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A Tale from Esterad: An Examination of the Political Power of Fantasy

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Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Department of English

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## Introduction

Fantasy inspired me to write. Pillars of the genre such as Tolkien and Lewis formed the cornerstone of what would become a lifelong love of literature. They created functioning “second worlds” to convey their ideas about our first-world reality. While we tend to define the genre as an escapist literature interested only in swords and sorcery, I believe its true appeal lies in its capacity to push past our biases and show us something with fresh eyes.

The fantasy genre has a long history as a tool used to explore real-world issues in a space divorced from reality. It strips away real-world contexts, such as international relations and ethnic identity, and allows people to look at an issue with unbiased eyes. When touching directly on political issues without the lens of genre fiction, people tend to become defensive and entrenched in their positions rather than willing to explore the ideas at hand. But whether authors are politically motivated or not, their fantasy stories can create a space for readers to engage with new ideas through the lens of their own experience. I wanted to create a fantasy story that would enable me to explore some political issues such as refugee crises, civil conflict, patriotism, and the use of weapons of mass destruction without writing about the real-world groups those issues affect. This story is an attempt to create such a space in the vein of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* or Patrick Rothfuss’ *Name of the Wind* which both make use of immersive fantasy worlds to explore political themes and ideas.

There are arguments against fantasy being used as a vehicle to explore political ideas. Tolkien, himself, the grandfather of modern fantasy, seems opposed to the notion. In *The Foreword to the Second Edition of The Fellowship of the Ring*, he writes:

...I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned,

with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse ‘applicability’ with ‘allegory’; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author. (xx)

The quote is commonly used to dispel attempts to read fantasy as applicable to real-world issues, but the statement usually appears outside of its full context. His dislike of allegory usually appears without his endorsement of applicability and the freedom of the reader. Tolkien is saying that allegory is a lazy form of writing, but that does not exclude real-world issues from being explored through fantasy. He objects to direct political messaging but not to “applicability,” a subjective connection that the reader may make with the real-world in the story. I will, therefore, argue that fantasy authors exploit applicability, not allegory, to explore real-world issues. They suggest; they do not assert. They imply; they do not command. Applicability, not allegory, is the true strength of the genre.

### **Tolkien’s Second-World Method**

*The Lord of the Rings* has long been the gold standard for the fantasy genre. It is the bar against which all other works are measured. Tolkien defined the genre for most of the 20th century until authors such as Pratchett began experimenting with the formula in the 70s and 80s. The influence of characters such as Frodo, Sam, Aragorn, and Gandalf permeate through the genre to this day. In his essay “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien coined the term “Secondary World” saying:

What really happens is that the story maker proves a successful “sub-creator.” He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were,

inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. (18)

Tolkien is saying the author of a secondary world constructs the “truth,” or rather, they use the fantasy world as a vehicle to communicate something they believe to be true about our reality.

He writes later in the epilogue of the same essay:

...every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it. If he indeed achieves a quality that can fairly be described by the dictionary definition: “inner consistency of reality,” it is difficult to conceive how this can be, if the work does not in some way partake of reality. The peculiar quality of the “joy” in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth...(35)

He tells us that all fantasy is in some way a reflection of reality, and thus, it will be suffused with human beliefs and ideas about how the world functions. An author establishes a moral baseline such as “being good grants you power” or “your friends are your strength” and makes the story consistent with that established worldview. Likewise, they may embed political values or beliefs into the “truth” of their world. Herein lies the method by which Tolkien explored, consciously or unconsciously, a wide range of political topics through his work without overtly preaching to his readership.

Many people boil the conflict of Tolkien’s work down to good versus evil, but the destruction of the ring refutes this. Throughout the series, readers can see the corrupting influence of the ring as it pits Boromir against the Fellowship, poisons Frodo’s perception of

those around him, and draws evil toward the Fellowship whenever it can. Tolkien builds up the potency of the ring for a few reasons. On a practical level, it functions as a plot device to drive tension and conflict, but on a political level, Tolkien uses it to explore what he sees as the nature of power. When standing at the edge of Mount Doom in the climactic scene of *The Return of the King*, Frodo falls victim to the ring's dark power and battles Gollum over it:

The light sprang up again, and there on the brink of the chasm, at the very Crack of Doom, stood Frodo, black against the glare, tense, erect, but still as if he had been turned to stone.

'Master!' cried Sam.

Then Frodo stirred and spoke with a clear voice, indeed with a voice clearer and more powerful than Sam had ever heard him use, and it rose above the throb and turmoil of Mount Doom, ringing in the roof and walls.

'I have come,' he said. 'But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!' And suddenly, as he set it on his finger, he vanished from Sam's sight. (969)

The ring represents not just evil, but the temptation of power. For Tolkien, this was a thesis on how evil destroys itself. In *Letter 109* Tolkien writes:

You can make the Ring into an allegory of our own time, if you like: an allegory of the inevitable fate that waits for all attempts to defeat evil power by power. But that is only because all power magical or mechanical does always so work. You cannot write a story about an apparently simple magic ring without that bursting in, if you really take the ring seriously, and make things happen that would happen, if such a thing existed.

While it is interesting that he seems to contradict his own statement against allegory, he tells us here that the very nature of the ring is its downfall. It was through a great act of will that the ring was brought to a place where it could be destroyed, but Tolkien shows us that power and goodness cannot overcome evil. Evil inevitably destroys itself.

For Tolkien, power and action did not save Middle Earth. The very temptation of the ring is what causes its destruction. Sauron destroys himself because the ring's tempting power corrupts Frodo and Gollum. We see this as the pair fight over the ring, and Gollum slips over the edge as he celebrates finally wrenching the ring away from Frodo (970). The climax reflects his own political beliefs informed by his experiences in the stalemate trench warfare of WW1 or with his experiences living as a citizen during WW2. That is not to say that this moment is simply a political message, but that is the underlying current which allows the moment to stand as one of the most iconic scenes in the genre.

Still that message is not as simple as power is bad and evil destroys itself. Tolkien acknowledges the complex reality of war. Power and action are necessary against evil. We see this in the plotline where Aragorn leads the Men of the West to buy Frodo time to finish his quest. Likewise, Tolkien posits that evil is endured by people who show kindness and mercy. Many characters choose to spare Gollum in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* leading him to a point where he and Frodo accidentally destroy the ring. It is a complex web of factors that positions the ring in a situation where it destroys itself, and Tolkien immerses the reader so heavily in the fiction of Middle Earth that these messages are taken unconsciously.

Tolkien goes on to show Frodo's burden for the remaining chapters as he transitions out of the focus of the story. The ring takes not just his finger but a fundamental part of his character as well. He largely takes a secondary role as the more knightly Merry and Pippin lead the quest



to reclaim the Shire in the 'Scouring of the Shire' chapter, and by the end of the novel, Frodo must sail away to Middle Earth's version of heaven to be at peace. This complex exploration of the effects of shellshock/PTSD mirrors the experiences of WW1 veterans, but with it dressed in the guise of Middle Earth, the harsh reality of the Great War becomes something that readers can conceptualize and empathize with. This is a fraction of the political work Tolkien puts into his writing and serves as one example of how fantasy is used as a vehicle for political ideas.

### **Le Guin and Inclusive Writing**

Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* popularized the boy wizard trope which was later adopted by the likes of J. K. Rowling in the *Harry Potter* series. The first book of the series, published in 1968, found its way to the public during the Civil Rights Movement. This is relevant to Le Guin as she wrote the secondary world of Earthsea to be one in which people of color represented the dominant culture all across the world. The ethnically pale Karg are the only notable white culture, but they are savages to the rest of Earthsea.

This is a clear counterculture narrative. Le Guin is communicating the importance of minority representation in fiction, and the reader is not told the main character, Ged, is a person of color until around a third of the first third of *A Wizard of Earthsea*. She writes, "Jasper took Ged to sit with a heavyset fellow called Vetch, who said nothing much but shoveled in his food with a will. He had the accent of the East Reach, and was very dark of skin, not red-brown like Ged and Jasper and most folk of the Archipelago, but black-brown," like Tolkien, Le Guin delivers political ideas subtly without preaching to the reader (46).

There is an argument to be made that Le Guin could be overstepping her boundaries by writing these characters, but given the time she was writing, it is notable that a female author was able to make a breakthrough like this in a genre that was dominated by white male authors.

In an essay called *A Whitewashed Earthsea*, Le Guin had this to say on the matter:

My color scheme was conscious and deliberate from the start...I have heard, not often, but very memorably, from readers of color who told me that the Earthsea books were the only books in the genre that they felt included in—and how much it meant to them, particularly as adolescents, when they'd found nothing to read in fantasy and science fiction except the adventures of white people in white worlds. So far no reader of color has told me I ought to butt out, or that I got the ethnicity wrong. When they do, I'll listen. As an anthropologist's daughter, I am intensely conscious of the risk of cultural or ethnic imperialism— a white writer speaking for nonwhite people, co-opting their voice, an act of extreme arrogance.

It is clear to see that Le Guin is not writing these characters from a desire to capture an untapped market but rather to broaden what fantasy can look like. It speaks to the power of the genre that these characters resonate with her POC readers despite them not sharing a real cultural identity, and without telling the reader outright on the page, she draws on a variety of black and brown cultures to create a fantasy world that feels fresh and inventive to this day.

Le Guin's publishers recognized (and resisted) her politics. They wanted Ged and other characters to appear as white on the cover because they believed it would harm sales. In the foreword to the first Earthsea novel, she writes:

After Ruth's unique wraparound jacket for the first edition of *A Wizard of Earthsea*—with its splendidly stylized, copper-brown portrait face—cover art for the books mostly went out of my control. The results could be ghastly—the droopy, lily-white wizard of the first Puffin UK paperback; the silly man with sparks shooting out of his fingers that replaced him. Some covers were quite pretty in themselves, but delicate

medieval persons on twee islands with castles with pointy towers had nothing to do with my earthy, salty Earthsea. And as for copper or brown or black skin, forget it! Earthsea was bathed in bleach. (7)

There is a well-documented history of Le Guin's frustrations with the publishing industries refusal to adhere to her vision for the *Earthsea Cycle*, and it is telling of the political moment Le Guin was writing in that a white cover was equated with a more successful novel even though it would only take a few pages for the reader to realize what kind of world Earthsea is.

This deliberate censoring of Le Guin's work speaks to its political power. The *Earthsea Cycle* stands as another example of how fantasy can be used to create narratives for underrepresented groups. It gives them a place in the genre and empowers them to make their own art. Le Guin proves that one does not need to have lived an experience to be able to represent it in fantasy. Though an important facet of why this political exploration works is that she never tries to speak on black or brown experiences through her work. She sets up black and brown characters as the norm shining a mirror on the fantasy genre which for so long was defined by European myth.

### **Sapkowski and Genre Convention**

The world of *The Witcher* falls into the modern category of dark fantasy that explores political ideas through the guise of a cruel and violent world. In some ways, the Continent, that is the setting of the series, closely reflects our own world. Sapkowski leaves few topics untouched in his series, but I find that comparing his use of race to Le Guin's is worth exploring.

Whereas Le Guin inverts the "status quo" of fantasy by having most characters be black or brown, Sapkowski's work is ethnically homogenous. It is, afterall, based on Polish folklore and history and, therefore, features mostly white characters with a few black and brown

characters appearing from far off lands such as Offir. Sapkowski uses this to his advantage in some clever ways. Traditional fantasy races such as elves, dwarves, and gnomes populate the Continent, but the humans of his world come from Earth. They were sent there in an ancient event called the “conjunction of the spheres,” and they arrived at the same time as monsters. On the Continent, humans have pushed these other races to the fringes of society. Humans are the invaders and colonizers.

