

THE WILDERNESS

- church
- town
- castle
- fortress
- village



The Kingdom of KANDARIN

THE PASS THROUGH WINDMOUNTAIN

FOURTHORPE

DEFENSIVE DITCH

KINSHRA FORTRESS

EDGEVILLE

MONASTERY OF SAKADOMIN

ICE MOUNTAIN

WINDMOUNTAIN

TAVERLEY

THE KINGDOM OF ASGARNIA

THE EAST ROAD

BARBARIAN TRIBES

The Kingdom of MISTHALIN

Path to Varrock & Morvantia

THE RIVER LUM

THE UNQUIET OCEAN

The city of knights FALADOR

Path to Rimmington & Port Sarim

Path to Draynor & Lumbridge

ONE



“Get some light over here! We need some light!”

Master-at-arms Nicholas Sharpe shouted loudly into the wind in order to be heard by his fellow knights on the bridge. A fair young man ran forward, shielding his blazing torch from the anger of the winter storm.

“Thank you, Squire Theodore. Now, let us see what damage has been done.”

Half a dozen men stood around as firelight flickered over the fallen masonry. It was a life-sized statue of a knight which had come crashing down from the castle heights an hour after midnight, when the storm had been at its most ferocious. The crash had been loud enough to raise the alarm.

“That’s more than a thousand pounds of solid stone,” Sharpe said, peering up into the darkness from whence it had plummeted. “Must’ve been a wicked gust to move it.

“We can’t leave it here,” he added. “Get hold of it. On three we’ll lift.”

There was some jostling as the knights moved closer, every man packing himself as close to the statue as possible.

“One... two... *three!*” Sharpe counted out, and on his last call the small group of men lifted the marble statue with a collective

groan of effort. "Carry him to the courtyard. We can't leave one of our own out here in the cold!"

The men staggered under their burden, moving slowly from the exposed bridge toward the open gates, Squire Theodore lighting the way.

The statue will be safe there until the morning, the master-at-arms mused, as long as the damage wasn't serious enough to break it into a thousand pieces as they moved it.

And as long as nothing more comes down on our heads, he added silently. It wasn't safe in the streets of Falador that night; several people had already been killed by falling debris, and the quicker their party was back inside the castle, the better.

But the pessimistic thought turned to prophecy. A sharp crack, a sudden cry, and the statue dropped again to the paving, scattering the men who had lifted it. Only two had retained their grips on the polished marble, and now they held the right leg between them, detached from the rest of the figure.

"Get the torch back here!" Sharpe hollered, his temper rising. He swiftly noted the anxious faces gazing toward the courtyard. "Where's the torch?" he called. "Where has Theodore got to?"

A sudden gust of wind, biting cold in its journey south from Ice Mountain, swept across the bridge. The squire emerged from the gatehouse, bringing the torch with him and carrying a heavy bundle under his arm. As soon as he reached the shivering party, there was a crack from above and a cry of warning rang out.

"Watch your heads!"

Each man instinctively looked up, crouching low in readiness. Spinning from the rooftops, a tile crashed onto the bridge and exploded on the stonework scant yards away, sending sharp chips of slate into the turbulent moat below.

"Come on; we must not stay out here any longer," Sharpe said decisively. For all the statue meant, it wasn't worth the lives of the young men who stood close to him. "Theodore, don't run off

again. We need the light to see what we're doing."

He noted the look of disappointment on the young man's face. Theodore was an excellent squire; the master-at-arms couldn't recall any better. Yet he took himself too seriously, making him an easy target for any of his peers who envied his dedication, or even despised him for it.

"I have blankets, sir," Theodore said. "We can carry the statue on that. It will allow more of us to help lift it and prevent any more accidents like the last one..." His voice trailed off as a couple of the knights regarded him coolly.

But Sharpe nodded.

"It's a good idea, Theodore. Pull the blankets under the statue when we lift it—on three again!" And as soon as the men around him had obeyed, the master-at-arms began the count.

"One..."

"Two..."

"*Three!*" Each man issued a grunt as they hefted their burden.

A sudden flash erupted from the polished marble above the entrance to the courtyard, and once again the stone knight fell, the impact knocking several of the knights off their feet. One stumbled against Theodore, so that he was forced to loosen his grip on the spluttering torch and the light vanished as it splashed into a puddle.

Immediately, concerned voices called out in the darkness.

"What was that?"

"Are we under attack?"

"There's been no thunder—it must be magic!"

Sharpe bellowed from the side of the bridge.

"Get me a light!"

Theodore crouched and seized the torch, only to find that it was soaked from the puddle. He was on his feet in a second, running toward the gatehouse where the night watch kept lights burning.

He was careful to avoid the dazed knights who risked tripping him in the dark.

“Help me!”

A voice called out nearby. It was faint and unusual, and Theodore dismissed it, knowing he could not help anyone until he had light. As he entered the gatehouse, the voice groaned again, closer now.

When Theodore emerged holding the burning torch, he nearly dropped it in surprise. For lying not far away was a young girl, shivering from the cold. Looking closer, he could see that she was in shock from the savage injuries that covered her body. In one hand she held a strange flower, and in the other a golden ring, broken in two, that appeared to be smouldering in her open palm. It boasted a crystal clear gem, and an acrid scent hung heavy on the night air.

Her eyes, wide and dark, looked into his. He had never seen anything so...

“Help me... please.”

The girl blinked once and opened her eyes. Then with a sigh she closed them again, and her head lolled back.

Sir Amik Varze’s mood reflected the weather outside.

Freezing winds howled down from the mountain and The Wilderness that lay beyond, and his order had been busy dealing with food shortages and a desperate population. Though the night was black as pitch, on a clear day, from his room in the tower of marble overlooking the city of Falador, Sir Amik could see Ice Mountain in the distant north, a foreboding sharp pinnacle which could look deceptively beautiful on those evenings when the sun reflected off the frozen summit.

Beautiful, but deadly, he thought as the gale blew open a shutter. It struck the wall with a raucous clatter.

From his younger days as an ambitious squire and all

through his long career, Sir Amik had travelled more than most throughout the lands of Gielinor, east to the borders of the dark realm of Morytania where even the dead could not find rest, and south to the vast wastes of the Kharidian Desert which no man had ever crossed.

Yet of all his achievements, he was most proud of his role in manoeuvring the Knights of Falador as a serious political force within the realm of Asgarnia. He had ruled in old King Vallance's place, making and enforcing the laws that kept the nation safe. For two years the king had been bedridden, and Sir Amik had made certain that the knights had filled the vacuum before instability could threaten.

Not everybody had been happy about that, however. The Imperial Guard—under the direct rule of Crown Prince Anlaf—had questioned Sir Amik's intentions, and were aware that his knights controlled the nation's treasury. The prince had governed the town of Burthorpe in northwest Asgarnia for many years, placed there by his father to amass experience and prepare him for his inevitable succession to the throne. Under Anlaf's management, the Imperial Guard kept the nation safe from the trolls in the northern mountains, and rarely interfered in Asgarnia's wider affairs.

Yet the rumours swirled. Some predicted that a power struggle would plunge the nation into civil war, but Sir Amik would not let it come to that. As long as he lived, honour and truth would conquer the petty politics of such self-interested men.

It was the will of Saradomin.

Amik was old now, though. Not so old, however, as to be confined to the almshouses in the city, which the knights maintained to shelter those who had survived to reach the age of retirement, spending their days in the parks and lecturing the younger generation about the virtues of truth and honour.

No, not yet, he thought as he stood up to close the offending

shutter. He was still capable of putting in as many hours as were required to guarantee the security of Asgarnia and the blessings of Saradomin.

Rather than closing the shutter, however, he pulled it back, taking a moment to glance down to the courtyard. Even over the wind, which sung its shrill song amongst the rooftops, he could hear raised voices. He saw several torches flickering in the darkness and shadowy men running in animated confusion. Before he could call out, however, footsteps sounded on the steep stairwell outside the door to his private study, and a moment later it shook under the anxious hammering of a man's clenched fist.

"Sir Amik? Are you awake?" a familiar voice said. The man's tone betrayed his excitement.

The knight sighed, knowing that he was going to be forced to postpone his sleep.

"What is it, Bhuler?" he called out, closing the shutter and turning to cross the room. "What catastrophe has you running up these stairs at this hour?" He unlocked the door, and there stood his personal valet.

"It's a woman, sir!"

Sir Amik raised an eyebrow. "At your age, Bhuler?"

"No, sir." The man looked to the floor, disarmed by his master's quick humour. "Outside, in the courtyard. She just appeared on the bridge—it has to be magic. But she's badly injured—Sharpe doesn't think she'll pull through."

Sir Amik's expression hardened.

"Where is she now?" he asked. His curiosity was piqued. The knights had many enemies, and in order to counter any hostile entry, the castle was guarded by more than walls alone. It was supposed to be impossible to teleport anywhere within the perimeter of the moat.

"She's been taken to the matron in the east wing, sir."

They exited the room, and the valet led the way down the spiral stairs and across the courtyard.

The entire castle had been roused by the news, and Sir Amik couldn't imagine a swifter call to action. Lights shone from the dormitories of the peons—those boys who worked to attain the rank of squire and who carried out the menial labours. Above the howling of the wind, he heard a squire muttering of an elven princess, sent to warn the knights of impending disaster.

Already the rumours have started, he thought. *Even ones as foolish as that.* He smiled thinly, for the elven race had vanished from the world long ago—if they had ever existed at all. Yet this was a point the young squire ignored entirely.

Then his smile disappeared. Some things he would not allow.

“Turn out those lights!” he roared. Hastily the young peons extinguished their lamps and ceased their speculations, aware that tomorrow would bring a punishment drill. Sir Amik's attitude toward discipline was well-known: it was at the heart of their order.

