croaks. “Water,” he says reaching out weakly. The cup is returned to his lips as he takes another small sip.

“Not too much at one time, now,” she advises.

When he’s done drinking, he asks, “Are Tersa and the others here?”

“Yes, they made it,” Jiron says happily.

“They’re staying at Hern’s old place right now,” Mary tells him. “When they showed up and explained things to us, they were allowed to move in while they waited for you.”

“Thank you,” he says. Cracking his eyes open, he can see Mary and Jiron sitting on the bed. The light hurts his eyes, but they seem to be getting used to it, either that, or the water has somehow helped.

“You’re welcome,” Mary says. The door cracks open and he hears a small voice ask, “Is he okay mama?”

“Cyanne,” her mother says, “he’s fine.”

James can hear her say something to another by the door when her mother says, “Girls, now leave him be. He needs his rest.”

“Yes, mama,” Cyanne says and then the door closes once more.

“We better go,” Mary says to Jiron. “He still needs a great deal of rest.”

“Alright,” he replies. Getting off the bed, he looks to his friend “You get some rest James. If I’m not here when the next time you wake, I’ll be over with Tersa.”

Then Mary gives him one more sip before rising. “Get some sleep,” she advises. “It’s the best thing for you right now.”

As they leave the room, he closes his eyes and before drifting off to sleep one more time, remembers the message that Abula-Mazki had sent: The Fire walks with the Star. They know, and they’ll be coming for it.

James’ adventures continues in:

*Trail of the Gods*
Book Four of The Morcyth Saga

Check out the epically adventurous worlds of fantasy author

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In many stories you hear how ‘The Chosen One’ appeared to save the day. Every wonder what would happen if the one doing the choosing bungled the job?

In *Ring of the Or’tux*, that’s exactly what happens. Hunter was on his way to a Three Stooges’ marathon when in mid-step, he went from the lobby of a movie theater to a charred tangle of stone and timber that once had been a place of worship. From there it only gets worse for the hapless *Chosen One*. First, an attempt to flee those he initially encounters (who by the way are the ones he was sent there to save), lands him into the merciless clutches of an invading army (those whom he was supposed to defeat).

**The Adventurer’s Guild**

Jaikus and Reneeke are ordinary lads whose dream in life is to become a member of The Adventurer's Guild. But to become a member, one must be able to lay claim to an Adventure, and not just any adventure. To qualify, an Adventure must entail the following:

1. **Have some element of risk to life and limb**
2. **Successfully concluded. If the point of the Adventure was to recover a stolen silver candelabra, then you better have that candelabra in hand when all is said and done.**
3. **A reward must be given. For what good is an Adventure if you don’t get paid for your troubles?**
Jaikus and Reneeke soon realize that becoming members in the renowned Guild is harder than they thought. For Adventures posted as Unresolved at the Guild, are usually the ones with the most risk.

However, when they hear of a party of experienced Guild members that are about to set out and are in need of Springers, they quickly volunteer only to discover to their dismay that a Springer's job is to "Spring the trap."

If they survive, membership in the Guild is assured.
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