Throughout the series Sapkowski builds up the idea that nonhumans (elves, halflings, dwarves, gnomes, witchers ect.) are second-class citizens. Guerrilla units of nonhumans join the Nilfgaardian Empire in their fight against the North Realms because Nilfgaard promises them dignity. Humans treat the main character, Geralt, as subhuman in many instances even when he is doing something for their benefit such as in the short story ‘The Lesser Evil.’ In that story, Geralt is run out of town for massacring a group of people who were planning an attack on the city of Blaviken. The Butcher of Blaviken is a nickname that follows Geralt throughout the series.

The culmination of racial prejudice in *The Witcher* comes at the very end of *Lady of the Lake*. Geralt attempts to defend a group of nonhumans caught in a pogrom due to post war propaganda. Geralt leaps into a crowd to defend his friend who is mistaken for an elf and is swarmed by peasants. He cuts the arm off of a peasant who begs for mercy. Geralt stops his assault, but another peasant in the crowd runs a pitchfork through his stomach (291-92). The pogrom carries on, and Geralt, who is a Witcher and considered a nonhuman, dies from his wounds. That is the end of our hero's story. It is sudden and unexpected. By doing this, Sapkowski gives his readers a dark look at racial violence in a way that plays to the strengths of the genre.

Sapkowski has gone on record saying, “I personally abhor politics and try to stay as far as I can from it. I consider my books politically neutral” in an interview with Publisher Weekly in 2020, but politically neutral is still a political stance. Sapkowski uses that neutrality and the fantasy genre to abstract the experience of racial violence from its real-world contexts, so that the reader can engage with the darkest side of humanity in a neutral way.

Unlike Sapkowski, Le Guin takes an active political stance. She says so in her interviews, but Sapkowski pulls away from that notion. In doing so, he shows off another strength of the fantasy genre. By that I mean, these scenes are tastefully done because Sapkowski abstracts the horror of racial violence by leaning on the tropes of elves, dwarves, and other fantastical races.

Where Le Guin inverts the status quo of fantasy by including black and brown characters, Sapkowski, consciously or unconsciously, leans into the Euro centric roots of the genre to let us examine why certain human atrocities are so terrible. We do not see humans killing other humans, but rather, humans killing elves and dwarves. It lets us get close to an event that would otherwise be difficult for readers to process in a way that did not comment directly on real-world experiences. In this way, Sapkowski uses the ethnic homogeneity of his second world to communicate the complex reality of racial prejudice by having the targets of the prejudice be mythical creatures rather than other human races.

### **Esterad: My Second World**

The world of Esterad preceded this story. The original concept that led to my thesis was an event in the history of my world called the “Mage Wars.” A group of mages called the Consular Arcanum betrayed the Drastonian Empire which resulted in the use of magical weapons of mass destruction. At this point, I knew I wanted to write something that showed how

fantasy could illustrate some powerful political ideas, which is when I got the idea to write the account of that extinction event.

My full plan for this project is to create multiple viewpoints of the event, and the story below will be the first of multiple accounts. It details the journey of three people of no importance in the grand scheme of the world fleeing north from the first wave of destruction. I wanted to zoom in and show how world-shaking events affect everyday people. My goal with this piece is to use the power of the second world to help normalize these narratives and make people more sympathetic towards the real people who go through these events.

When creating the characters for this piece, I knew I wanted to have the POV character be out of his depth and privileged while the other two characters would be worldly and ready to take on their dire circumstance. I was inspired by authors like Le Guin and Tolkien for Tamille, but where they play the lack of knowledge as charming, I wanted to play it as irritating. I thought, “What would happen if I put Bilbo or Frodo into a Sapkowskiesque world?”

Likewise, I wanted to explore the dynamic of patriotism clashing with disillusionment, and the dangers of holding onto the past. Social class was also something I set out to explore with these characters. They needed to come from different walks of life, so I could show how these sorts of events affect people at every level of society. This was all in an effort to show them as more than just “helpless refugees.” They needed to be more than victims in order to humanize this kind of narrative. They couldn’t just be three more numbers added to the masses like refugees are represented on modern news outlets.

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### Esterad: Pre and Post Mage War





# We Went North

## Chapter I: Of Bond and Blood

Seven days since we fled from Nira. Half a fortnight of crunching through snow and ice in the middle of summer. My feet dragged as if burdened by heavy iron chains, and the blisters, Great Dragon, were forming blisters of their own. I was grateful to feel my feet at all. Three days ago we left behind the Imperial road cutting onto a thin meandering dirt track leading to the Northland border. It was the Old Road.

My two traveling companions kept a good four paces ahead of me despite my efforts to close the gap. I hadn't traveled this much since I made the journey from Drastongar to Nira. That was six years ago. I had a good horse then and hopes of making good money for my family back in the capital. Six years of work away from home, and now, I tramped down a loose rocky path through the wilderness.

"And, how do you even know about this Old Road?" I asked.

"It's a military route. Will you pick up the pace? You walk like an old spinster."

"Says the one with a crooked leg. I don't see why you should chastise me when you're the one taking breaks every mile. And how do we know if this route goes where you think it does?"

"One more word about my leg, and I'll cut you down. You're alive because the boy likes you, but I am sure he'd get over it. "

I gulped. "So what unit did you serve under? My brother was in the army in the last expansion campaign. He didn't make it home an-"

"Not many did. Mind your own business."

“Well, anyways, I’m glad to have the protection of a soldier out here. Even if you are a deserter, I don’t mind at all. I always said-”

“Mind your own damn business. Fiege, I’m going up ahead. Make sure our little flower here doesn’t bite his tongue off with his chattering teeth.”

“Don’t start this again. You two argue like a pair of senile lovers. You’ll call every robber from here to Vorde with all this racket.” Fiege looked at me and made a frantic back and forth sawing motion across his neck.

“As if a man who can’t even steal a squirrel without tripping over his own shoelace was worth loving. I’m afraid we’ve picked up a walking corpse.”

“Look, he’s got the skills we don’t. Once we make it to Port Farisan, we’ll be raking in a banker’s fortune. He is grateful we didn’t kill him for trying to steal our squirrel. Isn’t that right?” He grinned greedily at me.

I stammered, “Yes. Very grateful. The squirrel was a misunderstanding. I thought it was left behind and-”

“Enough. Sit. Rest. This is the tallest point for another sixty miles. I’m going to get a lay of the land. When I come back, be ready to cover another five miles before we make camp, and I don’t want to hear another word about your toes.”

I folded my hands and pulled myself into an outcropping in the large rocky hill. As I plopped myself down on a mossy boulder, a cool breeze carried flecks of snow through my hair. It wasn’t meant to snow for another two quarters. Though after what I saw– well I supposed anything was possible.

Sandra whispered to me before she loped off into the brush. “Sit still and be quiet. Think you can manage that, banker?”

“Yes, I know how to be-”

“Quiet. Good. You can follow orders.”

There was a hardness to her voice that matched her dark hair and face. It was the voice of a warrior. I would've been able to place it even without the armor and the sword slung across her hip. She wore a permanent furrowed brow that made it hard to tell if she was angry or thinking. Her armor and sword were in immaculate condition save for the evidence of battles passed, and the breastplate bore the emblem of the Albari family, the lords of Nira and my long time employers. A soldier then, except she wasn't a retiree. She was older than me but still of working age.

Fiege wore a baggy outfit and tied his shaggy dirty blond hair behind his head with a bandana. He always looked hungry. Not for food necessarily, but there was an avarice that lurked in his youthful eyes. His whole getup looked secondhand, though not that my doublet was in much better condition. The magical winter all but destroyed the threading.

Fiege spotted me inspecting my clothes. “How much did that cost you, eh? ”

“Three nirats.”

“You paid three nirats for a coat that won't even keep you warm? Now that's funny. You bankmen must've thought you had it made.”

His smirk irritated me. “I told you. I'm not a banker. I worked the mint in Hazeldor's Square. I kept coins flowing into your grubby little hands.”

“Coins in my hands? That's rich. The only coins I got were the ones I found layin' around.”

“Laying in the purses of respectable Nirans, you mean. A thief has no right to judge me.”

“The way I see it, we’re both thieves. At least my thievin’ is keepin’ me alive. And you, well, you’d be dead if not for me and Sandra.”

I didn’t think he really knew what my job was, but he was right in a way. All of my life, I worked towards securing my family line, and it had burned up into arcane cinders in Nira. I had scrapped my way to a good position. I looked towards the future, never paying a thought to the present. My father taught me that, and just like him, I’d be dead before it did the family any good. I wished more than anything I could be with them, but I would only be another mouth to feed. At least, I was burdening these strangers.

“You want to know something funny?”

He raised his eyebrows.

“I was trying to arrange a marriage into a noble house, so I could secure my future. Just a minor noble house. Nothing too grand. I’d get all dressed up like a peacock and meet lady after lady. They wanted me for the same reasons you do. Having a coin maker in the family is a lucrative business. In all that time, I never once thought if I was happy. I was just trying to reach the next step.”

“That’s not funny, mate. It’s just sad.”

“Yes, I know. It was...Nevermind.”

The path ahead cut sharply around a boulder, and as I trudged through the slush, I noticed the distinctive smooth edge of eroded cut stone. Ruins. Old ruins. From our high vantage point, I saw dozens of stones, some as big as a house dotting the landscape.

“This looks like old Vari stonecraft to me.” I ran my hand along the smooth edges. “I didn’t know they lived in this part of the world.”

“I always liked the Var.” I hadn’t noticed him slink up beside me. “Well, the stories about them anyways. ‘Cept they more often than not had sad endings. Feels like a bad omen.”

“Not all of them have sad endings. In fact, I remember one from the academy. It was about three pilgrims stranded in a strange place. They journey to promised land, and when they arrived, the Vari queen rewarded them with riches and titles.” I frantically searched the corners of my mind to string together a tale that sounded authentic.

“I don’t know that one. How’s it go?”

“It’s not very well known. Part of my studies at the academy was to help professors translate old Vari into Imperial.”

“How does that help with banking?”

“Minting. And it doesn’t really. Like I said, the pilgrims travel through a strange land and face terrible dangers.” I looked out over the hilltop. Miles of snowy wood and ruined stone stretched out like a broken body. “They passed through the Land of the Dead, and because of their unwavering belief in returning to the living world, the queen rewarded them for their bravery.”

Fiege relaxed his shoulders just a little, and his corners of his mouth turned up slightly at the landscape before us. My tale was fabricated. I knew a few Vari stories about the Land of the Dead, but none of them ended happily. Maybe this city was an omen.

“I always like the story about Adanel. I used to run around the docks pretending I was him and the ships were the Silver Fleet.” It was Adoniel, but I bit my tongue.

It was the first time we had a pleasant conversation, and the sanctity of the academy felt of little importance. I leaned my back against the mossy rock and let my body slide deeper

towards the ground. The cold gnawed at my toes once more, and a gust of wind ripped over the hill. Icy splinters of cold wormed their way under my fingernails.

A flock of birds wheeled overhead. I had seen more birds clambering northward the past few days than ever before. The snap cold was affecting everything.

“So where were you when it happened?” Fiege asked me so bluntly that I coughed.

“I don’t think that would make for very pleasant conversation.”

“Maybe not pleasant, but I’m dyin’ to know how you of all people, no offense, made it out of the city.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Come on.” He practically leaned over top of me, and something about the way his eyes widened moved me to speak.

“Fine. Have it your way, but it’s not a thrilling tale of action. I was pressing a new line of coins for Lord Ricard Albari. A silver nirat in the visage of his second son Dario.” I had tried not to think of it for the last seven days, but now, the memory flooded into my mind.

“Didn’t know the lord had a second son.”

“Not many people do. You may have seen him at public events without realizing. He’s a handsome lad. Not much older than you. Square jaw. Thick head of curly hair.”

“Sounds like an Albari, but I didn’t go to many parades. You don’t get days off for those things at the docks.”

“My apologies. Anyways, it was to be my lucky break. A job from the Lord of Nira himself. That’s the kind of thing that got you noticed. I walked outside with the new coin. As Master Grebbe taught me, I showed it off to any passersby. He wanted to get them excited about spending money.”

