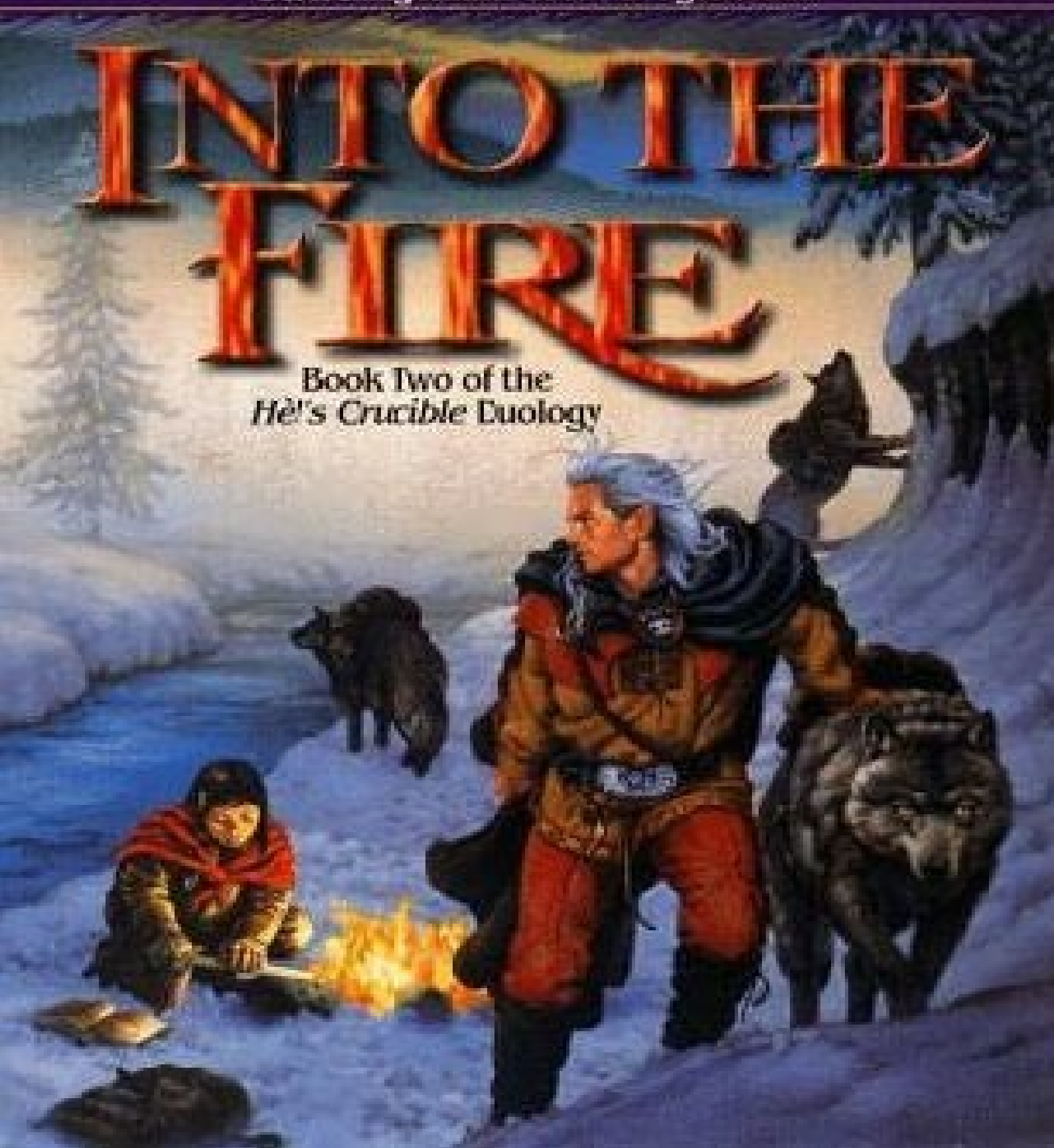


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Bestselling Author of *The Dragonstone*

INTO THE FIRE

Book Two of the
Hè's Crucible Duology



Into the fire

(Hel Crucible - 2)

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INTO THE FIRE

Chapter 1

Down from the now-free gates of Mineholt North rode the five-Tipperton, Beau, Phais, Loric, and Bekki-three on ponies, two on horses, and drawing two pack animals behind. Down from the port and along the road on the eastern side of the mountain vale they fared-two War-rows, two Elves, and Dwarf-riding southward, soon to turn east and follow the tradeway to the city of Dael. Of the mighty battle which had raged before the gates a mere ten weeks past, the battle which had shattered the Foul Folk siege of the Dwarvenholt, the battle which had sent one of Modru's Hordes fleeing in panic, that battle there remained little sign, for all was covered with unmarked December snow, and not even the great scorching of the funeral pyres from the aftermath showed through, though rounded hummocks under the whiteness betokened where lay the Daelsmen's burial knolls.

Past this field of blood rode the five, alongside a mountain flank, slitted eyewear protecting the sight from the blinding glare of the white pristine 'scape, the bright winter sun shedding little warmth down upon them all.

"I say," queried Beau, peering at Tip, "just how far is it to Dael?"

"Thirty, thirty-five leagues by road," replied Tipperton, "shorter could we fly."

At these words, Beau looked long at the sky. No birds were in sight, though the forward edge of feather-thin clouds eked southward high above. "Huah. Even if I were a bird, I'd think it too cold to fly. No, Tip, I'll stick to my pony even though it'll take us five or six days in all."

"Five or six days, Beau, that's just to Dael. We'll be forty, forty-five days on the road to Dendora and that's if we don't run into trouble."

"Forty-five da-?"

"It's two hundred sixty, two hundred seventy leagues away, bucco."

"Oh my, eight hundred miles or so?"

"So Bekki says, Beau."

Bekki grunted and said, "It is two hundred sixty-six leagues and two miles and some paces by the route we will go if all steps out as planned."

Beau nodded, then began counting on the fingers of one gloved hand. After a while he said, "You are right, Tip: at six or seven leagues a day, that will take some forty or forty-five days." Beau shook his head. "A long time of eating field rations."

"Oh, Beau, take heart," said Tip, "there are towns along the way."

Beau shook his head. "We can't count on that, Tip, with Foul Folk all about. I mean, look at how far we had to go after leaving Arden Vale before we had a good hot meal. All the way down and through the Grimwall and over the Gunarring and back up to Darda Galion."

Tip shook his head. "You're forgetting the marmot and rabbit we cooked on the Plains of Valon."

"All right, all right, so that's, what, one hot meal in a thousand miles? Not exactly what I'd call eating well."

Tip turned up his hands, then said, "We ate quite well in Darda Galion, and then again in Caer Lindor." Tip's face fell, yet he managed to say-"Lindor."