Arriving at the matron's quarters, he found master-at-arms Sharpe and the young Squire Theodore there, as well. But it was no elven princess under the matron's anxious care, rather a very human young girl. Her blonde hair was matted with dried earth and sharp thorns were entangled in the long strands. Her skin was deathly pale. She looked like some feral animal.

“What do you think, matron?” he asked.

“She is badly injured, Sir Amik.” The heavy-set woman's eyes flicked to the patient. “Prayer is her best hope now.”

“Then I may help. The will of Saradomin is not known to me, but his wisdom has never failed to aid me before.” The elderly matron nodded. Her considerable skills were of no use to a girl with such savage injuries.

“Clear the room,” Sir Amik ordered briskly. The matron complied, taking the others with her. When he was alone, he

knelt at the bedside to pray, clearing his mind. His head bowed in reverence and his hands rested on the girl's cold forehead.

"My Lord Saradomin, I have served you without question since I was old enough to govern the path of my life, and I do not claim to know your will. I pray now for the sake of this unknown girl. I pray that you will give her the strength to live."

He felt the power within him, stemming from his heart and cascading along his outstretched arms and into the still body. His eyes snapped open with surprise. Never before had he felt so much energy. He struggled to keep his hands steady and his mind clear, lest the conduit that he had become be broken.

After a minute the charge ceased, and Sir Amik called to the matron.

"Saradomin be praised!" he claimed as he stood. "She will live."

At his words, the girl stirred as if gripped by a fitful nightmare. She *would* live.

As he left the room carrying the mysterious girl's belongings, Theodore glanced back at her.

He didn't want to leave her side, and Sir Amik's order to clear the room had made him unusually angry, though he knew better than to voice his feelings. Instead he decided to keep himself busy, accompanying Sharpe toward the armoury to catalogue the girl's property.

"I saw the way you looked at her, Theodore," the master-at-arms said as they ascended a polished stairwell. "You know that as a Knight of Falador there can be no chance for romance. A lonely but honourable life in the service of Saradomin is our reward—not for us a hearth and a home."

"I know that, sir," Theodore replied, his face warming. "But as the only person she has spoken to, I felt it might be best if I was there when she wakes."

Sharpe looked sympathetically at the squire.

“You should prepare yourself, Theodore,” he said calmly. “She might not wake up.” He didn’t slow as they entered the armoury. The squire stopped for a moment, shocked at the fatalistic thoughts of his tutor.

“She will wake up, she will!” he declared.

Bending down and opening a wooden box, Sharpe didn’t even look up at the young man’s brief tirade. After a moment Theodore followed him.

It only took them a few minutes to catalogue the girl’s property. Her leather armour was cut deeply in a dozen places, to the degree that it would offer her no protection should she wear it again, and her clothes were so torn that they would have to be replaced. The nurses had found no weapons save her sword, which the knights had retrieved from the ground at her side. Her scabbard was empty and bent, as if she had fallen on it, and her quiver—slashed viciously from one side to the other—contained no arrows.

The items that she had held in her hands were the most interesting, however. The white flower offered a clue as to where she had come from, and the ring that had broken into two pieces could help to identify her. Theodore could recognise neither of them. He knew nothing of botany, and herblore wasn’t among the skills he had studied.

Such was the case with Sharpe, as well. Both men stared at the flower for several minutes before admitting their total ignorance of where it might have grown. The only thing they could determine was that neither of them had ever seen one like it before. But there were people who were well-practised in the identification of such things, chief amongst them the druids.

“I can take the flower to Taverley, sir,” Theodore offered. “It is two days’ ride. The druids will know where it grows, and it

should be clear to them, for how many other flowers bloom in winter?”

Sharpe nodded.

“I shall put your idea to Sir Amik tomorrow,” he said thoughtfully. “But it is not the flower that I am so interested in Theodore—not yet. It is the ring in her hand.”

The older man’s eyes glazed over as if he were searching for some memory of an event long past, the ring held closely before him, its small diamond faded to a milky white since Theodore first retrieved it.

“Do you recognise it, sir?” Theodore asked eventually.

Sharpe shook his head.

“No. No, I do not. I thought it was something that it was not, something it could not be. But I shall be certain in the morning, when I discuss this with older heads than yours.”

“What did you think it might be, sir?”

Sharpe peered at him for a moment.

“It was a foolish idea, Theodore, and it is time you went off to bed. It will be light in a few hours, and if I know Sir Amik he is going to want a reliable squire to drill some sense into the peons for their boisterous behaviour. They had no business being up at such an hour.”

Theodore bowed his head and left, yet he felt entirely unsatisfied at their findings. He returned to his chamber to try and snatch a few hours’ sleep, which he knew he would find evasive. All his thoughts were on the girl.

Sharpe did not sleep either. He sat silently in the armoury, alone under a burning torch, his eyes fixed on the broken ring.

Could it be? Is it possible? His mind ached with questions, none of which he could answer.

Finally, as the cold grey light of a winter dawn began to appear in the eastern sky, he stood, his bones cold and weary

from his long vigil. He stretched briefly and then took the ring in his hand, carefully, reverently. With a furtive glance around him, he left the armoury.

TWO



It was the dream again.

She felt the fear and cold that always came with it. It started with the screams of the villagers and the shouts of the black-armoured attackers.

She had escaped the men. It was always that way. She always escaped, just as she had done all those years before. Yet she knew what was to come.

She ran for the cover of the trees, but as soon as she touched the frozen bark the cry went out. She had been seen.

Her father's bag was heavy enough to slow the eight-year-old down, but she gritted her teeth and ignored the thin whips of the branches that tore at her face and hands as she ran, leaving red welts across her exposed skin.

She could hear the baying of the starving dogs the men had brought with them. The animals had her scent and her running figure caught their attention. She heard their growls and the jeers of the men who watched the spectacle, certain of the outcome.

And yet she knew she would escape and live. She knew it even as the first animal—running far ahead of the others—drew back to leap at her. For she had been taught how to protect herself.

Instinctively she ducked as the dog jumped, its eyes flashing in the winter sun, its red tongue anticipating the taste of young flesh. But its anticipation would be denied.

With a speed and skill that was unheard of in one so young, she slashed at its jaw with a knife from her belt. The dog howled. Then, startled at finding an enemy capable of fighting back, the beast fled—content to return to the warm corpses that lay unclaimed in the burning village.

But that was only one animal from several, and she knew already what she would be forced to do to escape the others. She knew of an island that stood in the heart of a frozen pool, not far away. In the summer evenings she had enjoyed the peace of the forest there, comfortable in the knowledge that her father, a woodcutter, was never far away.

With the baying of the other dogs close behind, she reached the pond and stepped onto the ice, making for a fallen tree that had toppled years before and lay like a bridge across the frozen pool. Clambering atop it, she was halfway across when the first dog leapt onto the fallen trunk, its starving eyes fixed feverishly upon her.

Her young heart was consumed with an anger that she had never imagined possible, a hate for the men who had destroyed her life and burned down everything she had loved.

For the first time in her life, she *wanted* to kill.

The dog advanced along the trunk, cautious at the sight of the girl's savagery, wary of the angry tears that came into her eyes as she suddenly realised that all she loved was dead.

The girl kicked downward and shook the trunk as hard as she could. Then she shifted slightly and stamped her feet onto the frozen surface of the pond. At once it began to crack.

The end of the trunk shuddered.

The starving dog dug its claws into the decaying bark, trying to steady itself, aware that something was wrong.

The other dogs arrived and bunched, displaying the pack instinct, then crept to the edge of the pool. But they were unwilling to commit their full weight to the ice.

With a sudden loud crunch, the ice shattered. Losing her balance, the girl fell into the freezing water. She clung to the trunk to keep herself from drowning, yelling in shock, unconcerned whether her cries were heard. The trunk twisted, taking the dog under the water, trapping it beneath the icy cover and condemning it to a frigid end.

Then the trunk twisted again, rising as it turned, carrying her up and lifting her clear of the biting cold water.

For a brief minute she lay on the bark, shivering uncontrollably, indifferent to the dogs that stood a dozen yards from her, separated only by the dark eddies of the water. They didn't matter, she thought to herself, nothing did. Her family was gone, her home destroyed.

Let them take me, she thought. *Let them do with me what they will.* For the cold was too strong for her to fight, too seductive in offering its escape from the weariness that was replacing her rage. Ignoring the hungry growling of the starving dogs nearby, she lay her head gently on the bark to rest.

Despite the many hundreds of times that she had relived the episode in her dreams, whether or not she had found sleep she could never tell. If she had, she knew it could not have been for more than a moment.

It was the voices that stirred her—harsh words of men drunk on plunder and violence, rejoicing in their wickedness. The dogs stared at her in hungry desperation, their appetite dimmed as they became aware of the men and their metallic boots stamping over the frozen ground.

She had to hide, for if she failed to do so she would die—the final victim of the men who had destroyed her village. But it was hard for her to move farther along the trunk toward the snow-

covered island. She had gone only a yard when her strength failed.

As her thoughts began to dim, she recalled the stories her father had told her, of centuries gone, when the gods fought for the destiny of the world and their terrible powers reshaped the continents and destroyed civilisations. There was one amongst them, her father had told her, who would give aid to those in need.

“Saradomin...” she whispered. The word felt awkward on her lips, as if she only half-believed the tales her father had told her on those winter nights in their cramped log cabin at the edge of The Wilderness.

“Saradomin... hide me.” The word gave her strength now—the strength necessary to clamber across the trunk and onto the small island. Her energy spent, she half-fell and hid behind a crimson bush of thorns.