Fiege looked visibly confused, but I kept going. I couldn't stop remembering now.

"I held the coin up and let the light of the midday sun dance across the surface. I was so proud. I wanted to write to my father. And then I saw the storm clouds. They gathered out of nowhere, and there was that great blue sigil in the sky right over Castle Albari. It was the stuff you only dream about seeing when you're a kid."

"Everyone thinks they're going to go off to the Consular Arcanum to be the next famous mage."

"True enough, but it made me glad I never got the chance."

"Made me wish I was on their side." He pulled his knees up to his chest. I couldn't stop remembering.

"There was the sigil. A blinding flash that left bright pink spots in my eyes, and then, Castle Albari was gone, vanished, or so I thought until debris began raining over the city. Consular soldiers poured out of arcane gateways like mad ants. You know the rest." All I could do was stare straight ahead. I needed to hear something else. "What about you?"

"I was being arrested for breakin' into some rich lady's house. Guards had me outside and were about to put the chains on. Then, like you said, storm clouds, blue sigil, boom. The debris collapsed part of the rich lady's roof. It crushed those guards, and I bolted."

"You didn't go home?" He tightened as the words left my mouth.

"Funny thing is, I was most relieved that my da wouldn't have to bail me out of the hole again. I was so happy the debris crushed those guards, but..." He didn't finish his sentence.

"Great Dragon." That was all that came out of my mouth.

A silence fell over us. There was nothing left to be said. I curled my aching fingers into my palm. They felt brittle like bird bones. Winter was my least favorite season. The cold crept all

the way to my marrow, and what meager athletic ability I possessed seemed to flee in the face of the icy wind. Imperial winters were harsh, but this arcane blizzard was worse. This cold did not creep. It devoured. It was a hungry predator, and heat was its prey. The only warmth found without a fire was huddling into yourself, but I learned quickly that it was a falsehood. The cold wanted you to huddle over. It waited so that you wouldn't notice its jaws wrapping around you, and when you tried to move again, you would find it was more comfortable to stay where you were.

A nearby bush rustled. I assumed it was Sandra returning from her scouting trip, and I turned my head to speak to Fiege. To my surprise, he had vanished leaving behind faint imprints in the snow. The rustling turned into low murmurs and heavy footfalls. I stood up. Panicking, I turned to run down the hill. I ran three paces before the ground was suddenly in close contact with my face.

My nose flared with pain. An armored foot stomped down on my back, and anger surged through me. I know Sandra and I had our differences, but this was entirely inappropriate.

“Now listen here. I don't think it's in our best interest to have two cripples wandering through the woods. I am not a—” I lifted my head and found myself staring into an unfamiliar face.

His cheeks were bare but his upper lip bore a long, dark mustache that ended in brass rings. He held a hefty crossbow pointed directly at my skull. “Empty your pockets. Where'd your little friends scamper off to? The boy and the cripple.”

I couldn't find my words, and he kicked me in the ribs. The pain exploded in my side and rapidly danced its way up my arm. The heat of the kick and the bitter cold mingled. My entire



left side felt like a thin sheet of ice that had been shattered. Each rib felt like it was splintering and jabbing into my organs. My arm went slack.

The frozen mud soaked into my shirt. My eyes darted around. There were ten at least. Those bastards left me here as bait. They made their getaway while the “banker” took the fall. Damn them. Damn them both. He pressed his armored boot into my back.

“Your pockets,” he said. “Now!”

Mindlessly, I turned out what meager possessions I had brought with me. All I had were the things on my person at the moment of the attack.

“Look ‘ere, boys. Got ourselves a rich man,” the robber said to the others.

They let out a collective raspy chuckle as he scooped out the contents of my coin purse. A gold imperial, five silver nirats, including the newly minted one, and a handful of copper marks. In addition to the money, I had a well worn copy of Vari poetry, a silver pen, and my father’s old ring which I kept on a golden chain around my neck. It was enough to help me get back on my feet in the north or so I had hoped. My arm was still slack. The pain from the kick was so immense that I could not move. I felt tears freezing to my face. *I don’t want to die here*, I thought. *Great Dragon, please. Not here.*

The whole lot of them were grinning at me. I tried my best to stare defiantly back at them, but it was a farce. They were well armed though their weapons looked poorly maintained. There was a scratched out dragon on the left breast of their armor. It was the symbol of the Imperial Army. More deserters. Damn that Sandra. I should have known she would lead me to more of her kind. If I saw her again, I’d break her good leg. She wouldn’t be so proud living as a filthy street beggar. Better yet, she’d freeze in some hollow, and Fiege would pick over her corpse like a vulture.

There was faint rustling somewhere to the side of the road. I could barely hear it over the heavy breathing of the thugs surrounding me. The snowfall had begun to pick up. Another torrent of wind ripped over the top of the bald hill. Suddenly, two arrows flew out from the brush on the side of the road, imbedding themselves into the thug whose foot was pressing on my back and the one pawing at my belongings in the icy mud road. Both bodies crumpled on top of me. The other robbers darted in the direction of the arrows but not before Sandra and Fiege sprung out onto the road.

Sandra limped forward taking a rigid stance with her sword. She was strong, but her eyes were held wide as if she was remembering some old hurt. Fiege stood behind her a good three paces, knocking another arrow and letting it fly. The robbers scrambled towards them, and the third arrow plinked off a breastplate. He stumbled, but the others had closed the distance to Sandra. She made a wipe sweep to prevent them from moving past her, but she quickly found her hands full as three of them surrounded her, testing her defenses with small jabs. The four others ran past her towards Fiege, but not before, a fourth arrow crunched into the bridge of a robber's nose. He collapsed on the ground clutching up towards the snowy, gray sky. Before the rest of the robbers could reach him, Fiege took off back down the hill.

He weaved left, putting a chest-height rock between himself and his attackers. Two ran at him on either side, but he leapt onto the rock and placed another arrow into the hand of the closest assailant. He threw himself off the rock sailing over a pair of robbers, but one of them jabbed him in the back with his spear.

Fiege clattered onto the ground. As the four approached him, he spun and threw a mix of snow, mud, and rock into their faces. It gave him just enough time to avoid a lethal spear jab and clamber down on the other side of the hill. The robbers gave chase until they were out of sight.

Sandra held her blade by her head and pointed it down towards the legs of the robbers. She drew herself up to her full height and rhythmically parried their strikes. She held two of the robbers in front of her daring them to make a move. When the third lunged at her from behind, she parried, then slashed under her arm. Blood sprayed across Sandra in a wide arch.

She overextended and stumbled on her bad leg. The second thug bashed the leg with his mace, and she lurched down into a kneeling position.

Before he could strike again, she pushed upward, her face a mask of pain and fury. Her sword came up swiftly landing across his fingers. They flew in all directions, but not before the third jabbed a long knife into her good leg. Her weight gave out from under her. The two still alive loomed over Sandra.

She laid on the ground two paces from me. "Run, you idiot."

The pain in my side still coursed through me, but I pushed off the bodies. With some effort, I stood and staggered away. Nausea welled up inside me. I looked back. My silver pen jutted out of the icy mud.

Before I processed, my body moved on its own. I pulled the pen out of the mud and ran at the pair of robbers hollering like a madman. I planted the pen into the neck of the knife wielder who was busy leering over her collapsed form.

He gurgled and fell to the side. The pen completely disappeared into his neck leaving me with no weapon. The fingerless mace wielder turned and struck my injured side with his full might.

There was an audible crack. The pain in my side redoubled and exploded again. My vision tunneled, and I wheezed out a ragged breath. I fell backwards onto the road. He walked towards me grinning.

He opened his mouth to say something but was cut short by a blast of fire engulfing his head. He stumbled briefly then collapsed. The fire spread across his flesh leaving his armor and weapon uncharred.

I lay on the ground still wheezing. My voice rasped, and I pointed a weak finger towards the direction the blast came from. Fiege ran that way, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The snow whirled around us. Sandra crawled towards her sword, but an invisible force kicked the blade away from her hand. She growled and pounded the icy ground.

I blinked thrice. A faint distortion of the air hung over Sandra. Then, there was another a few paces away and another still on the rocky outcropping above us.

“Show yourself, you cowards. If you’re going to kill us, at least do it in a decent way.”

While Sandra hurled curses at the air. Fiege came into view. He trudged up the path slowly. He was covered in blood, and there were glowing blue chains fixed around his neck and hands.

My mouth went dry as the figures threw back their cloaks and revealed themselves. Their silvery armor and ephemeral cloaks gave them away. They were mages trained to track and hunt the Consular’s enemies. People called them hounds, and they were feared across the land. A dozen or so flitted into view. Their leader held her hand extended, and the faint traces of arcane smoke drifted up in the snowy expanse.

Sandra dragged herself up against a stone on the roadside. A thin trail of blood mingled with the snow. Her usually tan paled from her wounds. I moved towards her but found myself struck in the gut by some invisible force. It was the third blow to the same spot. Another audible crack bounced off the rocks. I crumpled to the ground.

Two more distortions snuck up beside me and held sleek knives at the sides of my head. They pulled my hair back to keep me in a kneeling position, and the pain of holding myself upright shot through my torso and into my neck and legs. Black spots flashed across my vision, and the lead hound approached Sandra.

“You’re a soldier?”

“No,” Sandra said. “I lifted this off some dead fellow a few days back.”

“We watched you fight. Armor doesn’t fit like that unless it was made for you.”

Sandra grimaced. I knew that look in her eyes. She was going to say something and get herself killed. Maybe all of us.

“We fled Nira not but seven days ago,” I interjected. “We’re just trying to go north. We want no part in this fight.”

One of the hounds tensed his grip on my hair. The lead hound bore into me with her cold eyes. It felt as if she peered into me. She had a flat passionless look as if this was the last thing she wanted to be spending her time on. Her mouth moved slightly giving the impression of something between a frown and a smirk.

She turned back towards Sandra and regarded the emblem on her breastplate, “You were one of Albari’s men. Good. I’ll give you one more chance to tell the truth, deserter. Do you know where we can find Dario Albari?”

Sandra’s eyes gleamed, “Where’s your handler, mutt?”

Fiege made to speak, but the arcane chain around his neck glowed brightly and tightened. The lead hound placed a strong hand on Sandra’s chin and lifted her gaze upwards and struck her once with a gauntleted hand. That same passionless stare met with Sandra’s fiery eyes, and fear crept into my companion's expression.

“Do you have any information on the whereabouts of Dario Albari?”

“No, I haven’t been in the army since the last expansion campaign. They discharged me after I was injured in the fighting.” It was the first time I had seen Sandra shaken like this or speak so openly about herself. She tried to flatten her expression, but the eyes gave away her shame.

“I see,” was all the lead hound said and released Sandra.

She made a whistle which sounded to me like the chirping of a Red Mor. Two of the hounds moved wordlessly towards Sandra. They produced a vial of some iridescent green liquid.

“Keep your filthy magic to yourself. I don’t want it.”

The lead hound coldly regarded Sandra. “You’ll die. Hold her down.”

Sandra attempted to shove the two hounds off. The first put her in a choke hold, and the second went about rubbing the liquid on her injuries. She trashed like a toddler in their grasp, but the wound on her leg closed with remarkable speed.

. The lead hound stalked over to me. “Your clothing is that of a tradesmen. What did you do in Nira?”

“I worked the mint, ma’am.”

“You are far from home indeed, then. Do you have any information on the whereabouts of Dario Albari?”

“No, ma’am.” I tried to crane my neck to see if they were looking through my belongings, but the knife points at my temples told me it was best to look straight ahead.

“Nothing at all?”

“No, I’m sorry to disappoint you.” I hoped the coin wouldn’t arouse her suspicion.

“It’s a good thing, your story lined up with that scruffy boy over there. We don’t like liars.”