Beau looked across at his sad-eyed friend, then jerked his thumb over his shoulder and added, "Mineholt North, too."

Tip glanced at Beau and smiled through his tears. "Yes, we did." Then he sighed and wiped his cheeks with the heels of his gloved hands. "I'm sorry, Beau, but whenever I think of Caer Lindor, it brings it all back."

"I know, bucco," said Beau. "I know. And it's all right."

They rode along in morose silence for another mile or so, and a chill wind kicked up at their back and they drew their cloaks tightly 'round.

Finally they came to the mouth of the vale, and the road swung easterly. Along this way they turned, making new tracks in the unmarked snow as thickening clouds slid overhead.

Phais looked at the sky and removed her eyewear. "I think we're in for a blow."

"Oh my," said Beau. "Should we turn back? I mean, we're not too far from the shelter of the mineholt."

Phais glanced at Loric, and he shook his head and said, "'Tis the winter season, Beau, and no matter when we set out snow will fly... lest thou wouldst have us wait until spring is upon us."

"Oh no," said Beau, pushing out a hand in negation. "We've been on this mission too long as it is to dawdle about waiting for fair weather. Besides, whatever message or meaning or charm or hex the coin bears, we need to get it to the one it is meant for."

At this mention of potential magic, Tip's brow furrowed, and he nervously touched his eiderdown jacket high on his chest. "Beau, I wish you'd leave this talk of spellcraft behind. I mean it's enough that we bear the coin without having to talk about enchantments or magic or whatever."

"All right, bucco," replied Beau. "I'll be quiet. I know it makes you uncomfortable and all to think that something actually touching your skin might be charmed in some way. I mean, if a Mage cast a spell upon the coin, or if a Sorceress laid a hex, or a Wizard incanted a-

"Beau, enough!"

Beau's eyes flew wide, and then he frowned in puzzlement. Finally he grinned sheepishly and said "Oh, right."

Loric looked at Phais and she at him, and although they tried to remain solemn, they failed, and laughter rang out across the snow to be slapped back by the towering mountains to their left, and soon Beau was laughing, and finally stern Bekki joined in.

Tipperton scowled at them all, but at last even he grinned.

And the south-flowing clouds above thickened.

"Oh my," said Beau, pointing ahead and left, air hissing in through clenched teeth. "Modru's sigil. A standard pole with a tattered flag jutting up out from the snow, the symbol a ring of fire on black." "Abandoned by the fleeing Horde, I ween," said Phais.

"There's something under the snow," said Loric, spurring his horse to the flag and dismounting.

"Take care," called Beau.

Loric knelt and with a gloved hand brushed away the blanket of white.

"What is it?" asked Tip.

"A dead Ruch," replied Loric, looking down at the swart face revealed. He brushed away more snow, uncovering a long gash in the quilted armor along the Ruch's torso. Loric looked up at the others. "He took a cut from a blade. Probably in the battle. Got this far before he bled to death."

Tip blew out a breath, frosty white in the cold air. "I would rather die quickly in combat than a slow painful death such as that."

"Oh my, yes," said Beau. "But better still, what say we die of old age instead?"

As Loric remounted, Tip laughed and said, "Indeed, and after a long and fruitful life, eh?"

As Beau nodded in agreement, Bekki said, "I would have a long and fruitful life-three or four centuries-then die in glorious battle. If not battle, then old age must serve."

Once again they started easterly. Of a sudden Beau frowned and looked at Phais.

"We do not die of old age, Beau," said Phais, "if that is what thou art mulling. Instead 'tis b

violence or accident, or by poison as nearly did I."

"Oh my," said Beau, his eyes filling with distress. "Nothing peaceful whatsoever?"

Phais shook her head.

Beau glanced at his medical kit. "Illnesses?"

Phais spread her hands. "There are but few which affect Elvenkind, and those most virulent."

"Oh my," said Beau. "Oh my."

And easterly they rode, while the wind blew chill and brooding clouds darkened the skies above.

"This way," called Bekki above the howling wind, and Tip, next in line, could but barely hear him. Still Tippeton turned and shouted behind, "This way! This way!" and whether Beau heard him or not, he shouted the word on, Tipper-ton could not say.

Blindly they followed Bekki through the hurling white, barely able to see the horse or pony ahead as they tramped in file, each drawing an animal or two behind.

Finally they reached a vertical flank of mountain stone, and Bekki turned rightward to the east while the frigid blast shrieked down from the heights above, carrying stinging ice and hurtling snow on its furious wings.

"I say," called Tip toward Bekki, but his words were shredded on the squalling wind and carried to shrieking oblivion. I say, wouldn't it be better if we were roped together? But no one could hear him or read his thoughts, and so, unattached, he followed Bekki, and Beau followed him, with Phais coming after and then Loric. To the right loomed shapes-trees?-he did not know. He was just about to try yelling to Bekki again when of a sudden the fury abated, and he came into a cavernous vault, with stone overhanging above and rubble underfoot, and in the dimness he could see Bekki and his pony trudging on ahead, back into recesses of the great hollow.

Tip led his pony on inward and turned to see Beau and his mount coming after, and then Phais drawing her animal behind with a packhorse in tow as well, and finally Loric with two steeds after.

Bekki nodded at the fire. "Before we leave, we shall gather wood to replace that which we burn."

Beau gazed around at the vaulted chamber, a semidome of sorts, sides curving 'round to the back, the ceiling arcing down to the back as well, the rubble-strewn floor more or less level. They sat at the rear of the hollow in relative comfort, snow flying and wind howling a hundred feet away at the bow-mouth of the wide cavity.

Beau turned to Bekki. "Oh my, Bekki, how did you ever find this place?"

"It is a Chakka wayfarers' shelter. I have been here before."

Beau looked at the cords of wood stacked against the back of the chamber. "Yes, but with all this snow, I mean, how could you see?"

"I could not, but as I said, I have been here before."

Beau threw up his hands in a gesture of puzzlement.

Bekki glanced at Tip, then said, "Chakka cannot lose their footsteps. Once we have been to a place, the way is always within us. It is a gift from Elwydd."

Beau looked out into the shrieking snow. "Oh my, quite a marvelous gift, I should say." He turned to Tip. "I wonder if we have a gift... Warrows, that is."

Tip sighed and tapped his chest at the point of the coin. "Perseverance, I shouldn't wonder."

Phais shook her head and looked at the Warrows, then said, "Nay, Tippeton, 'tis heart."