She could not move, certain she was going to die on the island she had made her own in happier times.

“Well, Sulla! It looks like she got away!”

The man’s voice was hard, and he spat the words as if he meant to insult his companion.

“You think so? With no shelter? If the dogs didn’t get her then the cold will—or did you not hear the cry as we approached? Now round up these animals and muzzle them. We don’t want their yelps attracting any attention on our way back to camp.”

The other man swore under his breath as he turned to leave. In a breathless moment the girl knew she had to see this man, this “Sulla,” who had taken everything from her in a single afternoon. Carefully she raised her head, her numb hands parting the branches of the thorn bush.

The man Sulla, the commander of the attackers, had his face hidden by a black helm. As the wind picked up and tugged at his bearskin cloak, she noted that his entire armour was black, as if he were a being of soulless metal.

Then, even in her sleep, the girl shuddered involuntarily.

For she knew what would come next.

Sulla removed his helm in the dream, exactly as he had done in life nearly ten years before, and it was his face that made her bury her head into the snow to stop herself crying out. His entire face was a single hideous scar, as if a heated mask had been forced onto it, burning flesh and leaving the skin blistered. From the pale left eye that stared blindly without a pupil to the cracked fissures of skin around his mouth, the man called Sulla and his hideous visage was something the young girl promised herself she would never forget.

“Sulla,” she whispered as the men left, dragging their dogs with them, encouraging them with vicious kicks and the lash of the whip. “You killed me—and I will never forget you.”

And finally, when she was alone in the freezing forest under the clear pale sky, she closed her eyes, expecting never again to open them.

THREE



A clear dawn painted the white walls of Falador a noble gold, the sunlight from the east warming the stone and making the inhabitants forget about the weeks of gusting winds and damaged homes.

For Sir Amik, the morning brought questions that needed answering. He had been awake since the first rays of light had caressed the highest tower of the castle, hours before any lawful citizens had begun to stir from their beds, going over what little he knew about the mysterious girl. He estimated her age at seventeen, but there was little else he could tell.

Of one thing he was absolutely certain, however—the girl was important. The powerful response to his prayer at her bedside was evidence of that.

“Gods move in mysterious ways,” he said to his valet, Bhuler, when the servant entered the room to stir the fire.

“When they choose to move at all, my lord—which is either too rare for some...” Bhuler jabbed at the logs with the poker, “... or too frequently for others.”

Sir Amik didn’t answer. He knew what Bhuler meant. His valet had himself once been a capable knight, many years before, and still his body was strong, a hangover from the many years of

hard training. But Bhuler had been unlucky. During his first year as a knight, a joust between the two men had ended in disaster. Sir Amik had unhorsed him, and a bad landing had resulted in a leg injury that had forced Bhuler to retire from active duty. For although fit and strong, Bhuler had never since been able to run any great distance, and all knights who travelled abroad in the world needed the use of two good legs.

Since then he had spent his years managing the castle and ensuring that the knights had the home they deserved, often training with the squires and peons, for he was still a strong and skilled warrior.

On some occasions, Sir Amik secretly wondered if Bhuler harboured any anger against him for rising to the head of their order—a role to which Bhuler himself might once have aspired.

Perhaps, he thought sometimes, our roles could have been reversed. I could have been the servant, and Bhuler the master. More often he was certain that the man didn't blame him for the ruination of his career, for that was not a knight's way. Yet he knew it had caused his valet a crisis of faith.

For how could Saradomin let such a thing happen to a man filled with nothing but faith and love for his god?

"Are these false gods we worship?" Bhuler had once cried in a brief moment of anguish. "Does Saradomin even exist?"

And then a senior knight had stood up, so quickly as to upset his chair. His gaze had locked the distraught valet into a sobbing retreat, and the words he spoke with passion made everything seem so simple and true.

"Saradomin exists," he had said with conviction. "Yours was an unfortunate fate, no doubt the doing of Zamorak. He exists as well, and some say his will is as great as our Lord's."

The senior knight had bowed respectfully toward the four-pointed star that was the symbol of Saradomin, a symbol that the knights displayed proudly on their pennants and arms.

Slowly Bhuler had followed his example, uttering the words of Saradomin with a hesitant yet renewed confidence.

“Strength through wisdom.”

Never again had he shown such doubt. Accepting that he could not be an active knight, Bhuler had organised the running of the castle, elevating it to a higher standard than ever before. If he could not fight Saradomin’s battles in the world at large, he would ensure that his brother knights would be equipped to do so.

And to Sir Amik, Bhuler’s quick mind had proved an invaluable asset. It allowed him to concentrate his efforts on the knights’ political affairs, knowing that the domestic matters of the castle were left in good hands.

It was therefore no surprise to any of the most senior knights that Bhuler should be present at the private counsel they convened to discuss their strange visitor.

Sir Amik recounted the tale of the young girl’s arrival to the dozen men who sat before him. All had already heard some version of it—each slightly different, for the story had been told and retold a dozen times—and like all stories it had grown in the telling. Once he finished he sat down, gesturing to the master-at-arms to reveal what he could about the girl’s belongings.

“I shall start with the sword.”

He held it up for the men to see. It was a weapon of fine workmanship, and Sir Amik noted the look of admiration in the eyes of the onlookers. He especially enjoyed the look Sir Vyvin gave it, for his sword had been smelted years before by the Imcando dwarfs, before their defeat at the hands of raiding barbarians, and so precious had it become that Sir Vyvin only used it on ceremonial occasions.

“It is neither steel nor iron. I believe it is adamant.” A murmur of respect ran through the men. Adamant was one of

the strongest and rarest of all metals, and beyond the craft of any smith in Falador.

“I would draw your attention to the symbol on the blade, which is replicated on the scabbard.” Sharpe pointed to the engraving. All were familiar with the four-pointed star of Saradomin, yet this was different, imperfect, as if it had been carved into the metal by someone replicating it from memory.

The sword was handed around the circle of men, each weighing it in his hand, their faces expressing their pleasure at the quality of the blade.

“How could she have come by such a weapon?” Sir Vyvin asked.

“We have two clues that might help us answer that,” Sharpe said. “The white flower she clutched in her hand might give us an indication of her location before she teleported onto the bridge. I propose to send Squire Theodore to Taverley and the druids. They have the knowledge needed to identify the plant—knowledge none in Falador would likely possess.” He surveyed the uncertain looks of the men. “But if the case be otherwise, then here is the flower. If any of you can identify it and tell us where it grows, it would save Theodore the journey.”

The master-at-arms passed a silver tray around the company, the white flower resting at its centre.

“Do we not have books in the library that can help us?” Sir Vyvin asked as he too gave a resigned shake of the head and passed the tray back to the start, thus completing the circle.

“We do not,” Sharpe replied. “I have spent the night checking for both the flower and this ring that the girl possessed. It, too, might tell us who she is.” The broken ring began its round on a second tray, and each knight carefully scrutinised it.

“Do you think it a family heirloom, perhaps?” a voice said from the entrance, and each man looked to the newcomer. He was older than Sir Amik by nearly ten years, and his clear grey

eyes shone with a penetrating intelligence. Nature had favoured his mind over his body, however, for he walked stiffly in his armour, as if he had worn it for so long that taking it off was beyond him. The knights stood as he entered the room, two of the nearest rushing to help him to his chair.

He glared at both of them, and they stopped before they could reach him.

“I am not that old,” he said gruffly. “The almshouse may be where I hang my cloak, but I am not yet a permanent fixture.”

He read their thoughts with a glance, Sir Amik thought, and the idea amused him. For he has spent his life reading men and divining their intentions, and he was very good at his job. Then he spoke aloud:

“Come in, Sir Tiffy. I am glad you came. You have been apprised of the situation?” he asked.

Sir Tiffy moved slowly toward his chair, sitting himself down with dignified care. He ran a hand through his white beard.

“The peon who fetched me was eager to tell me everything, doing his best to be indiscreet. You should tell the youngsters to keep their tongues from wagging, Sir Amik. Loose talk costs lives!”

Several of the knights glanced at one another. Sir Tiffy ran the knights’ intelligence network, mostly from the quiet confines of the park close to the pond, where he could happily feed the ducks that lived in its reeds. He had developed an eccentric reputation amongst the citizens of Falador, and enjoyed a degree of fame as a harmless old man who was enjoying his retirement. Yet the reputation was a ruse, a shield to put his enemies off guard and to gain the confidence of others. Inside the castle, with his peers, he removed his mask, ever eager to bring his burning intellect to the problem at hand.

The three items were brought before him: the sword, the flower and finally the broken ring.

“Neither the sword nor the flower mean anything to me,” he said, considering each in turn. “But the ring! I have seen one like it before... though not recently. Indeed, not for a long time.”

“Do you remember where that was, Sir Tiffany?” Sharpe asked, an unusual intensity in his gaze.

“I do not immediately recall—but give me time.” He looked up at the master-at-arms, a slight glimmer in his eyes. “Please, tell me your suspicions.”

The company of men turned in anticipation to Sharpe, who swallowed before he began.

“I was hoping one of you might confirm my suspicions,” he said slowly. “I spent the night in the library, after Squire Theodore and I catalogued the items. I found nothing conclusive, but I strongly suspect that this is a Ring of Life.”

His eyes passed briefly over the men assembled. No one spoke, so he continued.

“It must have been what brought her here. It is broken now—most likely it was broken the minute she arrived. Is that not in keeping with the Rings of Life? That they offer a last chance to teleport a dying individual to a place of safety?”

“But are these Rings of Life powerful enough to breach the barrier?” Sir Vyvin spoke quietly. “This in itself was thought to be impossible.”

Before Sharpe could reply, Sir Tiffany spoke.