She looked at me like I was a Vari puzzle cube. I could be solved if she twisted me the right way. She whistled again, and the two hounds who held knives to my head relaxed their grip and produced the same liquid.

“Thank you, ma’am. I think I may have some broken ribs. And if you have any to spare, could I get some for my toes? They’re awfully cold.”

They laughed, and the lead hound spoke again. “You are free to go. Thank the New Drastonian Order for your lives. If you learn anything regarding the whereabouts of Dario Albari, you will be rewarded handsomely for it.”

At once, the hounds trailed off down the road towards the direction we came from. They flared their cloaks and vanished into the snow. I exhaled slowly. I hadn’t realized I was holding my breath. Fiege busied himself with running the pockets of the robber knights, but Sandra’s hadn’t moved at all. Her face was still a mask of anger and fear. Fiege and I made eye contact before I spoke.

“Sandra, are you alri—”

“Don’t. I almost lost my head, and for what? Thank the boy for your life. I thought it’d be better to leave you. Deadweight is never worth the trouble.”

“Ah, my apologies.” I stammered a little and turned away before she could see the tears in my eyes.

I made my way to the other side of the hill and stopped to pick up my belongings. I spent a moment trying to retrieve my pen but realized it was a fool’s errand. A shame. My sister had given it to me just before I left Drastongar for Nira. It was one of the only pieces of home I had

left. Fiege spent some time filling his quiver with fresh arrows and gave me a belt with a long knife sheathed on one side.

“She’s right, you know. We can’t have deadweight out here.”

“Right, deadweight.”

“Don’t take it like that. We both know you’re not cut out for this. She may have wanted to take off, but she didn’t. That should count for something. Besides, better to have a weapon and not need it than be caught without one.”

I took the blade from him. He was right, of course. I had stepped into a world in which I did not belong. The wild was for other people. My life so far kept me from staring the raw truth of the Empire in the face. Other people survived. I had grown rich and lazy. I looked down at my hands for the first time since the attack. There was a deep red stain on my skin. Fiege offered me a rag to wipe it off. I took it, but even after the stain was gone, I could feel it. I wondered how long that would last.

Fiege clapped me on the shoulder. “You had to do it, mate. He was gonna kill you.”

“I didn’t even hesitate to kill him. Didn’t even think once.”

“If you had thought, Sandra would be dead. Give her time. She’ll come around.”

How many people had he killed? He was still a boy, but there was a certainty in his eyes that said he had been in my position before. Sandra, as well. She was a soldier, and it was a soldier’s job to kill. To kill for the Empire. A pit formed in my stomach.

Fiege made a face that was something between understanding and pity. We sat down on a rock together. He pulled out a long wooden pipe from his satchel and began to pack it with waxleaf. In my youth, I had smoked the plant but kicked the habit as Master Grebbe had called it dirty and unprofessional. Fiege puffed and blew a ring. Wordlessly, he passed it to me, and I took



it. I tried to blow a ring of my own, but it had been too long. We sat there passing the pipe between us for several minutes.

Sandra's silhouette limped down the hill towards us until her face became visible through the snow. Her eyes were still wide, but her face no longer looked furious. She sat down on a rock near ours.

"I won't thank you for killing that man. It's the duty of a soldier to protect their comrades."

She had a strange way of showing gratitude. "Well, you're welcome, or not welcome, since you aren't thanking me."

"Close scrap, huh? I wasn't sure we'd walk out alive," Fiege chimed in. "Those hounds sure were scarier than when I saw 'em in the city."

"We shouldn't have. We were careless, and the enemy happened to rescue us."

I took another draw on the pipe. "They just saved our lives."

"And before that, they destroyed our home. Don't let their tricks fool you. I'm sure there are dozens, hundreds even, of those hounds patrolling the roads. They're rounding up the stragglers of note and killing those that get in the way."

"Then why save us?"

Sandra straightened and recited, "When conquering a foreign land, you must first remove the head of the dragon. Bribe its children, and they will lead you to their parent's hoard."

"Yes, I have also read Strategum. Not Guerrio's finest."

"You should have paid more attention, and you may have found yourself better prepared to deal with the current threat."

"The Albaris are done for, or they will be in short order if the hounds are on their trail."

“They’re craftier than you think.” Sandra cut me off, making a jabbing motion in the air.

“They won’t hand over the Nira after one attack.”

“Have you ever seen anything like this in war?”

“No. I have not.”

“Then, it’s not a matter of handing over. The battle was decided before the first stroke.”

“We came out of that alive, and you two are already back to arguing. Great Dragon, can we give it a rest? We’ve had enough luck for a lifetime today.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry, Sandra.”

She grimaced and motioned for Fiege to pass her the pipe. We stayed there for a good hour. We didn’t talk much. Words weren’t needed. The snow fell, and the birds wheeled overhead.

## Chapter II: Sufferings

Over the next several days, Fiege made good use of his bow to conjure up some meager game, but with the sudden unnatural change in weather, the usual prey were hunkering down for an early winter. The verdant green forests of the east wilted under the weight of the cold. The frost was a bone white parasite that ate the forest alive, but the small heat of our campfire was a much welcome reprieve from the carnivorous winter. The snows grew thicker. Creeks froze over. Winter had sunk its teeth into the bones of Eastern Drastonia.

Everyday we woke up before first light and traveled an excruciating distance through hill, wood, and valley. My joints ached, and the signs of another party traveling on the road gave us no comfort. If there was a fire large enough to be seen from a distance, we avoided it. Anyone brave enough to risk that was either stupid or dangerous. Mostly, we found ruined remains of campfires, but occasionally, a frozen body could be seen discarded by the trailside.

“We should bury her.”

“Great Dragon, banker. If we stop to bury every frozen corpse on the road we won’t make it to the border for another season.”

“She’s a child. She deserves a little kindness.”

“You can’t be kind to a corpse.”

“It’s important for people to have their last rites, Sandra.”

“Go join a cloister then. You can spend the rest of your days praying over the lost souls.”

“Does it not bother you at all?”

“I’m a soldier. If it means that much, go ahead. I won’t stop you, but I won’t wait around for tomorrow when you can’t walk from digging through the frozen dirt.”

“She’s right, Tam. But, let’s at least move her away from camp. I don’t want to sleep next to it, er, her.”

The image of her arm snapping off at the shoulder haunted my dreams. I awoke the next morning to the faintest embers of our fire and decided I would make breakfast. It couldn’t be too hard. Sandra had skewered the red bits of the rabbit Fiege had brought in and roasted them over the embers. I repeated the process with some of the bits we hadn’t eaten and sat back until they finished.

“You ought to be more careful, banker.”

“I didn’t realize you were up.”

“I’m always the first one up.” She sat across from me and poked at the embers with a charred stick. “I take it cooking wasn’t your strong suit in Nira?”

“Oh, no. The master had meals brought in for us most days, but I want to carry my weight.”

“You have a funny way of showing it.”

“I’m not sneaking the bigger portion for myself or anything. I just wanted to do something nice.”

“You’re roasting intestines, banker. I didn’t expect to have sausage out here in the wild.” She let out a raspy laugh.

I blushed and made to remove my attempt at a meal, but I knocked the skewer over which smothered the fire. A rancid smell began to fill the air.

“Wonderful. Get the boy up. I’ll take care of this.”

We ate charcoal smeared rabbit for breakfast. It was an old army trick Sandra picked up, but I think I would have preferred the intestines. After several miles of crunching through snowy wilderness, my legs wobbled.

The snow was at least three feet deep at any point on the path ahead, and off the road, it piled to the lowest bows of the trees. Marks where feet had punched through the snow provided the only sign of the Old Road's existence. I was about to call out for a rest when we broke through a treeline into an open field. A small village nested in the crook of a frozen creek.

It was altogether an unremarkable little hamlet. Fields of ruined crops dotted the landscape outside the village. There were maybe twenty single-story wood and stone buildings and a mill that looked like it had seen better days. A small palisade that was more like a big fence ringed the houses. It was situated along a low sloping hill surrounded by what would have been a thick green wood if not for the snow.

"Let's stop here for a night." I said. "I'd give ten imperials for a bed and a proper hearth."

"No. The longer we stay here the better chance of us getting caught up in another robber incident. We hold north until we hit Fort Stadenn."

"I could sneak in and lift some bread. They won't see a thing. Compared to Niran folk, they'll be an easy mark."

"These are our neighbors, Fiege. Where's your decency?"

"Neighbors? They live a hundred bloody miles from Nira."

"Forget it. We're not stealing from them."

"The fewer people we interact with the better. No getting tangled in other people's business," Sandra said.

“They could have food,” I pleaded. “And besides, I have some money. I can buy enough bread to last from here to Fort Stedem.”

“Stadenn.”

“Yes, yes. Just stop being stubborn.”

“Fine. But we’re not staying the night. Just a stop for provisions.”

Fiege and I both said in unison, “Agreed.”

As the three of us approached, there was no sound save for the light whipping of wind over the hill, and the occasional rattle of chimes common in the deep country of Eastern Drastonia. We made our way towards the house nearest the palisade.

“It’s quiet,” I said.

“Mhm, villagers always hide in war time. Soldiers can be greedy or worse,” Sandra replied in her low drawl.

“It’s like I said, more for us!”

“It’s a civil war. It’s awful enough seeing your countrymen kill each other. We needn’t steal from them as well.”

“Tamille Gordi, the great moralizer of our time,” Sandra threw a clump of snow at my head. “Trust me, they would do the same to us.”

“You don’t know that.”

“But, I do. War makes thieves of us all. I’m glad it’s quiet. No complications. I’ll admit it, banker. This was a good idea.”

“Exactly, Tam. Better live to regret it than starve with a good conscience. If they’re not here to do business, then let’s take what we can.”

Distaste pulled at the edges of her eyes, but Fiege was brimming with excitement. The place was a well-kept hovel with a low fence and coop around the back. Snow piled up against the threshold, and in the backyard, I saw three splotches of red. Blood, I thought at first, but as I looked harder, I realized they were frozen chickens. Fiege was knocking on the door, calling out to the peasants, but there was no reply. He tried twice before Sandra stopped him.

“Don’t think anybody’s home. Fiege, climb through that back window. On the double.”

“I don’t know,” I protested. “It feels wrong to be robbing from farmers.”

“If they know what’s good for them, they fled north. They won’t return until the fighting stops. Emperors and Lords hold little sway out here. If they’re lucky, this land wasn’t part of some knight’s fief. Otherwise, they’re being marched to the front.”

“Fief or not, we should still afford them the dignity we give to all Imperial citizens.”

Sandra huffed, “What dignity? For the last few weeks all I’ve seen is Imperials killing each other.”

“Don’t mock me. You know what I—”

The door swung open. I hadn’t noticed Fiege slipping through the back window, but he stood there grinning at us like a proud puppy. He performed a small bow with a flourish which earned a laugh from Sandra. It was nice seeing her let loose a little, but the whole affair still didn’t sit right with me. She pushed past me into the one roomed house. I threw up my hands.

There were three beds, one larger than the rest, and a plain table with chairs was pushed up against the back wall. A small window let in the frigid light of midday. Plain wooden craftsmanship made up the bulk of the large room except for the stone counter of the kitchen which nestled in the back left corner.

Fiege flopped onto the largest of the three beds and stretched out like a tomcat. Not wanting to participate, I sat at the table. Fiege's boots had scuffed the window frame, and I busied myself picking at the splinters. A plethora of dried herbs for cooking hung from the ceiling. Despite myself, I was enjoying the fragrant air.

Sandra rummaged through the kitchen. She flung a few loaves of stale bread and some scraps of dried meat up onto the countertop. Out of the corner of my eye, Fiege tossed the house. A few shiny trinkets made their way into his pockets. I stared out the back window. Survival or not, this was distasteful. The frozen chicken corpses seemed to point north, but it must have been my imagination.