They spent that night and all the next day in the cavernous shelter, the wind screaming past. It was during Bekki's watch on the second night that the storm began to abate, and by the next morning there was nought of it left but a few gentle flakes drifting down. The five scoured for dead-wood among the

broad stand of trees ranging before the hollow to replace the wood they had used. And then they set out once again to the east, the ponies and horses at times broaching deep drifts, at other times faring across ground scoured clean by the blow.

Slowly the skies cleared, and by midafternoon the comrades rode beneath a glacial sky, the sun remote and chill the air numbingly cold, their breath streaming white, the vapor freezing on crusts, scarves wrapped 'round faces and Bekki's beard was clotted with the ice of his exhalations.

Through the slits of his eyewear, Beau looked at Tip, the other buccan with his cloak wrapped 'round. "Lor', Tip but I don't think I'll ever be warm again. I mean, this is even worse than when we were in Drearwood."

"Let's walk awhile, Beau," said Tip, swinging a leg over the saddle forecandle and hopping down. "It'll warm us."

"I'm all for that," replied Beau, dismounting as well. "I mean, I'd walk all the way to Dendor if it keeps me warm."

"There'll be a warm inn in Dael," said Tip, "with good hot food and something steaming to drink."

"Oh my, hot wine mulled with spices," groaned Beau. "I can taste it now."

Walking behind and leading two animals, Phais said, "A warm bath would serve better."

"Oh yes," agreed Beau. "A hot bath with hot wine to sip even as we soak."

Tip's mind flashed back to their first bath in Arden Vale, its warmth driving away the chill in the bones. And then he blushed, remembering dark-haired, blue-eyed Lady Elissan walking in on him. He stood naked in the bath washing his hair, his eyes closed against the soap running down, and he recalled her words at their last parting: When next thou doth take a bath, keep thine eyes open, else thou mayest once again have thy splendor revealed.

Tipperton laughed, his breath puffing white in the brumal air.

Beau looked at him. "What?"

Tip shook his head. "Oh, nothing."

And on they trudged, now and again coming across the bodies of Foul Folk who had died of wounds sustained in the battle before the gates of Mineholt North, wounds which ultimately proved fatal during the retreat as the Horde had fled. Yet they could not say how many other dead Rupt the had unknowingly passed hidden beneath the snow.

Early on the nineteenth of December the road they followed entered Daelwood, a wide forest of Riamon. Frost covered the stark limbs of the wintering trees, the boughs barren and hard.

"Oh my," said Beau, as they wended through the desolate wood, "but with the branches scraping the sky, well, it reminds me somewhat of Drearwood."

"Nay, my friend," said Phais. "Dhruousdarda is an evil tangle; Arindarda is not."

Beau frowned. "Arindarda? -Oh, you mean Daelwood."

"Aye."

Tipperton nodded. "I agree. There was an evil air to Drearwood, whereas here there is none." Then he turned to Phais. "I say: Arindarda: doesn't that mean, urn, Ringwood?"

"Aye, it does. Once nearly all of the land within the ring of the Rimmen Mountains was covered with this forest, but men have hewn it down until but a remnant remains."

"Goodness," said Tip, shaking his head as he remembered the rolling plains he had scouted with Vail, "what a loss."

On they fared within the forest, and late in the day they crossed an ice-covered stone bridge above a frozen tributary of the Ironwater River. On the far side, the road swung southeastward, following along the stream.

"We'll camp here at the turn," said Bekki, glancing through bleak limbs at the cheerless sun.

"How much farther to Dael?" asked Beau, dismounting.

"Ten leagues and one mile minus some paces will bring us to the city walls," replied Bekki loosening the cinch strap on his shag-haired pony.

"Barn rats," groaned Beau. "I was hoping we'd get to an inn tomorrow, but it looks more like two days, eh?"

Bekki turned and shook his head. "Not quite. Even with this snow and ice, a day and a half should see us there."

Beau hauled the saddle from his pony. "A day and a half, Tip, and then it's hot mulled wine and bath for me."

Late the next day they came across a frozen man. With his cloak wrapped 'round and his back to the tree, he sat next to the road. Snow covered his feet and legs, and a white frost clung to him from the waist up. His icy face was chalky, and his eyes were frozen shut.

"Is it one of the Horde?" asked Tip.

Bekki shook his head. "Nay, I think not. By his garb it looks more to be a Daelsman. Caught in the storm, I deem."

"Aye," said Phais. "Though late in the storm, I would think. There is little snow clinging unto him."

"It could have been blown away," said Tip.

Loric cocked an eyebrow. "Mayhap, though I ween the words of Dara Phais more like to be true."

Beau finished his examination and turned to the others. "Well, he's frozen through and through there's nothing we can do for him now." He looked at Bekki. "Maybe a pyre, for we won't be able to bury him in this rock-hard winter ground."

Bekki shook his head. "Instead we'll report him to the town militia. They will come with a wagon and bear him back to Dael. His kith need to identify him and mourn him properly."

"What about Wolves or such," asked Tip, "won't they be likely to, um-?"

"Nay, Tipperton," said Loric. "He is frozen solid and bears little scent, and though the storm was four days past, nought has yet defiled his remains. I deem he will stay untouched until the militia comes, unless there is a warming."

"I'll see if there's anything on him to say just who he was," said Beau, squatting down and prying open frozen pockets.

Tip frowned at this necessary yet rather grim business, but said nought.

Beau moved to the other side and in moments stood and shook his head.

Another mile down the road they found a frozen horse, one leg broken.

"Hmm," mused Loric. "A mystery this."

"How so?" asked Tip.

"If this is the frozen man's horse, then he went onward instead of turning back toward Dael."

"He might have been confused," said Beau. "Lost in the storm. Or so chill that he had no wits."

"Mayhap," growled Bekki, "yet I think instead he was fleeing."

Tip's eyes widened. "Fleeing? Fleeing what?"

Bekki gestured at the animal. "See the frozen hair? Lather turned to ice, I think. The horse may have been running when he broke a leg. And who would run a horse on ice but a fleeing man? Too, its throat is not cut, and so I ask, who would leave behind a broken-legged horse alive and in pain? Someone fleeing, that's who. Someone running in panic."

"Yes, but still you haven't answered Tip's question," said Beau. "What was the man fleeing from?"

Bekki shrugged and looked southeasterly along the road and then muttered, "Mayhap he was fleeing the city of Dael."

The next day they came upon another frozen man, and then another, and then three together, all of them covered with snow and ice and frost. And as the five rode onward, more and more frozen corpses

were encountered, the road littered with the cold dead-men, "women, children-some clearly had been travelling afoot while others had been riding, and still more were found frozen in carts and wain horses lying blizzard-slain and rock-hard as well. And all were heading northwesterly along the road, road which led to Mineholt North and nowhere else.

As the five now rode onward, Loric turned to Phais "Refugees?"