“If it was a normal ring, then that might be so, but I see what Sharpe is getting at.” His face was drawn as he spoke. “If this is one of the few Rings of Life that was issued to our very own agents, many years ago, then it would possess the ability to pierce the barrier, would it not?”

Suddenly someone laughed.

“What is so funny, Sir Ferentse?” Sir Amik demanded.

The knight rose.

“Those rings were given out decades ago,” he said scornfully.

“The man who crafted them has been dead for ten years. Only a few were unaccounted for, and surely you cannot expect one of those to have fallen into the hands of a simple girl, and after all this time?”

“Stranger things have happened, Kuam. It is a possibility.” Sir Amik scolded the man lightly.

“It raises an important question.” Sir Tiffy looked intently at the ring again. “It could be, Sir Amik, that the girl you are harbouring upstairs, unguarded and unrestrained, is a murderer.”

A murmur arose. The Rings of Life were near-legendary artefacts the knights had created with the help of a sorcerer sympathetic to their goals. They had been issued to those who undertook the most dangerous missions, men who would spend years living amongst the enemy and learning their intentions. From nearly fifty Rings of Life issued over a decade-long period, only eight were yet unaccounted for.

“Speculation, Sir Tiffy,” Sir Amik stated, remembering the results of his bedside prayers. “We need facts, and I shall send Squire Theodore to Taverley to find out about the white flower.”

The meeting ended and the men rose from their chairs. All save Sir Tiffy, who politely refused the offers of assistance.

He’s certain that he’s right, Sir Amik realised. A Ring of Life had been used to teleport the wearer out of danger and away from certain death. But the question remained.

Just how did this girl come to possess such a precious object?

FOUR



The cold air of winter stung Theodore's face.

He travelled northwest, driving his mare hard in his eagerness to reach Taverley. He had been on the road since morning and had stopped only once, to bow his head in respect to the graven statue of Saradomin that stood several miles to the north of Falador, its hand pointing to the city as a guide for travellers.

He had not been alone, for several others were preparing a fire on which to cook some game. They sat a respectful distance from the squire, eyeing him with distrust, as if expecting him to accuse them of poaching. The Knights of Falador were known not only for their honour and their dedication to truth but also for their zealotry. Many perceived them as self-proclaimed lawmen, and a few even called them a militant judiciary, too eager to ensure that the law was upheld to the letter.

After a long silence, an elderly man spoke.

"Have you heard the news from the south?" he asked nervously of one of his fellows, who warmed his hands before the fire.

"Aye," the younger man replied. "I was there a week ago when we found her. Not far from Old Farm on the Draynor Road. It was a young woman. She'd been dragged from the road shortly

after darkness.” There was bitterness in his voice.

“So it’s true then? Did you see her?”

“What was left of her. There’s something south of Falador that lives amongst the woods and hills, something wicked that preys upon the local people.” As he spoke the hood slipped back from his face and his eyes settled on Theodore, who listened quietly.

He had heard of nothing amiss in the south, and yet as a simple squire there was no reason why he should have. It was the knights themselves who would attend to such business, or the Imperial Guard.

“What will you do about it, knight?” the man called over to him in anger. “Two people seized and devoured in the last month!” He stood and walked over, striding aggressively, confident that some code would prevent Theodore from retaliating against an unarmed traveller.

“Or do you go elsewhere in the service of your God?” the man continued. “Attending to matters of greater urgency. Are we peasants not important enough to warrant your attention?”

“That is not true,” Theodore replied calmly. “I knew nothing of this monster that plagues you, but when I have finished my journey I shall see that action is taken. You have my word.”

The man stopped and turned his head aside, unable to meet Theodore’s clear gaze. When he spoke again, some of the anger had left his voice.

“You knights have to do something,” he said, returning to the fire to join his companions. He faced the squire again, looking him straight in the eye.

“There have been strange men in purple robes—hunters they call themselves—stirring up anger, telling the people there is a monster in their midst. The men in robes have even started questioning folk about it. They will lynch some poor fool if they can, and it will be the wrong man.”

Theodore knew of the men in purple robes. They were

an organisation from neighbouring Misthalin, a group of individuals who preached human superiority and were intent on driving out non-human populations, stirring up anger and violence in the villages. Their most common target was the goblins that wandered Asgarnia.

He had encountered goblins on several occasions, and felt a certain sympathy for the creatures. As a tribe they posed no threat to the human cities. They were incapable of organising any standing army and as individuals they were to be found wandering the roads where they were akin to beggars. He had fought only one goblin, the year before, when he was sixteen. It had been stealing from a farmer, and he had killed it with a deft thrust through its neck. But he had taken no pride in the act. He had even lost sleep over it, for goblins were not worthy enemies.

After allowing his mare an hour's rest, Theodore continued north. The men's hostility had ceased after they vented their anger at the slayings, and they seemed satisfied with his promise to investigate.

Night fell, and yielded a full moon. He planned to sleep by the roadside, and when the winter darkness deepened so that there wasn't enough moonlight for him to continue, he led the mare off to the west. He found a hollow, sheltered from the wind by a briar. It was well back from the road, invisible to other travellers. There was no way in which any man-sized foe could approach him other than entering the hollow the same way he had.

He tethered his mare, ensuring that she was comfortable. She was a horse of the knights, a companion to Theodore from when she was very young, and since her days as a foal she had become accustomed to the long days of riding and the hard nights of unsheltered sleep. Without complaint she dipped her head, her eyes carefully fixed on her master.

Then he stretched out beneath the shelter of the briar, drew his sword and laid it by his side, ready for immediate use. Wrapped in his cloak, he was soon asleep.

The night was still. The northern winds that had rent the land had finally exhausted themselves, and the darkness was ideal for the hunt.

He had gone many miles out of his way, fearful of the large city of men with its white walls and armed guards, and it had cost him a week before he had picked up the scent of his quarry. He had feared that it had been lost, that he would have to continue onward until chance favoured him. But he had come upon the scent close to the road, and it was strong enough for him to follow.

And he had decided to celebrate.

He watched some gypsies at the roadside, the lights of their caravan luminescent in the blackness. The land of his youth had had gypsies, as well, hardier folk than these travellers, accustomed to the land they were living in and its unforgiving way of life. Those people knew their place, but here the people were soft, well-nourished, peace-loving, and unsuspecting.

He knew he shouldn't attempt it. But the risk that such an adventure suggested, here in these fatted lands, served to spur on his appetite.

A plump child wandered to the edge of the darkness, and he drooled. He heard the sharp cry of a young woman's voice, calling to her son, and recalled the week before when he had dragged another woman from the roadside, excited by her fear.

I am spoiling myself, he thought, his red eyes glowing under the still trees.

It was still dark when the sound awoke Theodore, a noise that instantly set him on edge, his hand grasping his sword instinctively.

Something was moving nearby, something big was forcing its way through the briar circle that sheltered him. He breathed out slowly, silently, waiting for the intruder to come closer. Yet with each second his fear grew.

I am a squire of Falador, Theodore told himself. Fear is paralysis. Fear is a greater enemy than any mortal foe.

He moved swiftly, his cumbersome armour giving him away as he stood, his sword drawn back in readiness. As he summoned his breath to give a yell of challenge, the briar parted and an animal's wizened head appeared through the thicket. The moment it saw him, the creature's dark eyes widened in fear.

"A badger!" he breathed as the intruder scurried off, loping swiftly into the darkness. He glanced at his mare, noting that she hadn't moved—indeed, she seemed barely awake—and he was reminded of an old maxim of the knights. *Evil to he who thinks evil.* It was the talk of the travellers that had set him on edge, putting thoughts of vicious beasts in his mind. Meanwhile his mare displayed the wisdom of all animal kind, dreaming in an untroubled sleep, oblivious to the fears of humanity.

Fear, Theodore told himself, as he lay back down on the earth still warmed from his sleep. Fear is the greatest enemy.

He had ridden for two hours before he came across the caravan, just beyond the tenth mile marker that indicated the distance to Taverley. He had left before daybreak, catching only an hour's added sleep after his rude awakening, unable to relax enough to get any more.

He noted the soldiers first, standing away from the brightly coloured wagon, its red tint gleaming in the morning sunlight. As he rode closer he noted the blanched faces of the men and their suspicious glances as they looked toward him.

"What has happened here?" Theodore asked. These were Imperial Guards, men who viewed the knights as a rival military

force in Asgarnia. He ignored their hostile gazes as his eyes swept over them hastily, and then moved onto the caravan. That was when he realised that the red tint hadn't been the gay colours of a gypsy's pride, but rather a spray of blood.

The guards noted his sudden comprehension, and one of the older men spoke.

"A savage attack on a gypsy peddler and his family. There is a body inside, mauled by a beast, and the body of a woman lies in the woods. Their child's clothing has been found..." The guard removed his helm as he spoke, as if he needed a diversion to gather himself before continuing. "... bloodied. There is no sign of its body."

Theodore entered the wagon, and felt his gorge rise. He had seen death before—from accidents in the lists to the violence he had encountered while accompanying a knight in his role of squire—but he had never seen such carnage. The beast had forced itself in through the slim wooden door at the back of the wagon, and even the killings had not satisfied its rage, for the wooden walls and cupboards had been ripped and household objects overturned as if the very idea of a home had been offensive to it.

"We think the woman ran into the woods with the child..." A younger man began to speak, but his commander interrupted him.

"What are your intentions here, squire?" he demanded. "Will you join us in the hunt and slow us down, or will you go on your way?"

"My interest here is the same as your own—to see that justice is done. However, I am needed urgently in Taverley, and will gladly take any message to the authorities there.

"I will not put politics above justice," he added firmly.