We had all grown up on tales of the barbarous Northanders. They were disparate city-states feuding over the scraps left out of the Empire's grasp. Once, they had contented themselves with wars in the North, but now, they had bound together in opposition of Drastonian rule. I was fleeing into their arms, watching my countrymen descend into the very barbarity we were raised to disdain. I was now a murderer and a thief. I wonder how many people had become like me in the last few weeks. I was raised to respect the law of the land, but it wasn't written for this time.

"What is it, banker?" Sandra asked. "Don't tell me you're all broken hearted over us taking some food. It'll go to waste out here."

"No. I'm glad we'll be fed. I'm not feeling well."

"Get up. I know that look. Best not to dwell on the past in abandoned places." She offered me a hand and pulled me off the stool. "It's a three-day journey till we hit the border fort. I need you with me, not with your head in a storm cloud."

"Look, I appreciate you trying to cheer me up but don't patronize me."



“Who’s pack do you think all the food is going into? I’m not going to be bear bait.”

I looked over to see Fiege stuffing my pack with the provisions.

She whispered to me, “In the last northern campaign, the first thing they taught new recruits was how to ignore the screams on the battlefield-”

“I’m not a soldier.”

“I know that. Listen to me. When we fought the Port Farisan army, the screams were awful. I still get nightmares.” She patted me once on the shoulder. “You’re not alone out here.”

“I think we’ve tossed this place pretty thoroughly. You two done chattin’?”

“The fort is the only way we don’t end up turned into arrow pincushions,” Sandra said. “They are Northland wilders that patrol the border. Follow my lead. We’ll push another seven miles and then make camp.”

We followed the Old Road to the opposite side of the village. There were faint impressions of tracks in the snow. They looked several days old, but there were a few dozen sets that followed the path out the other side of the village. Near the edge of the wood, huge gaps of snow dotted the field. The trees nearest the gaps were charred black as death. Sandra and I noticed at the same time, and both rested our hands on our weapons. She scanned the horizon, and Fiege obviously smiled up at the cloudy, gray sky.

My eye followed a set of tracks to the edge of the snow covered road where a large lump rose above the embankment. Another splotch of red blossomed from the bottom of the pile. I strained my eyes to get a better look. The tips of two fingers poked out of the center of the red blossom. Sandra saw it too. I rushed forward.

“Tamille, it could be an ambu-”

I disregarded her. Shoveling armfuls of snow off of the lump, I exposed a man. His body contorted unnaturally, and brown eyes rolled slowly in his head. His gaze was unfocused, but it seemed to settle on me. He let out a slight wheeze.

“H..Huhhh..” he reached up his arms towards me.

Within moments, Sandra and Fiege saddled up beside me and helped pull the man upright. Gently, we laid him against the snowbank. His skin had the purple tone of frostbite, and several jagged slashes criss-crossed his body from clavicle to knee. The hand that poked through the snow was detached from the rest of his body. He was rigid. There was little we could do but make him comfortable.

“Who did this to you?” Fiege’s voice sounded as if he was running from a truth he knew but could not comprehend.

“Huhhh...hounds,” he sputtered. “Came...askin’ after the boy. Five...days past...He fled...They attacked.”

Sandra’s face heated. “Why would they do such a thing?”

“I...don’t,” the man’s face darkened. “I...don’t.”

“Let him be. We need to keep moving,” Fiege said, his eyes darted looking for those shimmering cloaks. “And for my part, the less I know the better.”

“Then you two go, I ease his passing.” Sandra’s expression was grim.

My chest tightened. More killing. It was an act of mercy. Still, this barbarism was infecting the country to its foundation if areas this remote could not live in peace.

“No, let me do it. I found him. It should be my responsibility.” The words left my mouth, but they didn’t feel like my own.

Sandra looked at me with surprise. “You’re brave, banker, but let an old soldier do her duty.”

Her eyes turned down, but it was the first time her gaze felt friendly. As friendly as she could be anyways. It was best to leave an execution in the hands of the experienced, and I was not eager to add another taken life to my consciousness. Yes, best to leave it to those experienced with death dealing.

“Right. We’ll give you some space,” was all that I managed to get out. I felt embarrassed somehow.

As Fiege and I made our way up the road, there were two dozen or so large snow bumps spread about the ruined crop fields, and beyond them, were more stretching out to the woods until the snowfall obscured my vision. Fiege followed my gaze. He ran a hand over his head leaving flakes of snow in his bandana and dirty blond hair.

Death did not suit this place, but it was here. It had feasted on this village, devoured it, like the winter devoured the landscape. Somehow death suited Nira, or at least, it made sense why death had come there. Lords and soldiers were ready for death, but this was senseless. Even if the Emperor himself had fled here, these people deserved better. It was too much. I looked away from the field.

Fiege did not look away. His eyes fixated on each mound, and he muttered under his breath. I dared not break the silence. In my mind, I buried each and everyone of them and left the village without looking back.

### Chapter III: The Hill

The arcane winter loomed over the Old Road like a beast closing in for the kill. The snow fell in such great quantities that it obliterated the path ahead of us. Without Sandra, the endless stretches of gnarled trees were nothing more than a labyrinth, but she guided us along through broken tree limbs and disruptions in the endless snowy slate.

The snowfall thickened again, and our mood soured further. Sandra looked at me, but my eyes darted away. Fiege walked behind us at a good ten paces. He did not lose or make ground. Sandra marched us forward until we made camp for the night. We ate a decent meal for the first time since fleeing Nira. The stale bread and meat was a king's feast compared to charcoal rabbit, but I was full after just a few bites. Instead of eating, I watched the tiny embers of our campfire dance.

I broke the silence. "I never appreciated just how comforting fire can be amidst total darkness."

There was a long moment of silence before Fiege spoke. "I'm not so sure. I almost like it better when there's no fire at all. Easier to sleep when you can't make out any shapes in the dark."

"It's a tool," Sandra said. "And a necessary risk."

There was another long stretch of silence. Fiege's face looked a mix of hunger and sadness. He also could only manage a few bites of bread.

"Both of you, eat. We have to keep moving forward."

There was another long pause before Fiege picked up his bread and nibbled on it. I followed his lead and forced the food down.

As he chewed, he broke the silence. "Those people...the ones in the village."

I flinched away but Sandra spoke. “What about them?”

“I can’t wrap my head around it. Why?”

“Maybe the Albari boy was with them. I doubt it though. More likely it was for a laugh, or they were bored, or they were annoyed to be stuck patrolling the back country while the Consular wages war in the cities.”

I tried to think of something insightful to say, but all that came out was, “Great Dragon.”

Another long silence was disrupted only by the sounds of chewing bread. When I finished my portion, a queasiness settled over me. My stomach was full, but my head spun. Sandra turned and faced the dark. The limbs of trees seemed to reach out and pull her away.

“Before I laid him to rest, he told me that he and some others tried to fend off the hounds while those who couldn’t fight ran. They didn’t stand a chance.”

“Some of my friends from the academy went to train with the mages. From what I understand, there’s no fighting them. Magic was the backbone of the Empire, and they knew it.”

“We’ll find a way.” The shadows cutting across her face made her furrowed brow look like the visage of a demon.

“We?”

“Get some sleep, Tamille. I’ll take the first watch.”

Before the first light, Sandra woke us. She stayed up the whole night. We held an intense stare for a moment, and her eyes dared me to make a comment. I brushed off the light snow blanket and ate another ration of bread. Sandra was our guide, but more often, she stopped and made Fiege scurry up a tree to call out the landmarks. With the thickening snowfall, the method was growing less and less effective by the hour.

We trudged through a forest of elm and oak for a half a day when we heard the first battle cries. Snow shook from the trees with each thwack of a distant war drum. The low hills gave way to a thickly wooded ridgeline, and the Drastonian *March of the Griffin* boomed over the hills. Then, a great shout like waves crashing against rock thundered, and metal rang out against metal. Then came the distinct screams of pain I learned in Nira. We stooped low over the ridge. At the crest, we glimpsed our first sight of the battle.

A thousand-man melee raged at the bottom of the ridge. The colors of many minor noble houses fighting against a force of House Albari soldiers mingled in the valley below. They thrashed against each other like two bodies of amorphous giants. They would swell into each other, and then back the other way. From such a great distance, I couldn't see any one man perish, but the heavy smell of iron carried on the wind. Death was in the valley. Sandra perched at the lip of the ridge. Her face contorted into the same look from the night before. It was almost a grin. She said nothing but stayed rooted to her spot for a quarter of an hour.

House Albari battered back the inferior force, but then, blue gateways blinked into existence on the far side of the field. They were caught in a pincer. Flares of magic bursted in brilliant colors throughout the field. House Albari soldiers scrambled in all directions. I hadn't much hope of the Empire being restored, but the red mist and charred corpses that were once Albari soldiers crushed any delusions. It wasn't long until some of the stragglers fled into the woods at the base of the ridgeline.

"We ought to be movin' on, yeah? Don't wanna get caught up in another scrap," Fiege said.

Sandra's gaze lingered on the field. "Right. No use wasting the daylight."

We walked on through the high ridgeline. The weather battered my dress shoes until ice and sludge tickled my socks. The slightly too small boots from the village house were a welcome replacement. My toes still ached from the frost, but they were dry. My mind wandered back to the village. The dead had no use for boots. I imagined the farmer they belonged to giving them to me as a gift, but all I could see was my long knife plunged into his chest. I looked down at my hands. The blood stain was gone, but I could feel it still.

We trudged forward through the forest. The snow was unrelenting. I knew if I stopped moving, I would become another lump of snow for some other poor soul to agonize over. The cold stung the inside of my ears. It whispered to me. Dared me to lay down for a little while. My shoulders hunched over my body in a desperate attempt to cling to the meager warmth of my coat. I had to keep moving. The forest became Nira in my mind, but I could not see its beauty. There was only a burning city. Despite my best effort to dispel the fantasy, I gave up and instead tried to focus on the warmth of a city in flames. I wasn't sure where I'd rather be.

The only comfort I could find in the patch of trees we made camp in was that tomorrow was supposedly our last day of trekking through the wilderness. I pulled out more stale bread and Sandra made another meager fire.

“You two should be prepared for tomorrow. Fort Stadenn is large enough to house an army. We never were able to lay siege to it, but the soldiers hold a deep disdain for Imperials. Still, I'd take a prison cell over another day in this cold. If it gets any worse, I don't think we'll last.”

The snow was now constant. Not just flakes, it came down in chunks, and in the low evening light, the snow stopped all vision after ten feet.

I turned to her and spoke through chattering teeth. “You should get rid of your armor. Lower the chance of an incident.”

“I can’t do that.”

“For once, he’s right, Sandra. You’ve led us this far. I’m grateful, but it’s more likely to cause a fight than anything.”

“I said no. It’s important to me. You have your book, Tamille, and I have my armor. Through me to the dogs if it comes down to it, but I won’t part with it.”

“Fine. But I’m taking watch tonight. You get some sleep.”

She didn’t protest. We ate and said our goodnights. Truthfully, the night terrified me, but I feared sleep more. It felt too inviting. If I gave in now, I was certain I wouldn’t wake.

At first light, I prepared a rationing of our stale bread and meat for the three of us. I woke the two of them. Sandra and I stared at each other once again.

“You can’t do this without sleep, banker.”

“Neither can you. Besides, I’m not the one who can get us to the fort. Call it carrying my weight.” I uncurled myself from the fire embers and tried to lighten the mood. “I am ready to get back to civilization. A fire and a cot would suit me well.”

That earned a chuckle from both of them, and indeed, the mood was lighter than it was the day before. We were close. Even the intense snowfall of the previous day had slowed to a slow pattering.

“We just might survive this whole ordeal,” Fiege said.

“Tamille’s rubbing off on you too much.”

“And what’s wrong with that? Fancy words suit me.”



The unease of the last few days seemed to melt away. It was enough for me to ignore my frozen limbs. In fact, I felt all together warm. It was a miracle of the Great Dragon.