She nodded grimly. "Bekki I deem grasped the truth of it when he saw the very first man; he was fleeing the cit; of Dael, as I ween were these others."

"But what's in Dael?" asked Beau, looking about in trepidation. "I mean, why would they run?"

Loric turned up his gloved hands. "We cannot answer that question until we arrive, Beau."

"Perhaps we ought to skirt the city altogether," said Tip "I mean, if something perilous is there, Gargon or such-"

"Oh my," gasped Phais, looking at Loric, "mayhap in deed it is a Draedan."

"Gargon, Draedan, Ghath," growled Bekki, "we shouk draw near enough to know." He gestured southward "Somewhere my sire and the rest of the Allies hie after Squam, and we need to warn all if Ghath strides Dael."

Reluctantly Loric nodded. "Bekki is right. We need toe see for ourselves what may lie therein. And if needs be warn Coron and DelfLord and Chieftain and Prince alike.

Tip pulled his bow from its saddle scabbard and took an arrow in hand. "Fetch out your sling and bullets, Beauf we're riding into Dael."

They sat atop the hill and looked eastward down the fall of land toward where the city of Dael should have been Yet they saw nought of what they expected-a riverport town surrounded by high stone walls-but a mass of snow covered rubble instead. Not a whole structure stood, though here and there a damaged wall or stark chimney reared up where a building had been. Broken battlements surrounded the wrack, the high stone bulwark breached, ruptured, smashed in a hundred places, cleaved with great wide gaps. And a chill wind swirled through the gapes and among the ruins beyond.

"Lor'," breathed Beau, surveying the destruction, "what could have caused this? The Horde?"

Phais shook her head. "Nay. They were in flight, our allies after. They had not the time to do such."

"A Gargon?" asked Tip, his heart thudding.

Again Phais shook her head. "They are a terrible foe, but not even they could cause such ruin."

"Too," said Loric, "I feel not the dread of one."

Tip's mind flashed back to the time at Gunarring Gap when his heart had hammered with twisting apprehension from even a distant Gargon. No such anxiety writhed through his veins here.

"I see no movement," growled Bekki, looking at the others.

"Nor I," said Phais.

"What'll we do?" asked Beau. "Pass it by?"

Loric shook his head. "Nay. We must see what has befallen; others will want to know." Loric kicked his heels to the flanks of his mount, drawing his sword as he moved downslope.

And so did they all follow: Bekki with his hammer in hand, Phais with her blade, Beau with his bullet-laden sling, and Tip with an arrow strung.

They rode across the remains of crashed-down gates and into the rubble beyond, and hard-frozen bodies lay everywhere, yet some were burned as well. Too, not only were buildings smashed, but charred timbers and ash attested to raging fire.

And Phais and Loric looked at one another and nodded in unspoken agreement.

"What?" asked Beau.

"Drake," replied Phais.

The swirling air muttered among the wrack like whispering wraiths on the wind, as through the devastation and toward the palace they rode, now following Bekki, threading their way among snow

and ice and burned wreckage and the dead. But when they reached the site of the mansion they found nothing but blackened corpses amid shattered, charred ruins.

Beau looked about, shaking his head in disbelief, his eyes wide and filled with distress.

"I wonder-" began Tip -but Phais threw up a hand. "Hist!"

While the chill wind spun through splinter and burn among the stones, Phais cocked her head this way and that, and then she looked at Loric and gestured toward the river.

He nodded, and softly said, "I agree."

Bekki frowned. "I do not hear-"

"But they do," said Beau, canting his head toward the Elves.

"What is it?" breathed Tip.

"Laughter. Weeping," murmured Loric.

"Mounted or afoot?" asked Phais, gripping her sword.

"Mounted, I think," replied Loric, easing his horse ahead.

Now Beau frowned in puzzlement. "The weeping, the laughing, is mounted?"

"No," whispered Tip. "It's we who will go mounted rather than on foot down to the river's edge."

"Oh," breathed Beau in understanding.

"Spread wide," said Phais, "a street or so. 'Twould no do for us all to ride into the same ambush."

Beau looked at Tip and silently mouthed [Ambush?]

Tip shrugged and chucked his pony rightward to stay away.

Taking a deep breath, Beau went leftward.

Widely spread, down through the snow- and ice-laden wreckage they rode in a ragged line abreast down toward the frozen Ironwater, Bekki in the center, with Phais a cobbler's street to the right and Loric a street to the left. Beyond Phais rode Tip, with Beau to Loric's left.

And now Tip could hear an intermittent hissing and babbling, spates of unrecognizable words interspersed by giggling and weeping... and silence. Onward he rode, now able to see the frozen surface of the waterway ahead, bone white under the grey overcast above. At last he came to a long stone wharf bordering the Ironwater River itself, with a great number of boat slips and barge landings along its considerable length, all empty in the winter cold. His bow at the ready, Tip waited for the others to reach the long, long pier, and as he held position, again he heard distant hissed words, as if someone were revealing secrets to a confidant, though what was said Tip did not know, for it was in his tongue he spoke not.

To the left, beckon, and near. But wait for the others. Now Beau appeared on the stone pier at a distance away, and in quick succession Bekki and Phais and Loric rode onto the windswept stone.

Phais turned rightward and held out a shushing hand to Tippeton. Quietly she dismounted.

Tip did likewise, carefully and silently swinging a leg over and down.

Moving toward the Dara, Tip listened and looked and tried to hear and see everything all at once. And as he passed a wide ramp pull-way leading up from the river to the pier and across to the collapsed ruins of a dockside warehouse, from within the wreckage a giggling babble and weeping sissled forth.

Tip turned toward the warehouse ruin and signalled to Phais it was here. And he waited for her to arrive.

Together they crept in among the shatter and char, and found whence the hissings came: from beneath an overturned barge. And as Bekki and Loric and Beau came in among the rubble, Phais and Tip knelt and peered under. And in the shadows they saw- "Lord Tain!" gasped Tippeton.

The white-haired man was holding the frozen corpse of a burnt woman and muttering into her ear.

As weeping and babbling and hissed secrets came sissling from under the barge, Bekki stood up and growled. "I say we kill him now."

"What?" blurted Tip.

~~"He fled from the field of battle and deserves nothing more than a coward's death."~~

Loric put a hand on Bekki's shoulder. "Aye, my friend, he did flee from the Rupt at Mineho North, yet he was advisor to Prince Loden, hence justice is King Enrik's to do and not ours."

"King Loden, you mean," said Bekki.

Tip frowned up at Bekki. "Prince Loden?"

Bekki shook his head. "Nay, Tipperton, Loden is now king. Enrik is dead."

"How do you know this?"

Bekki gestured at the upturned barge. "Craven Tail says so."