"Nor will I," the man responded. "You can take a message to Taverley. That would be a useful service to us, for we need men

who know the local lands if we are to start a hunt.”

The guard moved to one side and wrote briefly on a parchment, which he then rolled and handed to Theodore, telling him who to give it to.

As the squire pulled on his reins, ready to depart, a sudden thought occurred to him.

“Is this related to the events in the south?” he called, making the guard turn.

“What events?”

“Another murder, a week or so ago. I met some travellers on the road yesterday who told me of a woman who had been slain. From his description it seems as if it might be the same creature.”

The guard bowed his head, his face darkened by the news.

“Thank you, squire—that is useful news, indeed. I am glad you chose to share it, despite the differences of our politics.”

Theodore returned the bow, knowing that he had done the right thing.

FIVE



The blue banners with the symbol of Saradomin embroidered upon their centre fluttered in the cleansing breeze over Falador. It was less bitter and violent than the wind that had buffeted the land in previous weeks.

The matron mopped the girl's feverish brow. Despite Sir Amik's assurance that she would live, the woman's optimism had begun to wane. Unless she woke soon, the girl would be too weak to survive.

"What is your name, child?" she asked softly. The matron had tended the sick since she was young, and she was sure that even in such a comatose state the patient would respond to her soft tones. She had spent a good deal of her time that morning singing the old nursery rhymes she had crooned to infants in her days as a midwife, hoping that the words might be familiar to the strange girl and stimulate a recovery.

But the song died on her lips when the girl suddenly turned her head. It was the first time she had moved since the knight's prayer. Was she ready to wake?

Her eyelids remained closed, her breathing unchanged, and the matron's heart sank. She gathered the damp rag she had used to wipe her patient's brow and moved to leave the ward.

She had just reached the door when a hard voice called out, uttering words that she did not understand, words unknown in the common tongue of men.

The patient had spoken.

Yet still she lay motionless, asleep, her breathing barely heightened from the exertion. The matron peered at her, unsure about what to do.

The girl suddenly moved again, tossing her head to one side.

That launched the woman into motion. Gathering her long skirt in her hands, she abandoned the rag on the flagstones and ran as fast as she could, down the wide staircase and across the courtyard, the winter morning cold on her face.

Theodore stood near the window overlooking the small fountains and gardens for which Taverley was famous. It was a very different place from Falador—far more peaceful, in harmony with nature. The houses reflected two styles, either thatched, wooden structures or moss-covered stone buildings that seemed to grow out of the earth itself.

He enjoyed the serenity of the town, for it did not have cobbled streets like Falador but fine earth tracks on which a horse could walk almost silently. The peace was exactly what the squire needed after the shocking scenes at the caravan.

Casting his attention outward, he surveyed the country around Taverley, looking first to the northwest, to White Wolf Mountain. He had heard tales of the huge wolves from which the mountain derived its name. Few were brave enough or foolish enough to attempt a journey over the narrow passes and into the sun-filled land of Kandarin beyond, and in winter it was said that the mountain was impassable.

To the south, a great calm lake extended as far as he could see. He remembered the tales he was told as a child, of dragons that prowled its depths, away from the prying eyes of men. As

a squire, Theodore had been taught of the special equipment needed to successfully combat a dragon, and of the abilities these creatures possessed. More often they were seen on land, but they were rarely sighted in civilised regions, rather making their lairs deep underground and far north in the most distant Wilderness.

A soft voice interrupted his reverie.

“I cannot help you, Theodore,” it said. He turned to see an old man in a plain white robe, his chin boasting an even whiter beard.

“Then you have no idea where it grows?” Theodore could not hide his disappointment. He had been so sure the druids would know.

“I have consulted our specimens, but there are none that match,” Sanfew replied, handing the flower back to Theodore. “I still have some of our coven going through them, however,” he continued, speaking slowly and quietly as if he were afraid his very words might be an intrusion against nature. “If you would be happy to wait, I suggest that you explore Taverley. The calm here would do you good.”

As soon as Theodore had arrived he had relayed the message of the Imperial Guards and informed the druids of the monster’s attack on the gypsy caravan. A dozen militiamen had headed south to aid in the hunt, while the druids had offered him soothing tea to calm his nerves.

Yet still he felt a lingering panic.

“I could do with a brief rest,” he admitted gratefully to Sanfew.

“Then please, avail yourself of the opportunity,” the druid said. “Meanwhile, I have sent for Kaqemeex. He’s the most knowledgeable of our coven, although he spends much of his time in the ancient stone circles to the north. He will be here by afternoon, however, and with luck he may be able to answer all your questions.”

The manner in which Sanfew spoke drew the squire's curiosity.

"All of my questions?" he echoed. "I have only one."

"I thought you might have more. About the beast that stalks the countryside?"

Theodore hadn't considered the possibility that the druids might be able to ascertain the nature of the savage creature that had committed the brutal murders. Yet the druids knew more about the world and its magical ways than they let on. It was said that they could conjure animals, compelling them to do their bidding in guarded rituals.

"Do you know anything that might help in its capture, Sanfew?" Theodore's voice was urgent. *What do they know about the monster?*

"You must ask Kaqemeex," the druid replied calmly. "He hears things, from the birds and the beasts."

Theodore nodded, content to wait, for he didn't wish to appear rude. The druids were well known for doing things at their own pace, regardless of the pressures of the wider world. Instead, he decided that he would use the time to attend to his horse, to explore Taverley, and then to get some rest.

He had found his mare a warm stable as soon as he had arrived, and was pleased to see that a young groom had provided food and water. He found her asleep, tucked amid the warm hay that was a rare luxury in winter, her saddlebags and reins hanging nearby.

Then Theodore had only himself to look after, so he spent half an hour strolling amongst the fountains and the flower beds. He wondered whether he had time to pass through the fence to the south, to gaze upon the still waters of the partly-frozen lake.

"Squire Theodore! What are you doing here?"

Theodore recognised the youthful voice at once, and turned to see a familiar face and a shock of red hair. They belonged to a young man in a long blue robe that marked him as an apprentice to the Wizards' Tower. The robe was too big, however, and seemed prone to being caught underfoot while the sleeves hung too far over the man's hands.

"Castimir!"

The young apprentice bowed to the squire, but there was a look in his eye that took Theodore back to a childhood friendship that predated his own decision to dedicate his life to the knights.

Straightening, the wizard showed an eager smile.

"The druids have not ceased talking of your arrival," he said. Then his face darkened. "Nor of the caravan."

"That is not my concern, at least not yet," Theodore replied, his own mood sombre for a moment. "The Imperial Guard are handling it. I will help when I am able, and when..."

"... when your duties are done." Castimir finished Theodore's sentence for him. "You see, young squire, I know you too well."

"Your wits may be sharp, but how would your magic fare against the true steel of a knight?" Theodore drew his blade, the sharp sound of steel on steel reflected in the eager gleam of his eyes. He stood as if to attack the defenceless blue figure before him.

And then he laughed, lowering his weapon. It seemed as if it had been a long time since he had laughed so genuinely.

"I have moved beyond such childhood games, Theodore," Castimir replied earnestly. "We no longer compete on the same level." He opened his hand to reveal a dozen pebble-like stones resting in his open palm, with mysterious markings engraved upon them. The wizard smiled daringly at Theodore. "Do you think you could deliver a blow before I could stop you? Or do you lack the courage to try?"

Theodore's eyes narrowed as he regarded his childhood friend coolly, but after a few seconds his icy demeanour evaporated and a large grin spread across his face.

"And what spell would you have used, Castimir? A fire strike?" The squire laughed again as he sheathed his sword. Yet the wizard remained serious.

"My abilities have grown considerably in the months since we last met in Falador. With these runes in my hand, I could snare you to the spot and bind your limbs." He gestured dramatically. "You'd be defenceless! As for fire strike, that would be child's play. It is one of the very first spells we wizards learn."

"Truly, I remember when you first cast that one, Castimir. It was a day after the talent scout had identified your magical potential and gave you a few runes to practise with. You tried to kill that rat, and ended up setting fire to Rommik's crafting store! No wonder he disliked you, even *before* you destroyed his entire inventory!"

It was Castimir's turn to laugh.

"My uncle had tried to apprentice me as a crafter under Rommik's guidance. What a mistake that was. I attempted to mould a ring and ended up breaking everything. He scowled at me for years afterwards!"

"Well, I hope you make a better wizard than crafter, Castimir. Your luck can only take you so far!"

Despite his words, it had always seemed to Theodore that Castimir had been the brighter of the two of them, and to have risen so quickly in the ranks of the wizards in the legendary tower only served to prove his point. It was a great accomplishment.

His face must have reflected his thoughts, for his friend spoke up.

"Let's get something to eat, Theo," he said, calling the squire by his childhood nickname, "and I'll answer all your questions as we dine."



The table was laden generously with food.

Theodore had heard tales of how the druids would only eat meat if it was specially prepared. The animal had to have been killed in a fashion that was respectful of its nature. Now several meat dishes sat between the two friends. Brightly coloured fruits, some of which he had never seen before, were piled in wooden bowls, their red and orange skins stirring the squire's appetite.

"That one is chicken." Castimir pointed with his fork to the dish that sizzled in front of them, his manners abandoned in the company of his friend. He seemed entirely intent on enjoying himself.

Theodore helped himself to the delicacy, careful to avoid filling his plate excessively. He noted Castimir's wilful abandon, however, and a moment's fleeting jealousy flashed through his mind when he considered his old friend's new station in life.

Castimir was destined for great things, and even the shock of bright red hair that once had been such a cause of merriment now seemed to distinguish him from other men. It had darkened as he had aged but still stood out. And its owner moved with a confident assurance that he had lacked only a year before—especially in the company of Theodore, against whom he had always been physically weaker.