“Listen up! Tamille, you look like a blueberry. Give me twenty jumping stars now. I want you warmed up and ready to march.”

“I feel fine. In fact, I feel better than I have in days.”

“That’s because you’re freezing to death. Didn’t they teach you about that at the academy?”

“Freeze to death? Maybe if I buried myself. I’m not going to-”

“That’s an order. You’ll thank me by the end of the first mile. And since you think it’s so funny, join him, Fiege.”

“Yes, general.” Fiege stood at rigid attention.

The jumping stars were helpful. My limbs had turned to leaden blocks overnight without my notice. I was grateful for her vigilance, but after the tenth set, my gratitude wore thin.

After about a quarter day's travel, we descended the heavily wooded ridge to a flat icy plain. The tall evergreens of the ridge gave way to thick deciduous trees which in turn gave way into barren icy dunes. The tracks we relied on to follow the Old Road returned. Every now and then, several sets of footprints and even some cart tracks marred the perfect surface of the snow.

Along the path, a sharp stone marked with faded yellow paint jutted out of the snow.

“What are those? They look like knobs.” Fiege asked.

“Markers for the Old Road. They still maintain it in the Northlands.”

“That means we-”

“We crossed the border.”

The snowy plain gave way to an open marshland, but as we moved closer, most of the marsh was frozen solid. The old road snaked in and out of the marsh. Cattails and other tall grasses were encased completely in ice. They looked like large sharp pikes, and the ground was covered in a thousand frozen mirrors all reflecting the brilliant sun. The icy landscape shimmered in the light making the whole place feel radiant. My eyes watered, and I shielded them with my hand.

Sandra gestured to a large hill far off in the distance. It was bald in several places as if a giant had ripped out its own hair. “See that hill? We fought over it for days. It was a key staging point for the last battle of the expansion campaign. My company and several others were stationed there.”

“Well, what happened,” asked Fiege.

“We were trounced. The main core of the army was attacked on the eve of battle by a dragon rider, and my company was forced to hold out for reinforcements. They swarmed us from all sides and we got pinned at the top. Our general,” she trailed off for a moment. “Left us there. We were a lost cause, and she pulled back all our forces. That was the end of the battle and the end of the war.”

“How did you escape?” Maybe that was rude to ask, but curiosity got the better of me.

“Luck. Pure damn luck. That dragon was picking us off, and we made a suicide charge to get a young Castor Albari through enemy lines. It was our one job to save his life. We broke through by some miracle of the Great Dragon.”

“Must’ve been some battle,” Fiege said.

Sandra smirked but it quickly became a flat frown. “I took an arrow in the back of my knee when we charged through. By the time we met up with the main column, it was infected. Another miracle they didn’t have to amputate it, but well...you’ve seen what it did to me.”

A silence fell over us. Fiege and I regarded Sandra solemnly.

“Don’t pity me.”

“You should have been honored as a hero.”

“Yeah, it ain’t fair.”

“War rarely is. I haven’t been here since it happened. You’re the only ones who know the full tale.”

“Why’d you wait so long?”

“Fiege!”

“What?”

She threw a snowball at him and marched us onward like a commanding officer.

We pushed through the marsh and into a hilly forest on the other side. The trees drooped under the weight of ice clinging to their branches. Icicles dangled overhead, occasionally breaking off and causing a sharp cracking sound. No matter how many times it happened, Sandra and Fiege jumped and readied their weapons. I joined at first, but after a while, I grew tired of it. More often than not, I fumbled the long knife at my hip out of its sheath only to drop it into the snow. My fingers ached, and when I touched the metal pommel, the thing sent a cold burn up my arm.

Fiege walked some forty paces ahead on the path. The end of the wood lay just ahead, but the blinding white light made it impossible to see what lay beyond. Sandra and I walked side by side.

“I am starving. I need a break soon.”

“My leg is pounding like the Imperial Bell, banker. Just another mile. Then we rest.”

Fiege stopped at the edge of the bright light. “Great Dragon!”

He fell to his knees. Sandra and I shared a worried look before she shoved me in the back. “You’re faster. Get up there.”

There was no need to repeat the message. I started moving before the shove. My frigid legs ached with the tension of road travel, but I reached him in seconds.

“What’s the matter? Are you alright?” I looked past the edge of the wood into the blinding light. Nothing was wrong. Nothing at all. Tears streamed down my cheeks and froze.

Down a packed snow path, at the end of a hilly valley stood a massive fortress. Its large outer wall unfurled like a grandfather welcoming you for a visit. Its keep spiraled upward like a jagged tooth. At the top of each of its four spires flew a banner with a red goat on a green field which seemed to wave me down the path to safety.

Outside the gate stood a blob of brown and gray shapes. At first, the bright snow caused more tears to well in my eyes which promptly froze. Shielding my eyes from the light, a massive tent city sprawled out from the base of the fortress like a wave.

Some thousands of little pitched homes dotted the landscape, and people bustled all about alongside beasts of burden and carts. Great Dragon, there were cookfires. My mouth began to wet. I wanted to dance and sing but settled for a frigid hop into the air. The words were stuck in my throat. I croaked like a toad and spun around. Sandra called something from down the path and waved her arms, but I did not hear her. I fell to the ground as well and embraced Fiege. Tears ran down both our faces, and our laughter filled the air. When Sandra reached the edge of the wood, she was giving a verbal lashing, but she quieted at the sight before us.

She placed one arm on our shoulders. "We made it."

## Chapter IV: A Taste of Home

Seeing safety gave us a second wind. We practically skipped down the snow-packed path. The exhaustion and challenges of the road ceased to exist for the moment, but somewhere in the valley, a horn brought our glee to a prompt end. It sounded clear and sharp like glass, and it echoed six times one after the other. Within a minute, rapid movement galloped towards us from the road that bisected the camp. Six polished gleams of barded horses and armor glided across the snowy plain with one at the head bearing the standard of Port Farisan. The weight of my limbs settled back onto my body. The cold whispered through the trees behind us. Death was behind and ahead.

The fight with the robber knights leapt into my mind. We escaped that by happy chance; we couldn't hold our own against six mounted soldiers. I glanced over at Sandra's armor.

"Is that a friendly horn?" My attempt to keep the nervousness out of my voice failed.

She followed my eyes to the emblem on her breastplate and frowned. "They have no love for the Empire. Back off a few paces from me. If they won't listen, make for the trees."

"If they try to hurt you, I'll kill 'em." Fiege's face flashed anger and he knocked an arrow in his bow string.

"No. Keep going. Both of you. There's a life worth living in Port Farisan."

She excluded herself from that. I wanted to protest, but there was no time. The riders were a mere thirty paces away and closing. The sun and the snow reflected in their armor, and it caused me to flinch.

There was galloping, then the sounds of hooves sliding on packed snow, then soft snorts. When I looked back, they were right in front of us. The woman bearing the standard looked jovial for a soldier. She wore a frumpy smile, and her red hair and freckles poked out of the

edges of her pushed-up visor. She studied us the way a parent studies their child when they catch them in a lie.

Her voice was sharp and left no room for negotiation. “Lay your weapons down, Imperial scum.”

I needed no second reminder. Clumsily, I fumbled with the long knife at my side and cast it down into the snowy embankment. Likewise, Fiege laid his bow, quiver, and knife down on the path in front of him. Sandra stared at the standard bearer defiantly. The standard bearer cocked her eyebrow.

“Please, don’t mind her. Our journey has taken a lot out of us all. We want no quarrel.”

“What he said. No quarrels or anything else like that.”

“It’s just a sword, Sandra. Please.”

Her eyes seethed, but she unfastened the scabbard and thrust the point deep into the snow. That was a warrior’s sign of disdain, but the standard bearer ignored it.

“A wise choice,” the standard bearer intoned. Her companions furrowed their brows at the sword thrust into the snow. “Raise your arms above your head and keep them there until I say otherwise. Assuming you are not carrying any contraband on your persons, you will be permitted your small arms back, but the sword shall be confiscated and deposited in the keep’s armory.”

“Just my sword?”

“Imperial Army weapons are contraband in Port Farisan. You can take it and leave if you like.”

No northern law that I knew said as much. Three of the riders dismounted. The three who remained on horseback, including the standard bearer, aimed thick crossbows at our heads. A

bead of sweat formed on my temple which quickly froze. The dismounted soldiers approached slowly and began their search.

The soldier who searched me was a hearty-looking man. Stocky and with light brown hair and a beard, he was the textbook image of a Northlander. He started by grabbing my arms and running a tight grip down the length of them before swatting my front and back with his large paw-like hands. He repeated the process with my legs and buttocks.

After he was finished with me, he collected my smattering of personal effects and looked them over. He creased and slightly tore the front cover of my book. Typical Northlanders. He sat my things on the ground in front of me before giving me a rough smile. I smiled back. Things were going well.

It was then I heard from Sandra's direction, "Ma'am, what should we do about this Imperial soldier?"

My stomach hollowed. I glanced over in Sandra's direction, still extending my hands towards the cloudy sky.

"Are you a deserter?" The disgust in the standard bearer's voice was clear.

Sandra's face tensed at first but relaxed with effort. "No. Just a retiree who can't let go of the past."

"Did one of ours give you that crooked leg?"

Sandra's face flared up again, but she kept her tone even if not calm. "What do you think?"

The standard bearer lifted her crossbow towards the sky. "Good. Welcome to Fort Stadenn."



The three soldiers who searched us returned to their horses picking up Sandra's sword as they went. One handed it to the standard bearer who slung it across her saddle bag. Another of the other soldiers pocketed the little amount of waxweed Fiege had left. The three of us shared a haggard look. The standard bearer trotted to the end of the troop and blew a clear note on a brass horn. As they rode back towards the fortress, the sound echoed five times from further down the valley.

"You alright?" Fiege asked.

She held her face up to the sky. "That sword hasn't left my side since I was a fresh-faced girl just out of officer school."

"We won't leave here without it. Northlander law was one of my electives at the academy and-"

They both began to laugh causing my face to flush.

Sandra smiled at me. "I can never make up my mind whether you're too good for the world or if you're just a fool."

"I don't-"

"You don't need to understand. I might take you up on that if need be."

We walked to the tent city outside of Fort Stadenn. The faint gleam of the rider's armor disappeared into the fortress gates.

I shivered. The nervous sweat which worked its way from my head to my toes was now freezing. With so many fires in sight, I took it as refreshing. The sounds of our crunching footsteps filled me with an impending sense of doom for the last two weeks, and while I was no longer afraid of freezing to death, the dozens of gleaming soldiers that dotted the camp told me I

had not reached safety. I was a tolerated guest. I looked over my two companions. Sandra's face worked as it usually did from stormy to cool and back to stormy again.

I took the long knife from my belt and handed it to her. "I know it's not the same, but here."

"Didn't I say not to pity me?"

"It's a gift. I can't imagine you'd be comfortable here without a weapon."

"Thank you." She smiled warmly at me.

As we neared the camp, the weight of our journey settled on me. My world was thrashed, and it was a miracle of the Great Dragon that I came out the other side. "It's the least I can do, and there's more to come when we get to Port Farisan."

"I think I'll keep going. Find a caravan and see the north. When I was a girl, I thought it would all be part of the Empire, and I'd be the conquering hero. You were right, Tamille, but I was too stubborn to see it. The Empire is done for. Time to move on."

"That sounds like a load of fun. Maybe I'll join you."

"I thought you were going to get cozy in the coin-making business, kid."

"Makin' a fortune on the road sounds like the life for me."

Sandra laughed hard. "There's no fortune in being a soldier for hire. Trust me. But I think you'll do well wherever you end up. Think about it some more. If you have the itch when we make it to Port Farisan, I'll train you."

They said it so matter of factly that it took me by surprise. I was so engrossed in our little journey that I forgot how little we knew each other. We were all still relative strangers. Road companions. I frowned a little at a stone and kicked it.