"You understand the tongue he babbles?"

Bekki nodded. "It is Riamonian."

"What is he saying?"

Of a sudden Bekki's eyes softened, and he sighed sadly.

"What is it, Bekki?" asked Tip.

"He just now said her name."

"Whose name?"

"The corpse he holds: it is Lady Jolet, his daughter."

In that moment Beau came back into the rubble, his satchel of medicks in hand. "Is he still und there? I need him here to treat him."

Bekki shook his head. "He is too fear-stricken and won come out."

"Then I'll go in," said Beau.

"Nay, Beau," said Loric. "Thou dost not know what h may do, for his wits are gone."

Beau looked at Phais.

"Hast thou aught to set madness aside?" she asked.

Beau shook his head.

"Then thou canst do no good, whereas in his state he may do great ill to thee."

"Nevertheless..." said Beau.

Bekki ground his teeth and said, "Wait, I will try to ca him forth."

Bekki squatted and peered under the edge of the barge "Radca Tain, wychodzic."

Lord Tain held the corpse and rocked and whispered on

"Radca Tain, proze wychodzic."

Still there was no response from Tain.

Bekki turned to Beau. "He does not know we are here."

"Then I'm going in," said Beau, and before anyone could stop him he scrambled under the edge.

"Tipperton," snapped Bekki. "Set arrow to bow and hold against Tain. If he makes an ill move, kill him."

"But I might hit Beau," protested Tip.

"Not so," said Phais, "for thine aim is true. And Bekki is right. Tis better to slay a madman than to lose a friend."

Hastily Tip nocked an arrow and knelt and made ready should Lord Tain try to do ill to Beau.

Bekki squatted at Tip's side.

Still Tain muttered on.

"What is he saying?"

Bekki took a deep breath. "Among his babblings he now speaks of a Dragon, Sleeth, wreaking havoc."

"One of the renegades," whispered Phais.

"Now he tells that King Enrik is dead," continued Bekki, "killed by Dragonfire."

Beau opened his medick bag and took out a small jar: a salve. He applied it to the burn on Tain's forehead. The man did not note the buccan's ministrations.

Still Bekki translated, sifting information from babble: "Again he says Enrik is dead, but adds that Lady Jolet now bears Enrik's child in her womb, a child who will be the one true heir."

Phais gasped, "Oh Adon, she was with child." Phais reached out and took Loric's hand as tears brimmed her eyes.

Bekki looked up. "He believes that all the princes of Riamon are now slain: some by Dragon, some by cold, and he deems Loden and Brandt could not escape death at the hands of the overwhelming Horde in the battle at Mineholt North." Bekki shook his head. "He does not know Lady Jolet is dead and he speaks of the child, the prince, the king to come from her loins."

Under the barge Beau spoke softly as he wound a bandage about Tain's head, yet the counsellor babbled on.

"Again he tells of Sleeth and the ravaging of Dael and speaks ill of those who fled from the city, calling them cowards all. Pah! As if Tain himself were not a runaway coward."

Beau closed his satchel, and Tippeton gasped and pulled the arrow to the full, for Beau tugged on Tain's sleeve, trying to draw him forth from under the barge. "Watch out, Beau," called Tip, "he's likely to do you harm."

Beau looked at Tip and then back at Counsellor Tain and tugged again, saying, "My Lord Tain, we must leave now, the kingdom has need of you."

But Tain did not note the Warrow's presence and sat and rocked and keened.

Finally, shaking his head, Beau took up his satchel and came out from under.

Tip exhaled a sigh of relief and relaxed his draw.

Southeasterly along the Sea Road they fared and away from the ruins of Dael, for none would stand in that city of death, none but the dead and the mad. And all along the tradeway they passed among the frozen blizzard-slain.

Ere they had departed, Bekki had led them to a market square, and there they had managed to find in the rubble a frozen slab of bacon, a whole side of venison, a number of grain-sacks of oats and two kegs of pickled herring, along with several sacks of beans. Some of this they packed on their horses but most they bore back to Counsellor Tain's shelter and set it there for him to have. Too, they left him with a found oil lantern along with flint and steel. As for firewood, there were many unburned splintered timbers he could use, though none of the comrades thought he would. As Bekki said, and they all agreed, "He is mad and in his madness knows only what he mutters."

And they had ridden throughout the ruins and searched for other survivors, calling out for any who might yet be alive... but nothing stirred and no one answered and so they had ridden away, having done all they reasonably could.

And now they fared down the Sea Road among the frozen dead.

Loric gestured about. "This is why the Horde marched past Dael and set siege to Mineholt North instead."

"I don't understand," said Beau.

"Modru knew Sleeth would attack here and so did not cast his Horde against the walled city."

"But that was months back," said Tip, "and Lord Tain babbled of Sleeth attacking just ere the blizzard came."

"Modru is master of the cold," said Bekki. "He waited for his season ere loosing Sleeth to set fire to Dael, to crush its walls and batter down its dwellings, and he sent the blizzard flying on the Dragon's tail, for without shelter any survivors would die in the grasp of its frigid blast."

"I say," chimed in Beau, "d' y' think that's why he set siege to Mineholt North, to cut off that place of refuge should any make it through?"

Bekki shrugged. "Who knows the mind of Modru? Not I, Beau. Not I."

~~They set camp alongside the road, in a stretch where no frozen dead lay. And as they huddled~~ about their nightly fire and sipped hot tea, Tip said, "It's my understanding that Drakes are vain, selfish, arrogant, and very powerful. How could Modru command such a creature to destroy Dael?"

"Perhaps he bribed him with a treasure," said Bekki.

"A treasure, eh?" said Beau. "What do you suppose it was? Or for that matter, what did he offer Skail of the Barrens to attack the Dwarves at Drimmen-deeve?"

Bekki shrugged, but Tip said, "Delon the Bard offered Raudhrskal a mate." Suddenly Tip's eyes widened. "Oh my, but I just thought of something."

Phais looked at Tip, an eyebrow raised.

"What if Modru has offered the renegade Drakes the Dragonstone?"

Phais shook her head. "'Twas lost with the destruction of Rwn."

"But what if he's found it? I mean, that's why they became renegades in the first place, isn't it? They didn't want to give up the Dragonstone."

"Mayhap," replied Phais, "though Dara Arin herself said 'twas more likely they became renegades because in their arrogance they did not wish to be bound by the strictures of a pledge to anyone, much less the one devised by the Mages of Black Mountain."

"Now wait a moment," said Beau, throwing up a hand. "Look, didn't you just say Dragons were selfish and arrogant and powerful?" At Tipperton's nod, Beau plunged on: "Well if that's so, then which one of them would hold this Dragonstone? I mean they couldn't all have possession of the precious thing. So how could Modru promise the renegades the Dragonstone?"