"I am nearing the end of my year's travels." Castimir said, recounting his wanderings. "I crossed over the mountain a few weeks after leaving you in Falador. The snows were not so bad, and I went with a party of travellers. If I had crossed alone, however, I doubt very much I would have survived. The wolves up there are huge, and always ravenous."

He paused to poke his knife in the direction of White Wolf Mountain, using the moment to swallow a tender morsel.

"And Kandarín! When you get over the summit, round the highest pass, you see a land drenched in golden sunlight, and

the ocean as vast as you can imagine.” He paused, and his eyes peered at something far away. “It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, Theo, amid the freezing snows and the howls of the white wolves!”

Theodore said nothing, though his envy grew unbidden. He had heard stories of Kandarin that lay beyond the mountain. Many knights had travelled there, and he had listened to their accounts with eagerness, dreaming of one day walking there himself.

“It has strange beasts as well. My mule died shortly after we descended the mountain. A wolf injured him near the end of our journey, and the poor creature did not survive. Thus, I was forced to purchase a replacement from a fur trader who had journeyed south all the way from Rellekka, the city of the Fremennik peoples who live on the northern edge of the world.”

Castimir looked at Theodore with an amused glint in his eyes, hastily swallowing another piece of chicken.

“It is a yak, Theodore!” he said, his enthusiasm youthful again. “A yak! He’s a stubborn creature, but he is a perfect substitute for my poor mule, and he is better suited to carrying my belongings with a purpose-built leather harness. I shall introduce you to him. I think he is far more useful when travelling in cold climates than a mule—he’s sure-footed and his shaggy hair is warm, if ever you need to shelter from the cold.” Then he looked wistfully at the rapidly diminishing food, as if debating what to eat next.

Theodore found himself turning sullen, yearning for the adventures his friend had already experienced. Before he could speak, the young wizard continued.

“I honestly think I might be the first person to bring a yak into Asgarnia. I thought I could sell him as a curiosity to one of these natural philosophers, but then they would probably cut him up to see how he works, and I couldn’t accept that!”

Then Castimir paused, studying his companion’s expression.

He bit greedily into a rose-tinted apple and changed the subject.

“So how are things in Falador?” he inquired. “You look well—but then you never looked amiss!” His grin failed to turn Theodore’s humour.

“I have been with the knights since I was nine, Castimir,” the squire replied. “I have seen my parents only once in that time, when I graduated to the position of a squire after the long years as a peon. I still have another two years before I become a knight.”

Castimir gave him an encouraging look.

“It will pass quickly, Theo,” he said, certainty in his voice. “Of course, you must have doubts. What knight would you be if you did not?”

“A true one, Castimir! One who would not question my life’s direction.”

But the young wizard was undeterred.

“You don’t doubt your choices, Theo, you doubt your own ability,” he said. “Your parents weren’t rich, and many squires come from exclusive backgrounds. To them, having a spare mount or lance is something they take for granted. That is why you feel left out—you cannot afford the same entertainments as the other squires when they head into Falador for a night off.”

“I do not take nights off, Castimir.”

“And the others do?” A pained look appeared on his face, and Theodore stared down at the table.

“Sometimes,” he replied. “Not often.”

“Your hard work will be rewarded, Theo—I can promise that. Stick at it long enough and keep in the game, and you will be there at the end, ready to reap the rewards.”

At that, they allowed the subject to drop, and both friends refilled their plates, Castimir unafraid of excess, and Theodore refusing to let the food go to waste.

SIX



“I want you to meet someone, Theo.”

The young squire’s mood had lifted since their meal. After they had refilled their plates, Castimir had gone over memories of their childhood, many of which Theodore had forgotten. They had brought the smile back to his face, and as they left the room he had gripped his old friend’s hand, in gratitude for making him remember what he had forgotten in the pursuit of duty.

Castimir spoke as they made their way toward the wizard’s lodging.

“This man has been in Taverley for several weeks, after returning from Catherby. He is eccentric—and possibly mad, I haven’t decided yet—but he is certainly worth meeting. I call him the alchemist because he has all sorts of strange theories about the world.”

“Nothing too blasphemous, I hope?” Theodore said smiling, seeing if Castimir would rise to the bait—for he had always been more open-minded than the squire.

“Well, he’s not a worshipper of Saradomin, Theo. I do not think he worships any of the gods as we know them. He believes them all to be one being, that each element of the traditional gods—such as order and wisdom from Saradomin, and chaos and death

for Zamorak—are parts of a single entity. He believes that such differences are akin to different fingers on the same hand.”

“But surely he favours one aspect over the others? The wisdom of Saradomin, the balance of Guthix, or the chaos of Zamorak? How can you believe in all three when they run so contrary to one another?”

“That is what I said,” Castimir agreed. “And he remarked that the differences I had mentioned, just as you have done, are created by mortals to serve their own political ends.”

Theodore’s expression hardened.

“If he speaks too loudly, then, he will be declared a heretic,” he muttered.

“Maybe,” the wizard agreed. “But what kind of world would it be if it were true? Would your ideals change? Would you still pursue the followers of Zamorak with your sword in hand on your white charger?”

“You sound as if you almost believe him, Castimir.”

“I do not, Theo. The old gods aren’t so weak as to be knocked off their pedestals by the words of old men. But we wizards must be open to new ideas.”

They stopped outside a white-walled house with a thatched roof. Castimir entered without knocking.

The bitter smell was the first thing Theodore noted as he ducked his head under the low lintel. A large table stood in the centre of the room, behind which stood an old white-haired man. His thick-rimmed glasses glistened in the afternoon sunlight, which struggled to make its way through the fug in the room. Theodore’s hand instinctively covered his mouth as the smell began to choke him, and the man looked up.

“Ah! Leave the door open, Castimir,” he said. “Your friend is unfamiliar with *chemistry*!” The alchemist beamed with pride at the word, and said it with an exaggerated flair. “Chemistry!” he hollered. “Surely there can be no more noble an art.”

He spread his arms wide, gesturing to the strange implements that lay scattered throughout the laboratory. Theodore noted test tubes suspended over the open fire or arranged upon the table, contentedly boiling away the suspicious liquids they contained, in some cases until there was nothing left.

“I had understood you to be interested in science, Ebenezer,” Castimir reminded him gently, and the old man’s eyes gleamed at the mention of the word. “What is this newfound enthusiasm you have embraced?”

“Science, yes, that’s right my young friend,” the man replied. “It’s one and the same. My chemistry is a study of science, Castimir—one of the many facets of knowledge that may reveal the workings of the universe.” A suspicious furrow wrinkled his brow, and he peered at Theodore. “But Castimir is a wizard, and wizards already think they know all there is to know.” He scowled darkly at the young man.

“Sir, Castimir told me that you don’t believe in the gods,” Theodore said cautiously. “Is this true?” He had met men like this before, men who preyed upon the discontent of the masses, preaching impossible solutions to the hardships of life. *Liars, heretics, and con men*, he thought.

But the alchemist didn’t respond as he expected. He shook his head.

“That’s not entirely true, squire.” The man gazed darkly once more at Castimir, pushing his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose. “The evidence supports their existence, despite the fact that the prayers of the faithful still seem to go mostly unanswered. Yet in my travels I have seen miraculous demonstrations of faith, attributable to any member of the pantheon of gods who are currently worshipped.”

“Currently worshipped?” Theodore countered. “It is not for mortal-kind to pick and choose the gods.”

The notion was absurd to the aspiring knight, whose ideology

was built around serving justice in Saradomin's name.

"Isn't it?" the alchemist parried. "I have seen terrible things done in the name of religion, by people who were good in all other respects. Isn't the pantheon like a noble house, wherein each member is fighting for dominance?"

Theodore felt the blood rush to his face.

"It is not for men to pass on their own folly to the gods—they are above that!"

"A god above jealousy?" The old man seemed amused by the idea. "And yet legends tell of the God Wars, when the continents were devastated by their quest for dominance over one another." But then he turned away, adding, "Perhaps you are right though. Who can know the will of higher beings?"

Theodore cursed himself inwardly. Was his faith in Saradomin so weak that it could be upset by a remark from an eccentric traveller? The Knights of Falador believed that Saradomin was the most powerful god, and their education was not accepting of all other religions. Some faiths could be tolerated, certainly, but those such as the followers of chaos, of Zamorak, were to be opposed wherever they were found.

He breathed deeply to calm himself before speaking again.

"I am sorry, alchemist, if my words seemed harsh. You have seen much more of the world than I, but surely you must acknowledge that Saradomin's way is best? If all followed it, there would be no war, no dishonesty. Would we not have a perfect world?"

The alchemist raised his head.

"People boast too many differences for us to have a perfect world. What is perfect for you might not be perfection for anyone else." He saw Theodore open his mouth to respond, and held up his hand to prevent him. "As for only worshipping Saradomin, that would make the world a boring place, wouldn't it?"

"But if the pantheon were incorporated as one god, that god

would possess aspects of your Saradomin to reflect justice and order, and Zamorak to reflect the need for chaos. After all, even chaos exists in the natural order of things. The fox takes a rabbit where it can, following its nature—its attack chaotic, unplanned, the strong against the weak. That is how the natural world goes,” he said firmly.

“And what aspect of order does the natural world possess?” Theodore asked, his tone sarcastic. “Any at all?”

“Order is in nature every bit as much as chaos,” the old man replied, seemingly unperturbed. “If the fox eats too many rabbits there will be no more and it will starve. Thus there will then be fewer foxes the next year to hunt the fewer rabbits. In time, however, the rabbits will breed and once their numbers are back up then they will be able to sustain a greater population of foxes. There is order there, and chaos as well, but at a level that is hard for us to see. The natural world is something that is still largely hidden from us.”