We passed by the first tents of the encampment. Even from about thirty paces out, my nose tingled with the distinct smell of people crowded together. Food, sweat, fire, hay, and animals blended into a dissonant harmony. Smoke tingled my nose. A camp where a tent had gone up in flames was empty save for a small girl knelt beside the charred husk. Animals bulldozed people out of the way, and from a ways into the throng, a soldier was beating a woman who held her hands up and cried for mercy.

The people were frail and sunken. Some eyed us as we entered the camp. A group of thugs moved in our direction, but when Sandra drew her knife, they backed off. They were interested in easy prey.

Small kitchens sporadically appeared throughout the camp. Remnants of village militia and deserted soldiers guarded the towering boxes of stale army rations and the scraps of food taken from homes. A knife fight ended in one dead man and a ruined sleeping bag. Faces looked aged. Even the children bore an air of knowing. There were enough stories here to write ten volumes. More Imperial citizens were living off scraps than I had ever seen.

Most looked like they were from the East, but here and there, I spied the fashions and emblems of Falra and Karst. No one wore the fashions of Drastongar. I never stopped sending my family money after father passed, but what good would it do in the face of the Consular's terrible magic.

We passed by a semi-circle of carts, looking for an unoccupied space to claim in when someone in the throng called out. "Tamille! Tamille Gordi! Is that you? Great Dragon, it is! C'mere you bastard."

I whipped my head around to see Garred Falira. He was an older man. Tall and lanky, he gave the impression of a billowing reed when he walked, and he had worked in the scriptoria

across Hazellidor's Square since I was a young apprentice. We were not close, but he had always been kind to me. He was one of those neighborly acquaintances that made you feel like you belonged in a place.

My father and he had been great friends or so I heard. They trained together in Drastongar, but there was a falling out that I never got the chance to ask about. I missed him. I wondered what he would have told me, or what he would have to say to his old friend.

Garred had always been a thin man, but he looked positively gaunt. His cheeks were sallow, and his eyes looked heavily lidded. I imagined I looked much the same.

Inside the semi-circle of carts, there were about three dozen Niran citizens. Some of them I recognized in passing from the other trades shops around the square. They were a shot of brandy in the unrelenting cold.

I rushed over and clasped his hand. "It's good to see you, friend. I thought I was the only one who made it out of Hazellidor alive."

"They weren't too keen on murdering scribes. That, or the Great Dragon was watching over me. My family and a few others from our neighborhood managed to flee the day after the attack. By that time, the Albaris gathered in the north of the city, but the Consular was hammering them the entire time. I can't imagine they held out much longer."

"Great Dragon," I trailed off for a moment. "Well, I'm glad you made it."

He smiled sadly. "If only we were all so lucky."

There was no need to ask his meaning. Whoever it was, I closed my eyes and muttered a kind word in the traditional way. He seemed to catch the gesture and patted my shoulder.

"So, who are your companions, Mr. Gordi?"

“Ah, my manners. This is Sandra and Fiege. I met them on the road, and they are the reason I stand before you now.”

Sandra and Fiege offered up their greetings which Garred returned in kind before I chimed back in. “You wouldn’t happen to have any spare tents, would you? The three of us made it all the way here without any such provisions, but if you have some to spare, I should be much in your debt.”

He looked back towards the camp for a moment and furrowed his brow. “Well, yes. We lost some folks on the road. Frostbite. I’ll trade you the space for food if you have any. We have enough room for you all though one of you will be sharing a tent with a sickly man. Poor lad. His whole village was cut down by those mangy dogs.”

“You saw hounds on the road as well?” Fiege blurted out. He was nothing if not curious.

Garred lowered his voice. “Aye, lad. They’ll cut down anyone for a laugh. Great Dragon curse them. Let us not speak of the matter. The soldiers here are not as dull as they seem.”

“Believe us, we understand. Thank you for your hospitality,” Sandra spoke before turning to Fiege and I. “I’m not sharing a tent with a sick man. You two figure it out.”

“I call the clean tent.” Fiege quickly belted out before giving me a mischievous grin.

“Fine, I’ve been freezing my toes off in this cold. A little sickness won’t kill me.”

“I half expected you to pitch a fit, banker.”

“I’m not a bank-nevermind.” They both let out a chuckle.

Garred gave a soft smile to us. “Keep your wits about you. Sleep with a knife. Earn your keep. And, most importantly, don’t talk to the soldiers. Welcome to our camp.”

We gave him the rest of our stale bread and meat. He pointed to my tent and then to his cart where the unused one lay. With that, he gave a simple bow and turned to attend his family.

“Not bad, banker,” Fiege said.

“Minter.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I helped them pitch their tent before sitting down around the large fire at the center of the camp. My shoulders slumped. I looked up into the sky. Despite the cold and hunger, I felt safe for the first time in weeks. It wasn't home, but it was damn near close enough. It was good to be around other Nirans. Not that it had done much good in the city, but the fighting would not reach here. Surely, not.

The camp mother laid a bowl of soup in my hands without my asking. I tried to protest, but she shushed me and kept on her way. It was a meager meal of corn and carrots in a steamy broth. A hot meal. Never had I eaten anything so delicious in my life. The warmth of it made me weep. I devoured it greedily, and when I had finished, she gave me another bowl.

Again, I tried to refuse. A quick slap on the head with her wooden ladle was the only permission I needed to devour the second. “We feed you well today. Only two meals tomorrow, and you work, yes?”

She did not give me time to respond before she was shuffled off towards Sandra with another bowl of broth. Warmth spread from my stomach to my limbs. For a moment, the winter could not touch me. I wanted to leap into the air and shout, but I settled for a third helping instead.

## Chapter V: A Question in the Dark

It's remarkable how quickly you forget the long dark of the night when people surround you. On the Old Road, I was all too aware of the night's slow creep. The shadows were its arms, and the wind, its teeth. Little distracted me from how alive it was save the endless snowy expanse. I watched darkness envelope the world until our little campfire cut its tiny pocket. Now, the light of several fires lifted an invisible tension from my shoulders.

The tent with the sickly man was closest to the fire. That was something to be grateful for, and the prospect of sleeping with a roof, even a cloth one, was enough to dispel any gripes about sickness. I lifted back the fold of the tent to reveal a small, warm space. The canvas exterior of the tent blocked out almost all the wind, but the camp noises still crept under the folds. Even that was better than the endless quiet of the dark. A bundle of cloth huddled on the far side of the tent facing away from me. The sick man, I presumed.

"Hello," I started. "Nice to meet you."

The pile shifted and some low noises emitted from it. I strained my ears to catch any intelligent speech, but it was a series of groans followed by a short cough. He turned towards me, and his eyes flashed a fiery brown in the slit of firelight that carved an orange streak across the canvas wall. His eyes held the same look that everyone's did, but there was an arrogance to it, a certainty that things should not be this way.

"Well, don't mind me. Just going to catch some sleep."

Sleep came quickly. A warm blanket and a roaring fire within three paces felt like a royal bedchamber. I dreamed of Nira. Its tall white marble towers and silver-tipped domes. It was spring. I walked to the mint my usual way, but all around me there were soldiers. House Albari

and Consular Arcanum soldiers strolled up and down the street. The city burned all around. No one seemed to notice. It grew cold. The fires spread. I was running.

I jolted up early in the morning, my hand reaching for a long blade at my side that was no longer there. From the corner of my bleary vision, I saw the lump of blankets spin rapidly from sitting to lying down again. I caught a glimpse of his face from between the folds of the fabric. He looked handsome and once well built, but his form sagged with malnutrition. Long curly brown hair seemed to be matted to his head.

I rubbed my head and made my way out of the tent folding a blanket around me like a fur cloak. To my delight, Mr. Falira sat by the fire stoking it with a long, charred stick. A small kettle rested on a spit above the blaze

I shuffled over to him and took a seat on a crate. “Good morning. Manage to bring some coffee despite it all?”

“A good morning to you, Mr. Gordi, and no, I traded the Port Farisan soldiers some boxes of stationery. Shame to waste such good paper on military messages, but I thought some small luxury would raise our spirits.”

“That’s wise and more importantly, warm.”

He gestured for me to pick up a small, tarnished pewter cup. “Right, you are.”

The dark liquid filled the cup, and my hands felt life rush into them. I clutched the vessel up to my chest and let the warmth of it spread throughout my body.

“Do you think you’ll find work in Port Farisan?” I burned my tongue as I asked.

“There are always people who need something written down. Lords, merchants, guild artists. The only hurdle I foresee is my blood. I fear for our people.”

“I’ve heard Port Farisan is a flourishing spot of culture in the north.”



He grunted. “Those barbarians wouldn’t know culture if it impaled itself on their pikes. They’re warmongers, but once we cross the border, Nira will be safe. At least for a while.”

“I suppose we’re all that’s left.” A dreary silence fell over us, and I moved quickly to change the subject. “Did you manage to save any books?”

I traded him my copy of *Aen Falae em Andoniel* for his copy of *History of Nira: Village to Imperial Territory*. The large tome had a wooden frame and brown engraved leather stretch across the covers. It was a pretty thing. We sat and enjoyed the quiet of the morning absorbed in our new books.

Both animals and people stirred about the camp when I reached the section about the proud lineage of House Albari. The general information, I already knew. They were petty kings of the territory until Drastonia conquered them. I imagined Sandra scaling the walls and making Lord Albari bend the knee to the Imperial throne. Now the Albari’s were-well mostly dead, I guessed. A shame. They were fair rulers. A Port Farisan soldier rode by on his horse staring down at an unfurled scroll. He was a crier.

As he neared I could make out, “By order of the King of Port Farisan, our southern border is to remain closed until such time as one Dario Albari is found. Refugees shall be permitted to camp outside of Fort Stadenn until such time as it is reasonable to return to your homes or until this person is turned over to us. Any information regarding the whereabouts of this individual should be given directly to the nearest camp guard.”

He went on repeating the same script as his horse trotted by. I looked over to Garred, and he shook his head.

“They’ve been saying that since we arrived. When we got here, there were already mountains of people from Kathlan and Castle Notar, but they were keenly interested in the Albaris.” Garred looked around solemnly.

“We may freeze to death before they find him.”

“They know that.” He slanted his eyes darkly over the brim of his cup. “Fear. It’s a powerful tool. Makes people do all sorts of things.”

My mind flashed back to the robber knight I killed. “Great Dragon, save us.”

Garred looked me over. His eyes studied me as if looking for some flaw on his stationery. I had seen him work before. Master Grebbe wanted a printed portfolio of our work for our clients. We had all of the documents, but Garred made them into works of art. He glanced around us, then back to me.

“Tamille, I’ve got to tell you something important. Our families may as well be one in the same. I need you to help me. It’d make your old man proud.”

Just then Fiege and Sandra walked around the nearest cart, and Garred stopped talking.

“Camp mother told us to bring you both breakfast. You’re lucky I didn’t swipe any for myself.”

“But you did eat some of their sausage, Fiege.”

“Just a bite!”

It was simple. Bread and hard sausage. Garred shifted his demeanor into that of an old grandfather. “Thank you, lad. Are you taking him on as an apprentice?”

“He has his heart set on guarding caravans, I’m afraid.”

“That’s no good, lad. Hard to meet a girl on the road.”

“I prefer quantity over quality.” He beamed at both of us before Sandra smacked him hard on the back of the head.

“I’m not going to let you ruin some poor northern girl's life. Great Dragon save me from the stupidity of boys.”

We all laughed. It was good to hear laughter again. Just then, the camp mother appeared. “You three! You’re on dish duty for the morning. Quickly now! Eat your breakfast and get to it. You’re going to earn your keep just like the rest of us.”

I turned back to Garred, but he smiled and waved me off. “Later, lad.”

As the three of us whittled down the mountain of dishes, my mood crept steadily downward. The hot water burned my wrists where it met the cold air. I mindlessly passed the dented and tarnished kitchenware. Idleness replaced the intensity of the road. At least out there, safety was more or less in my own hands. Now, it was a waiting game.