"Perhaps," growled Bekki, "he secretly told each one that he would give over the stone to him and him alone- Skail, Sleeth, and any other Drake he would bribe-separately promising each one the same."

Loric nodded. "A Black Mage would do such."

Tip shook his head. "But wouldn't the Dragons take retribution against Modru for doing such an underhanded thing?"

Now it was Phais who shook her head. "Not with Gy-phon as Modru's protector."

Beau yawned and stretched. "Well, I must say it's all quite beyond me. It's enough that we'll be done with it when we've delivered the coin."

"Oh, Beau, we won't be done with it until the entire war itself is done," said Tip, sipping the last of his tea and sliding his cup into a saddlebag. "It's all connected, you know."

Beau's eyes widened, and he nodded, pondering, then said, "You're right, Tip, but listen: nothing will ever be over, even after this war is done, for indeed all is connected, all is linked, past, present, and future, at hand and near and far, from all that has ever gone before to all that is yet to come."

As Tip took up his bow to stand the first turn at watch he said, "Well, Beau, you may be right about that, but if we can just get to the end of this war and win, for me that will be enough."

Beau did not reply as Tip stepped away from the fire and into the cold dark beyond.

Chapter 2

South-southeasterly they fared, passing by the frozen corpses of those who had fled from the ci of Dael, had fled from the raging Dragonfire, had fled from the whelm-ings of Sleeth, had fled into the countryside only to be blizzard-slain. Men, women, children, babies, horses, dogs: Modru's storm had spared none. And they lay scattered along the road as testament to his cruel power.

"Oh Adon," said Beau, his tilted amber eyes wide with distress, "why didn't some survive?"

"They had no chance to prepare when they ran from Sleeth's ravagement," growled Bekki.

"But they should have made fires, found shelter, anything but this."

"Oh, Beau," said Tip, "don't you remember the shrieking wind? The blinding snow? I mean, if hadn't been for Bekki, we would have been hard-pressed to survive ourselves, and we're well prepared for the cold."

"Aye," said Phais, smiling at Bekki, "'twas Fortune Herself who favored us with the company of this Drimm."

Bekki shot the Dara a quick glance, then looked at the road ahead, the Dwarf somehow disconcerted by her regard.

Beau sighed, then said, "Ah, me, and wellaway, but it is so tragic for so many to come to this grievous end."

"It's just one more thing that Gyphon and all his get will have to answer for," said Tip.

Loric looked at Tipperton. "Art thou still consumed by the need for revenge, wee one?"

Tip shook his head. "No, Loric. I but speak the truth." Loric nodded and said no more as on down the Sea Road they fared, riding now in silence.

The next day, the shortest of the year, they passed beyond the reach of the frozen dead, and that night, as a waning gibbous moon rose in a clear sky, Phais, Loric, Tip, and Beau all took places to step through the Elven Winter-day rite, the Dara facing north, the Alor and Waerlinga facing south. And as they looked upon one another, Phais began to sing, to chant, for it was something of each. Then Loric took up the chant, the song, and surprisingly he was joined by Tipperton, the Waerling in harmony. And Loric and Phais both smiled down at the buccan, while Beau looked at him in astonishment.

And in the argent light of the silvery moon shining down on white snow, Phais and Loric and Tip and Beau began stepping out the turning of the seasons.

Singing, chanting, and pacing slowly pacing, they followed an ancient ritual reaching back to the dawn of Elven-kind. And enveloped by moonlight and melody and harmony and descant and counterpoint and feet soft in the moonlit snow, they trod solemnly, gravely... but with filling hearts.

Step... pause... shift... pause... turn... pause... step.

Slowly, slowly, move and pause. One voice rising; two voices falling. Liquid notes from the dawn of time. Harmony. Euphony. Step... pause... step. Phais turning. Loric turning, Waerlinga in his wake. Dara passing. Alor pausing. Buccan pausing as well. Counterpoint. Descant. Step... pause... step...

And all were lost in the ritual... step... pause... step.

When the rite at last came to an end-voices dwindling, song diminishing, movement slowing, there all was silent and still-Lian and Waerlinga once again stood in their beginning places: female facing north, males facing south. And when they were finished it seemed as if the weight of the last few days had been lifted from them, and they were gladdened.

"I say," exclaimed Beau, breathlessly, "we almost know how it's done, eh?"

Loric grinned, but Tip shook his head. "Oh no. If it wasn't for Loric, we'd've floundered about in the snow."

Beau grinned back at Loric. "Even so, we're beginning to get the hang of it, neh?"

"Aye," said Loric. "~~Ye are at that, though e'en if ye practiced each day, still 'twould take long er~~ ye would be masters of the rite."

"I say, if we were Dwarves, we could master it at one pass, couldn't we?" asked Beau.

"The steps, aye, but the chant, the song, and its relation to the steps, that would take awhile."

"Speaking of Dwarves," said Tip, looking about the sparsely wooded clearing, "where has Bekki gotten to?"

Phais pointed. Atop a nearby hill stood Bekki, his arms stretched wide to the sky above. And the could hear his voice chanting words.

"What's he doing?" asked Beau.

" 'Tis the Drimmen rite of Wintemight, a calling out to Elwydd," said Loric.

"Elwydd, eh?" said Tip.

"Aye, for She is their patron."

"What's he saying?" asked Beau.

"Words nearly as ancient as the Drimma themselves," replied Loric. "I was taught the rite by Kelek, when we were shipwrecked in the Bright Sea. To do it properly, the DelfLord acts as cantor, the Drimma of the Dwarvenholt act as chorale, in alternating litany."

"Can you chant it to us?" asked Tip. "In Common, please."

Loric glanced upslope, then shook his head and said, "Even though thou and I art Chak-Soc Tippetton, Bekki will have to do so, for it is their most solemn rite, a thing of the Drimma and not of the Lian."

"Oh," said Tip, looking up at Bekki on the moonlit hill, the snow asparkle in the silvery light, "understand."

After a moment, Beau looked at Tip and said, "You know, we don't have solemn rites."

Tip frowned. "Who, Beau? Who doesn't have solemn rites?"

"Warrows, Tip. Warrows of the Boskydells, that is. I mean, although we note Summerday, Winterday, Spring-day, and Autumn-day, they're all happy affairs, the best being Summerday."

"Oh?"

Beau nodded enthusiastically. "Oh my, yes. Look, Tip, you weren't raised in the Bosky, but on Summerday, Year's Long Day, Mid-Year's Day, there's a fair in Rood, and parades, and contests. And that's the day, Year's Long Day, when we hold a birthday celebration for anyone who's had a birthday in the past year, which of course includes everyone. -Oh my, I just thought of something."