Before the argument could continue, a door slammed, and a youth with dark hair and astonishingly black eyes appeared behind Ebenezer. He stood uneasily, looking at Theodore with what the squire could only think of as fear, hiding himself partly behind the alchemist as a shy child might hide behind its mother.

He looked about a year younger than Theodore, an adolescent slightly taller than the squire. His teeth were very white, and his dark hair was thickly matted and unkempt, growing long to his shoulders. When he moved he did so with the natural grace of an animal, his thin body sinewy and tough. He noted Theodore’s gaze on him and stepped back farther still behind the old man, his white teeth showing in a feral snarl of distrust that startled the squire.

There was something about the lad that made him feel distinctly unsafe, as if he were in the company of a wild creature.

At the sound of the low growl, Ebenezer turned to reassure the lad, his hand resting on the youth's shoulder in a gesture of reconciliation.

"You must excuse Gar'rth, young squire," he began as the newcomer calmed. "He has had a hard life, and does not speak the common tongue. Plus he is hostile to armed men, even if they be of your righteous order."

"He has nothing to fear from me, sir—unless he has broken the laws of the land." As he spoke, Theodore was surprised to see Castimir glance knowingly at Ebenezer.

The old man shook his head.

"I found him on the road a few weeks ago," the alchemist explained, "starving outside the walls of Taverley, a stranger to human kindness. Is a man guilty if he steals to prevent himself from starving?"

Theodore did not answer. In his mind theft was a crime, and crime—no matter what the cause—was inexcusable. His expression darkened, and Castimir moved closer to him, speaking quickly.

"You must excuse Ebenezer, Theodore," he said. "He found the man that Gar'rth stole from and made full reparation. The farmer was entirely satisfied."

"But has Gar'rth been punished?" the squire responded. "Simple reparations are not enough. He must be made to understand that what he did was unacceptable." His hand had instinctively travelled to the hilt of his sword, caressing it unconsciously.

Before Castimir could reply, the alchemist spoke, anger colouring his voice.

"Did I not explain? He does not speak our language!" he said, his eyes flashing. "How can he be made to understand?" Ebenezer's eyes darted between him and Castimir, and with a clear effort he calmed himself. "But I am teaching him. We are

learning, aren't we, Gar'rth?" He smiled at the youth as a teacher might smile to encourage a pupil.

After a moment of struggling, a broken phrase passed between Gar'rth's lips.

"Thank you..."

"That is one of the few phrases he has mastered," whispered Castimir. "The lad is a strange one, Theo, savage and astoundingly strong. To any other save Ebenezer, he is decidedly hostile. Even toward me." He grinned broadly as he finished speaking, and Theodore decided again that there was little in life his friend took seriously. As always he found it inexplicable, yet it caused him to appreciate the friendship all the more.

Ebenezer returned to his chemistry. Carefully he took a glass vial from the tabletop. It contained a clear, still liquid. With exaggerated care he mixed the calm fluid with a cup of water.

Immediately, the compound began to froth, spitting droplets onto the tabletop and beyond.

"Oil of Vitriol! Who would have thought that adding cool water could cause such a reaction?" He laughed manically.

Castimir's curiosity was sparked by the experiment, and he moved closer, reaching out.

"Water did this? I would not have thought it possible..."

"Do not touch it!" the alchemist shouted. "The reaction heats the liquid, and it's still quite hot," the old man added. "It would have burned you."

"Heat without flame?" Theodore muttered to his friend. "Surely that is magic."

"I told you he was worth meeting, Theo," the young wizard responded, as a knock at the door drew their attention.

A druid stood in the entrance, the sunlight illuminating his white robes, his green cloak shining as if it were made of living plants. He had an old face that spoke of many days and nights spent outdoors and in the company of nature. His grey eyes

possessed wisdom that could not be learned save by an honest journey into old age.

He focused his gaze on Gar'rth, and the youth hung his head to avoid the attention of the new arrival. When the druid spoke, his voice was deep.

"How is Gar'rth today, Ebenezer?"

"He is well, Kaqemeex," the alchemist replied. Upon hearing the name, Theodore straightened with curiosity. "The affliction seems to have quieted since your intervention. We are all thankful for that."

The old druid noticed Theodore's interest, and nodded to him.

"You are the young squire from Falador, who wishes to know about a particular white flower," he said. "The birds have told me of your coming."

Theodore bowed his head in respect to the old man. He opened his mouth to answer the druid's query when a high-pitched chirping sounded from nearby. A blackbird perched upon the lintel, her black eyes flicking warily from one person to the next, taking in the entire group with a flurry of motion.

"I know already, my small feathered friend," Kaqemeex said gently, and her chirping ceased. "Go and take your fill in the cool waters of the fountains." The small bird fluttered away, leaving Theodore to stare at the druid with undisguised scepticism.

"The birds are the most useful spies of all," the elder man said as if giving a lecture. He seemed not the least bit daunted by the squire's overt disbelief. "There are very few of us who can still converse with wild creatures, and of those I am possibly the most adept at doing so." He smiled sorrowfully, as if his memory dwelt on better times.

Yet Theodore remained unconvinced.

Surely he cannot expect me to believe...

"What did she tell you?" Castimir asked in all earnestness.

“What I have known for some weeks now. There is an evil abroad in Asgarnia, that has entered the lands recently. A creature that seeks something, or someone.” He bowed his face and a cloud hid the sun, deepening the shadows.

The killer, Theodore realized with a start, and he spoke up, all thoughts of blackbirds driven from his mind.

“Sanfew told me to ask you about the monster,” he said quickly, eager to learn anything that might help him in the quest for justice. “He told me you might have some useful information?”

“I do not know what the beast is, if that is what you ask,” Kaqemeex answered. “I know only that it pursues something. It heads north, hiding by day and moving toward its goal each night. I suspect that what it is searching for is here, in Taverley. The birds seldom sight it, for it is a canny creature.”

His eyes moved swiftly to each of them in turn, much as the bird’s had done. Castimir looked uncertainly away, and Theodore held his grey stare without moving. He turned his attention to Ebenezer, who cast a knowing look in return. Finally they came to rest on Gar’rth.

“How are his lessons, Ebenezer?” Kaqemeex asked, turning back to the alchemist.

“Slow,” Ebenezer replied ruefully. “Gar’rth is not a linguist, I fear. Teaching him the common tongue will take time. Castimir has helped, however.”

The druid nodded in Castimir’s direction and then he turned his eyes back on Theodore.

“I understand you have a query about a white plant, as well,” he said.

At that, Theodore reached into his pack and drew the specimen out reverently.

Kaqemeex stared at the flower in Theodore’s upturned palm. He did not touch it at first, and after a minute he bent low to

smell what fragrance remained with the flower. As far as the squire could tell, there was none.

“Do you recognise it, sir?” Theodore asked with ill-disguised anticipation.

“Yes, it is a White Pearl, so called because of the fruit it produces,” the druid replied, and at his words a shiver passed through the squire. “They are found up on White Wolf Mountain.” He nodded his head northward to where the range of icy peaks marched into the distance as far as the eye could see. “They do not grow exclusively on that mountain range. Ice Mountain also harbours its own population of White Pearl.”

At last, a clue!

Theodore’s excitement caused him to smile broadly. He extended his hand in gratitude to the old man.

“May the blessing of Saradomin be upon you! This is excellent news indeed.” He turned to his friend. “I will return to Falador at first light tomorrow.”

SEVEN



It was night. The faces of the men were eerily lit by the burning brands they held in the crowded dell.

Before them stood twelve men clad in purple robes, addressing the audience and engaging them with swift hand movements and carefully chosen words.

“What kind of men are we, citizens of Asgarnia, who would let monsters roam the countryside?” one said. “How many more of our womenfolk must we see seized by the roadside and devoured? How many of our children? The attack on the caravan is not the first of its kind, and even now a conspiracy amongst the Imperial Guard and the knights exists to deny it—to prevent us knowing the truth!”

The speaker paused for breath, clenching his fist as he raised his hand and then pointed to the onlookers theatrically.

“Do you know what that truth is, fellow citizens?” The faces looked expectant under the light of the burning torches. “Do you?” the speaker cried loudly, he bunched his hand in a tight fist and punched the air, challenging the crowd.

“No! Tell us!” someone shouted from the back, and immediately his call was backed by others in the crowd. The speaker in the purple robe let them continue for a moment

before calmly raising his arms in a gesture that bespoke of reconciliation and peace.

The crowd fell silent, everyone captivated by these strange men who had come amongst them, preaching humanity's superiority over all other creatures.

The speaker resumed.

"The truth is that they *can't* protect you! They cannot protect any of you! Not the elitist Imperial Guard, too concerned with protecting the crown prince in Burthorpe. Not the knights, too caught up in their righteous ways to care about the needs of the so-called common people!

"And both..." He pointed at the crowd once more, emphasising his point, "...and both caught up in their own militant rivalry!" He spat the words in disgust, and a few voices shouted out excitedly from the crowd, agreeing with him.

"They do not want us out here, hunting for the monster ourselves! They feed on our insecurity, on the belief that simple men like us cannot protect our homes—making us believe we need them! Look around you! Look at your neighbour! Can he not protect himself? Would he not *die* to save his family?" He spread his arms wide before him in a suddenly sweeping gesture, and the audience of men, glaring now at one another, nodded their heads and shouted in agreement.