Fiege poked my side. “What’s got you down?”

“How long do you think we’ll last here? A week? A month? We’ll freeze to death or starve before they find Dario Albari. For all we know, he could be buried under several feet of snow somewhere outside Drastongar.”

“I’m not sure what else we can do but wait, Tam.” He leaned in close. “Worst comes to worse, the three of us leg it. We got this far, didn’t we?”

Somehow, I didn’t think it would be that simple. The camp mother dragged me around from chore to chore, by the time I returned to my tent, the exhaustion of the day forced lamenting out of my mind.

I fashioned a pillow out of some dirty linens. It wasn’t much, but it beat the cold ground. The sick man faced away from me. I turned away from him as well and tried to get some sleep.

After about two hours of tossing and turning, I gave up. I slit the tent just enough for a sliver of fire light to shine through and picked up my place in the book Garred lent me.

I read quietly for a while until the blanket pile shifted. The man made no noise save for a gentle snoring. Some of the coverings fell away revealing more of the curly head of brown hair. As I thought, it was matted, but as I moved the slit of the tent to allow a little more light, it was clear the matting had a slick shiny texture to it.

Gingerly, I moved the blanket the rest of the way off his head. It smelled of dull iron. It was blood, a significant head wound to be sure. Garred said he was sickly, but this required proper medical attention.

I leaned over to get a better look. My blood went cold. Colder than my journey through the blizzard. Colder than the day I learned my father died. Colder than the deepest remote hollow in the Northlands. I reached to my side and pulled out the freshly minted nirat. I opened the tent a little more to let the light in. Holding the coin, I was certain beyond doubt the man laying next to me was Dario Albari.

Dario stirred, and I held my breath. Slowly, I closed the flap of the tent and crept back to my side. My hands trembled. Garred was a mad man. The key to the border laid helplessly at my fingertips. I shook uncontrollably. I needed to calm down and think.

There were two options. I could turn him in or pretend this never happened. Great Dragon, there were children living in frozen tents. Still, it meant his doom if I turned him in. It was one step closer to the fall of the Empire. My mind flashed to the robber knight. I looked down at my hands. They were smeared with blood from Dario's blankets. The shaking would not stop.

I needed to find Sandra and Fiege. They would know what to do. I covered Dario's face with the blanket once again and made my way out of the tent.

Across the camp, a few individuals still milled about in the darkness. Their eyes looked me over, but the intensity of my stare forced them to flinch away. Most looked harrowed by some great unseeable force. I grimaced. Arriving at my companions tent, I gave the entrance two solid thwacks.

Sandra's gruff voice mumbled. "Who's there?"

"Let me in. We need to talk. Now."

There was another brief pause. Another thwack sound was followed by Fiege's disoriented groaning. The tent flap opened, and I made my way inside.

"What's the matter, Tam? You look frightened," Fiege said as the two of them scooted to make room for my sitting.

I stammered for a while, musing on how best to start before Sandra laid a firm hand on my back. "Come on, now. Spit it out."

"Dario Albari." They both raised their eyebrows to urge me on.

"He's asleep in my tent. It's not just some sick man. Garred must've found him outside the village. Looks like he took a nasty blow to the head. I don't know what he's thinking." I began to scratch my head nervously.

My words settled on them the way a boulder settles at the base of a mountain.

Sandra spoke first. "Great Dragon, save us. You have a knack for landing into trouble."

"We gotta turn him in. I heard it as plain as day. They want him bad. Those hounds were after him too. If we don't say something, we're as good as ghosts."

“We can’t turn him over to those dogs. Dario Albari may be the last thing that could restore our home.”

“The rich bastard never did anythin’ for me. I don’t see why we should all freeze to death over one nobleman. We can save these people!”

They both looked at me. Sandra’s face was grim, and Fiege looked ready to flee. “I’m not sure, Sandra. Saving thousands is as good an argument as one could hope for. They are the Empire too.”

“What about your friend that took us in?” That fire crawled into her eyes. “He’s clearly protecting him. Does it mean anything to you? They’ll kill him for harboring a fugitive. Maybe the whole camp, us included.”

I cast my face down. I couldn’t sit by anymore. I was through being the idler.

“As much as I want to believe in restoring Nira, I’m not a soldier, Sandra. I can’t fight a war. I can barely fight one man, but I can save these people. We can save these people.”

“Drastonian’s don’t turn on each other, or are you no better than the Consular dogs?”

“Your commander didn’t think so.”

My face flushed. “Fiege, that was uncall-”

As I spoke Sandra drew the long knife from its sheath and pointed it at the both of us. I gulped. Fiege stopped talking, thankfully.

“He didn’t mean that.”

“Oh, I think the little brat chose his words carefully. I won’t let the hope of our city die at the whims of two. It’s a shame. I liked both of you, ya know? Thought we’d be friends till our old age.” She leaned in close with the knife.

The book Garred lent me rested in the folds of my blanket. I fingered it delicately. Fiege stammered out apologies. Her eyes blazed with fury, and tears streamed down the corners.

I chose that moment to strike and hurled the hefty tome at her head. It collided with a dull crack. The tent collapsed on her in a heap as Fiege and I scrambled out. She let out a low growl, but Fiege kicked her in the temple before she could escape the canvas. The few late-night stragglers darted towards their own tents. I kneeled down and checked her heartbeat. Still there.

Fiege and I shared a determined look. “We’re doin’ this. Right, Tam?”

“Hurry. We don’t have a moment to waste.”

We flew as fast as we could to the nearest camp officer. A little ways up the main road, we found a Port Farisan soldier patrolling on horseback. Fiege caught his attention by raising his arms and shouting. I stopped to catch my breath.

A curt and interrogative, “Citizen,” ushered from him.

I looked at Fiege, and he gave me an affirming nod. “I’d like to report the location of Dario Albari. That is the deal, right? You get him, and the rest of us get to make our way to Port Farisan.”

“Yes, sir. The border closed so we could catch the villain. A word of warning though. False information will result in three days of stockades plus a flogging.”

My mind whirled as I produced the coin. “Well, this is a coin I made in Nira just before the city was attacked. His father, Lord Ricard, had it made to commemorate his son’s twentieth naming day. There’s a fellow all wrapped up in blankets in my tent that looks just like him.”

The soldier took my story in stride. He made curt nods every so often to indicate his attentiveness. When I was finished, he said, “Who else knows?”

“Just us,” Fiege cut in. “We came here as soon as he found out.”

It was near enough to the truth. “We only arrived a few days ago. If there’s punishment to be dealt, spare the angry soldier. She had nothing to do with hiding him.”

“I’ll be sure to tell the captain. You two have done a brave thing,” he said before putting a horn to his lips. “Return to your camp. Act as if nothing happened. And let me have that coin.”

I handed it over, and we walked back to camp. My feet seemed to sink deeper in the snow. Scheming against nobles and soldiers was too much. I shivered. As we returned, Sandra was nowhere to be seen. Immediately, Fiege scrambled towards my tent.

“He’s still in there,” he whispered. “Think she ran to?”

“No, but I hope she’s not doing something stupid.”

“She was pretty set on keeping him out of their hands. Great Dragon, she tried to kill us.”

His eyes were tight. The wetness of his eyes reflected in the low light of the fire. I stared blankly into the coals. In the hypnotizing dance of the embers, all I could see was my city burning.

A low dull note played on a horn from the darkness, and suddenly, the camp was crawling with soldiers. Port Farisan armsmen rode through on horses. Fiege pulled closer to me. My mouth dried as I caught the ephemeral flashing of a hound cloak in the dark.

They were here. Fiege caught it too. I felt his grip on me tighten. We locked eyes. The armsmen made a circle around my tent, and each rider pointed his spear down towards the canvas. The hounds flitted about on the edge of the fire light. Just as the one rider with a plumed helm made to speak, there was a great whinnying from up the road towards the fortress. I pulled Fiege as close as possible.

Out of the darkness, a six-horse cart barrelled through the camp. It tore over the edge of the great campfire. The massive wheels sent sparks flying into the night. It crashed into three of



the six riders surrounding the tent. The high-pitched whining of horses and the screams of the soldiers filled the air.

Two more shapes came out of the dark. Sandra and Garred rode through armored and both riding Port Farisan war horses. The orange glow of the fire flickered on the metal of their weapons. A flurry of arrows caught two of the riders, and Sandra drew the long knife to engage the last. Garred dismounted and threw the injured Dario over the back of his horse.

He looked at me. "Traitor to your own country. A curse on your bloodline, you beast."

I wanted nothing more than to see them ride off into the night, but there was no point. They would die out there in the frigid cold.

Garred remounted and drew his weapon. "We need to move before more of those northern dogs arrive."

"I already cut down the guards on the far side of the camp. Let's ride," Sandra said before looking over at the two of us. "I'm sorry. I have to do this."

My mouth hung open. They didn't know about the hounds. I ran in front of them to try and tell them. "No, wait! The hounds are he--"

I was cut short by Garred's horse colliding with me. My vision went dark for a moment. I looked back. Stars wheeled overhead, and Garred sneered at me from his saddle. "I brought you in, and this is how you repay me? You always were a selfish pig-headed lad. Even left your own family to rot in Drastongar. You Gordis are all one in the same."

He spat at the ground, and they rode off. I tried to call after them, but it was too late. Fiege pulled me off the ground. My arm bent at an unnatural angle. The pain hit me like, well, like a horse. Fiege stopped from passing out, and we both watched the pair tear off into the night.

They disappeared into the darkness, and nothing happened for several minutes. We watched in disbelief.

“I can’t believe it, Tam.” He laughed a little. “They made it.”

“Great Dragon watch over the-”

Our hopes were dashed. From the forest, bright lights flashed illuminating the trees in bursts of blue light. It was the unmistakable glow of arcane fire. We knew it well.

More soldiers arrived on the scene. Our entire camp roused from sleep. The hounds unshrouded themselves in the camp. Those that tried to run were cut down or blasted with arcane fire. Magical chains affixed themselves to everyone in sight. They began their questioning. Collared conspirators were executed on the spot. Their cries to the Great Dragon fell on deaf ears as the hounds went about their bloody work. The rest were left to return to their tents. After a little time, a hound made her way over to us for questioning.

Before anything, she set my arm back into place with a sudden motion. There was a tearing sensation and even more pain before she administered a vial of green medicine. My arm jerked back into place, and it was then I recognized her. She massacred the robber knights.

“Never suspected I’d see you again. I thought you all would be frozen corpses not a day after we found you. What’s more, you delivered my quarry to me on a silver platter. You have my thanks.”

She attempted a smile, but it did not suit her sharp face. Guilt wracked through me. I gave over two friends to the hounds.

“You need time to process. I understand. I doubt we shall meet again, but do remember the New Drastonian Order will be wanting its workers back once things have settled down. As I

said before, you will be rewarded for your trouble.” She gave me a pat on the head before handing me ten gold imperials in a well made leather pouch.

She nodded and strode off blending into the night. Fiege and I sat in silence. Some of the remaining camp members gave us horrid looks or cursed us in the name of the Great Dragon. We’d cross the border come morning. That pit in my stomach hardened. I had a sinking feeling it was there to stay. Fiege made us coffee, but the warmth of it felt hollow. The world felt hollow. The dark laughed at us.

“When we make it to Port Farisan, I’m going to bring you on as an apprentice. I’m sure I’ll find work. Unless you want to go off adventuring.”

“No, I’ve had enough,” he said before casting his eyes down. “Thanks, Tam.”

“We did the right thing.” My voice shook even as I said it.

It was a long night. We watched the morning light creep back into the world. I kept my eyes out for the sway of a hound’s cloak but never saw it. I never saw a member of the Consular Arcanum again. I gathered my things and some provisions from the camp. The two of us began making our way towards Port Farisan. To our new home.