Tip raised an eyebrow.

"We didn't celebrate our birthdays on Year's Long Day," said Beau.

"Hmph," grunted Tip. "It seems to me that on Year's Long Day we were hiking across Valon in the night with Hyrinians and Chabbains all about trying to do us in, Beau."

"Pah," said Beau, frowning, "be that as it may, still we should have celebrated. In fact, we should celebrate our birthdays right now."

"But, Beau, it isn't Year's Long Day, but Year's Short Day instead," protested Tip. "We'll be six months late or six months early, depending on how you want to look at it."

"Well, late or early, Tip, what better day for Warrows to celebrate? A short day for a short folk eh?" Beau turned to Phais, who was grinning behind her hand. "I say Phais, have we any of that venison -And tea? Yes, tea We must have a birthday tea, with mian if we yet have some, or crue if not. And Tip, you must play your lute: 'The Merry Man of Boskledee' will do just fine. It's a good birthday song."

"Let's wait for Bekki," said Tippetton, glancing up at the crest of the hill. But Bekki wasn't there. Instead the Dwarf came flying downslope. "What th-? Bekki!"

Loric looked up and sprang to his feet. "Quench the fire," he hissed, his hand on the grip of his sword. "Be ready to fly."

As Beau kicked the campfire into the snow, Loric and Phais stepped to the horses and began casting on saddle blankets, Tipperton doing likewise to the ponies.

"A band," huffed Bekki, as he came into the site.

"Band?" asked Beau, catching up his saddle and stepping to his pony.

"Aye. To the south along the road. Tramping this way. Squam, I think."

"How many?" asked Phais, cinching a saddle tight.

"Too many," gritted Bekki, lifting his own saddle into place. "A hundred or so."

"Does it have to be Rucks and such?" asked Beau, reaching under his pony for the belly strap dangling down opposite. "I mean, couldn't it be Daelsmen?"

"Mayhap," replied Bekki. "Though were it Loden's men, I would expect them to be riding and not on foot."

"We are well off the road," said Tip, threading cinch strap through binding rings.

"Even so..." said Phais, now turning toward one of the packhorses.

Quickly all was ready for flight, and Bekki growled, "I would keep them in sight."

Phais nodded. "Let us ride to the far side of the knoll, and then go afoot to the top."

"Aye," said Loric, "'tis Rupt."

In the distance, in the moonlight, Tip could see the company of Foul Folk tramping northward along the road.

"Oh my," said Beau, "they're marching to Dael. Shouldn't we ride back and warn-?"

"There is nought back there but ruins and the dead," growled Bekki.

"What about Lord Tain?" said Beau. "He's not dead."

Bekki looked at the buccan. "He might as well be."

"Nevertheless," said Beau, turning to Phais, "shouldn't he be warned?"

Phais sighed. "Thou must harden thy heart, Beau, for many will be the time the needs of the mission outweigh the needs of one."

"Barn rats, but I don't think I like that one bit."

"Still, 'tis the way of war, Beau."

"Oh, I understand the need, Phais. Even so, I don't have to like it, do I?"

"Nay, thou dost not."

"Why would they be going to Dael?" asked Tip.

"To loot," gritted Bekki. "It lies in ruins ripe for plunder."

"But how would they know it's been destroyed? I mean, if this is part of the runaway Horde, how would they know? They would think it a well-fortified city."

"Mayhap they go there at the behest of Modru," said Loric.

"But we killed his surrogate," said Tip, his mind returning to that desperate dawn in the tent. "Bekki did, that is. And since we killed Modru's eyes and ears and voice, how would they know?"

"He has more than one surrogate," said Phais.

"Perhaps they're simply deserters from the Horde," said Beau. "Running away from the fighting. Heading for the mountains."

"Well, deserters or not, fleeing or not, even if they are going to Dael," said Tip, turning to Beau, "still they might not find Lord Tain; he is well hidden, and all he needs do is remain silent."

Beau shook his head. "Not likely in his madness."

"If they do find Coward Tain," growled Bekki, "mayhap the Grg will save Loden the task of dispensing the king's justice."

Beau sighed but said nought in reply.

Long they lay atop the hill and watched the maggot-folk march up the road and past and away while the waning gibbous moon sailed overhead and down, and Beau fell asleep with the waiting. And when finally the Spawn were gone from sight, Phais awakened the buccan and down the slope they went, back to the horses and ponies, Beau grumbling that Year's Short Day was now also gone and they hadn't gotten to have their birthday party.

"Bekki says there's a town some miles ahead," said Tip, thumbing among his map sketches finding the one he sought and showing it to Beau. "It's here at the fork where the Ironwater meets this tributary. Perhaps we can have a good hot meal and a bath and a mug of ale."

"Oh, Tip, don't say that."

"Wha-?" Tip looked at his friend. "Why not?"

"Well, every time we've counted on getting a good hot meal and a warm bath and a good bed and such in the next town, we arrive only to find it destroyed-Stede, An-nory, that town in Valon, Braeton Dael."

"See what I mean?" hissed Beau.

They stood in the woods and peered across the frozen Ironwater River at the small town on the far bank, where a company of swart maggot-folk looted and burned.

Tip sighed. "There are too many to fight."

Phais nodded. "We must ride on. To do otherwise is to risk the mission."

Bekki growled. "I like not this leaving of foe at our backs, yet I agree."

As they trudged among the trees toward the horses and ponies, Tip said, "There was a time, Bekki, when all I wanted was to kill Spawn. But no more. The death of Alor Lerren and others at Braeton was the first time I realized that people I knew would actually be killed while I sought my revenge. And then there were the terrible losses at Mineholt North... the price we pay is too high."

Loric looked down at the buccan. "The price paid for vengeance indeed is oft too great, wee on, yet no price is too high to pay for liberty, for it is precious beyond reckoning."

Bekki grunted. "Loric, I would argue with you concerning the worth of vengeance, yet not on the value of liberty."

They came to the place where the animals were tethered and mounted up and rode slowly through the woods, out of sight of the plundering Rupt, passing the town by, each of the comrades feeling somewhat guilty at leaving living enemy behind.

Days passed and days more, and still they followed the road through the woods bordering the Ironwater River, and ten days after leaving the ruins of Dael, they neared the town of Bridgeton, the place where a gap forty miles wide broached the ring of the Rimmen Mountains. And through this gap the waterway flowed southerly, the Sea Road following along as both wended down to the far Avagon Sea. And faring across, stretching east and west, through the breach ran the Landover Road, the Grimwain Mountains at one end, far Xian at the other.

And as the five comrades neared the gap, through the river-border trees they could see trails of smoke blearing the sky.

"Oh no," groaned Beau.