"They rule only by our consent. They govern us only by our own leave. They exist only because we allow them to!" The speaker's finger once more extended toward the night sky, and he paused for a moment to let them consider the enormity of his words. If the authorities had heard him speak in such a manner in one of the cities, he would be arrested for sedition. He knew that well. But here in the open country, and with Falador a day's ride south, standing amongst farmers and travellers and men to whom the monster was a very real thing, he was free to do as he wished.

“But in truth, we are to blame,” he continued. “Look again at your neighbour—if he can protect himself, then why does he rely on the goodwill of others? If he can fight, why then is he so eager to extol the virtues of the knights and depend upon them for safety? Why, if a common man has faith in the strength of his own arm, are we so eager to let the strutting knights and officers of the exclusive Imperial Guard collect their taxes and rob us of our livelihood, just to pay for the silver buttons on their ceremonial coats?”

“Remember, they rule only because we let them. They rule only because we fear to take our destinies into our own hands!”

A pungent smell made the speaker smile inwardly. His fellow believers had done well, passing the strong brew amongst the onlookers, feeding their frenzied minds with the potent alcohol. Such was their animation that he doubted the crowd would be willing to disperse without some activity to vent their rage.

It is so easy, he thought to himself before continuing, to take advantage of their innate fear.

“They say a monster is loose!” he cried. “A creature that devours its victims! They say they do not know what it is, and they secretly encourage us to let our own imaginations build their monster into something mythical.

“Werewolves!” He punched the air viciously. “Vampires! Ghouls!” With each word another savage punch, and with each blow a roaring tempest of voices shouting encouragement.

“But what has it attacked so far? A single woman barely out of girlhood! A lone gypsy caravan, isolated from any help, with just a grandfather and young mother to protect a defenceless child! Look at your neighbour, my friends, and ask yourselves why we should be afraid. Search amongst you for any who would not fight to protect their families from a beast that kills the old and the weak. This is no werewolf. This is no vampire or ghoul. But it is not human either. What human would do such a thing?”

The faces of the men showed doubt under the torchlight.

“It is something masquerading as a monster—something designed to instil fear into our souls,” he said, his voice filled with certainty. “What else could it be?”

The men shook their heads.

“Goblins can be found in these parts—we all know of the settlement north of here. Could it be a goblin?” he asked, facing the foremost onlookers directly, one after the other.

“Goblins aren’t smart enough.” The voice was thick with the rural accent.

“But what else can it be?” This second voice was familiar to the speaker, for he had told the man exactly what to say.

The result was exactly as he had hoped.

“There’s a dwarf that lives hereabouts. Just off the road to Taverley, a few miles north of here. He lives on his own, as a hermit.”

Doubtful expressions drew the speaker’s attention. Some of the crowd still needed convincing.

“A hermit?” the speaker yelled suddenly. “Does he show a hatred of people?”

“He don’t like them getting too close!” the rural voice shouted out, and several nodded in agreement. The dwarf was a well-known hermit who had lived in the lands of Asgarnia for two dozen untroubled years, but as the farms of men had grown closer, he had become an angry neighbour.

He’s perfect, the speaker mused.

“Dwarfs are known for their cunning,” he said in a thoughtful manner. “They are the masters of metal, hoarding their treasures, unwilling to share even the basest trinket. What lengths would he go to in order to protect his privacy? How well do we know him? We cannot trust a creature like that!” His fiery eyes observed new jugs of alcohol being passed amongst the crowd, and to his delight he noted several men swaying uncertainly.

“How can we trust a thing that hoards its wealth?” he

continued. "Dwarfs are known for their love of shiny metals. They share the magpie's lust to decorate their homes with what is precious to humankind. Gold! Silver! Rubies! Where a dwarf makes his home, you will find such things."

The speaker had lit the fire of envy in the eyes of the onlookers, and as they drank he could see the effects of his appeal to their greed. Each of them pictured what secret wealth the lone dwarf might possess in his isolated log cabin.

"I say we go and see the dwarf," the rural voice called from the rear of the crowd. "Ask him about the murders!" A dozen voices rose in agreement.

"It will know something, my friends! The caravan was only a few miles from its lair when it was attacked." The speaker had changed his approach. The dwarf had been demoted to an "it", his home rechristened a lair.

He smiled as the angry voices echoed amidst the dell. A lair was so much easier to burn than someone's home.

The clear night glittered with so many stars that Theodore thought they must be beyond count.

He had sat up late with Castimir, talking extensively of their childhood together in Rimmington, a town that lay several days' travel from Falador. The two had shared laughter, reliving the halcyon days of their youth, their faces lit under the strong moonlight that softly touched the thatched rooftops and white walls of Taverley. The fountains glistened in the gloom, their faint music of cascading water an eerie enchantment.

Now Theodore looked once more at the stars, a great loneliness in his heart, a sudden feeling of smallness as he observed the heavens above him.

"Is it true, Castimir?" he asked. "What they say about the stars?"

The young wizard looked at him for a long minute, aware

that their conversation was nearing its end and that it would soon be time for them to part. It had taken considerable effort to break through Theodore's reserve, a protection the squire built around himself to keep others at a distance.

You didn't have that before you joined the knights, Castimir thought with sadness. If you have changed like that, how must you think I've changed?

"What do they say about the stars, Theo?"

"That if you travel far enough, they change." Theodore stared wistfully skyward.

"I cannot say, for I have never travelled so far. The stars in Catherby are the same as they are here—fixed in the heavens by the gods to guide seamen and reveal the secrets of the world to astrologers."

A sudden cough sounded from nearby, and Theodore's hand instinctively found the hilt of his sword. A moment later Ebenezer emerged from behind a fountain, his hand holding a clay pipe as he walked tentatively toward them.

"Did I hear you correctly, saying that you believed the stars to be fixed forever in the heavens, just to be used by astrologers?" He eyed Castimir with a sparkle in his eyes.

"That's what we were brought up to believe," the young man replied. "I know you well enough, however, to know that you do not agree." The wizard looked at Theodore warily, knowing that he would not approve of Ebenezer listening in the darkness.

And still the squire kept his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

"I have a number of different theories about them," the old man replied. "Though I have yet to decide which one best suits the facts as I know them. But nothing is forever—not people, not places, not worlds and not stars. Everything is subject to change."

"Must you question everything, alchemist?" Theodore

asked, unwilling to be drawn into another argument in his final moments with Castimir.

“Absolutely!” the old man replied proudly. “If you do not ask, you do not learn—a favourite maxim of many mothers, that too few children bother to practise. It is a philosophy of mine that everything must be questioned. To leave the natural world in the hands of the gods is to give even them too much credit.”

With that, Ebenezer lit his clay pipe and stood close to the two young men, pointing out the constellations to both squire and wizard. As they observed the heavens on that cold, cloudless night, a shooting star sped across the horizon and vanished behind the glistening peaks of White Wolf Mountain to the northwest.

Not a hundred yards away, Gar’rth lay in a pool of cold sweat.

Curled beneath some blankets they had laid down in the hall, he had watched as Ebenezer, finished with his chemicals, decided to stroll out for his evening smoke. The alchemist had paused at the door before opening it, looking down at Gar’rth’s shadowy outline.

“Are you all right, Gar’rth?” he asked the motionless youth. Although he did not understand any of the words save his name, Gar’rth was familiar with the manner in which they were spoken. Soft words, comforting words, the words of someone who cared. It had been long years since Gar’rth had heard any words like that.

“Thank you,” he had responded. The only words that Gar’rth had so far been able to learn, he said them with a sincerity that would make the most practised dissembler feel envious.

Gar’rth had struggled to keep himself from shaking as Ebenezer spoke to him, but when the old man shut the door he stopped trying to fight it. He lay in utter silence, his body

shivering so much that even the glowing embers of the fire offered him no comfort.

Shortly afterward he began to sweat, a cold sweat that erupted from his pores and drenched the bedclothes. He was familiar with his ailment, and despite the potions that the druid had brewed for him, he knew he could not expect his condition to improve. He doubted that he would *ever* be rid of it.

Lying there, he recalled the taunts that his blood-brothers had heaped on him those many months ago, before he had escaped.

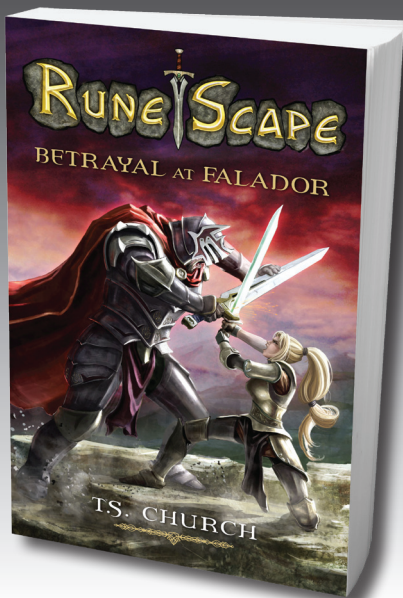
You can't change what you are, Gar'rth. You're one of us. You can't change the way you're born!

He had escaped, crossing rivers and borders, living off charity where he could before accepting the fact that he had to steal to survive. The one thing he never did was to harm an innocent person—that was a rule he would not break. He could never do that, for if he did then he knew he would be lost.

After the sweating came the spasms, which wracked his body as if there were something inside that hungered to be released. As he tasted his own blood in his mouth, he sniffed the mixture of crushed herbs that Ebenezer had prepared for him. Usually they soothed him, but now they affected him little.

It was the most violent attack his ailment had ever made against him, and he knew it would be worse the next time.

Crying was rare where he came from. It showed weakness, and a youth of Gar'rth's age crying would have incurred a harsh punishment. But he was far away from that place. Covering himself entirely with the sweat-drenched blanket that was now cold against his skin, he wept, his black eyes pools of anguish.



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