None else said aught as they rode onward.

Yet at last they emerged from the woods, and Beau broke into tears, for in the gap ahead they saw a town yet whole, smoke from chimneys rising into the air.

Chapter 3

It was Year's End Day, the last day of December, the last day of the two thousand one hundred ninety-fifth year of the Second Era of Mithgar, when Tip and Beau and Phais and Loric and Bekki rode toward the shut and warded town gates of Bridgeton. It was, as well, the very last day of the very first year of a great and terrible war.

And as the five approached, horns were sounded and flinty-eyed watchmen with crossbows in hand stood atop the western walls and looked upon these nearing strangers hooded against the cold. And when the horses and ponies were drawn up before the gates "Uw zaak!" demanded one of the guards.

Bekki glanced up at the blue-and-white tabarded watchman above the gate and at the flag of Riamon higher still and then called back, "Wij zoeken schutting." Bekki cast back his hood and motioned for the others to do as well, which drew a murmur from the guards. Elves and Dwarves they recognized for what they were, but as to Tip and Beau "My lord and lady," called down the chief warder, now speaking Common, "to travel with your children in these troubled times-

"We are Warrows!" interrupted Beau Volksklein? The guards looked down in wonder, for seldom had Small Folk been seen in Bridgeton, though it was said some Waldans lived on the banks of the River Rissanin just beyond the Rimmen Mountains on the western borders of Riamon.

- "And if you please," continued Beau, "would you open the gates? We need hot baths and mulled wine and warm meals and good beds to sleep in."

The warder laughed and turned and called down to someone within, then turned back to the five. "Meals and baths and mulled wine are within, but as to the beds, we've a scarcity of such, for Prince Loden and the Allies occupy many a cot."

"Loden?" blurted Tip, his companions surprised as well.

"Aye," replied the warder, as within the gate there ground a rumble of gears.

"What of my sire Borl?" called Bekki above the grinding sound. "DelfLord of Mineholt North."

The chief warder's eyes widened. "The DelfLord can be found at the Red Goose. Straight ahead and on the right You can't miss it."

"And Coron Ruar?" called Loric.

"Coron, DelfLord, Chieftain, Prince: you will find them all at the Red Goose."

Now a side postern opened, and a man beckoned. Dismounting, inward strode the five, drawing their animals after. Through a wrenching corridor under the wall they went, much like the twisting passageway at Caer Lindor, with portcullises and barred gates at each end and murder holes overhead.

And then they came in among the streets of Bridgeton, the city abustle, for it was Year's End Day and the citizenry would celebrate in spite of Modru's war.

"And it was Sleeth you say?"

"Aye, King Loden," replied Bekki, sitting across the table from the stunned young man.

Prince Brandt stood at the fireplace, tears running down his face. "We've got to kill him."

"Kill who?" asked Beau, sitting at the edge of the hearth.

"Sleeth."

Bekki cocked an eyebrow and shook his head, and beside him, DelfLord Borl said, "It cannot be done, for none has ever slain a Drake and likely none ever will."

"What about Gurd? He slew Kram," declared Brandt.

Phais glanced at Tip, then turned to Brandt. "'Tis but a fanciful song the Bards sing."

Loden nodded grimly. "Brother of mine, Lord Borl and Lady Phais are right: should we go after Sleeth then we would merely be casting our lives away."

"But he slew our father, our brothers... Lady Pietja." Brandt's face twisted in grief.

"I know," replied Loden, his eyes desolate. "I know."

"It's Modru who is responsible for the destruction of Dael and the deaths of so many," said Tippeton, "for not only did Renegade Sleeth whelm the city, but the blizzard Modru sent was perhaps even more deadly."

"Aye," said Coron Ruar, the Dylvana Elf staring into his mug of tea. He looked up at Tip. "It nearly proved our undoing as well."

"Oh?"

"Aye. Yet Fortune smiled upon us, for we were near Bridgeton when the blizzard struck."

"What of the foe, the Horde?" asked Tip.

"Fully half of them perished," said Chieftain Gara, "slain by the breath of Waroo, or so we thought."

"Waroo?"

"A hearthtale, Sir Tippeton: he is the Great White Bear from the north who claws over the tops of the mountains and blasts his chill breath down on all, bringing hard winters onto the land, or so our legends say."

A silence fell upon those gathered 'round the table, and only the crackle of the fire on the hearth filled the void. Finally Borl said, "Regardless of the Baeron fables, we thought this blizzard was Fortune's behest, but now we find it was Modru instead."

"Modru, aye," said Loric, "yet beyond stands Gyphon, the root of all ill."

Another silence fell, and a knot popped in the fireplace, startling Beau. He looked about sheepishly, then said, "What'll you do about the company of Foul Folk we saw marching toward the ruins of Dael?"

Loden shook his head. "Rather than pursue a small band of deserters into a dead city, there are some two thousand Foul Folk-the remnants of the Horde-yet east of here. Those we must deal with first."

"But what about Lord Tain?" asked Beau. "He's in Dae and yet lives."

"Coward Tain," growled Bekki.

"Mad Tain," replied Beau. A bleak look drew over the buccan's face. "He whispers to the corpse of his daughter."

"Mad he may be," said Bekki, then he looked at Loden, "yet a proven coward he is, and deserves nought but the king's justice."

Loden shook his head. "From what you say, my friend. Lord Tain's punishment was greater than any king's justice I might have decreed."

Bekki frowned but remained silent.

"Speaking of justice," said Borl, "it is fitting half of what remained of Modru's Horde were slain by his own hand."

"Devastated they may be," said Gara, "yet gone they are not. I say we go forward as planned and set forth on the morrow to renew our harassment of them."

"But there are only two thousand of them left," said Brandt, "and the scouts say they're on for the Skarpal Mountains. Why not let them fly, while we go back to Dael instead. In spite of what we've been told, perhaps Lady Pietja survived; others too."

Bekki shook his head. "I tell you, Prince Brandt, we found none in the city alive but Coward Tain."

"She may have been hidden," cried Brandt.

Bekki growled but did not reply.

Loden looked at his brother. "Brandt, I, too, would like to go back and seek those who may have escaped, and give those we love a fitting funeral. Yet we cannot allow even two segments of a Horde

to remain in the kingdom. Nay, Chieftain Gara is right: now is the time to pursue the Wrg, to slay them or drive them entirely out. Our warriors are well rested, the steeds, too, and the remainder of the Horde is now weary and weak." King Loden looked about the table for affirmation and received none from Chieftain Gara, Delf Lord Borl, and Coron Ruar. "Good. It is settled then. On the morrow we ride."

Ruar turned to Tipperton and raised an eyebrow. "No, Coron Ruar," said Tip, glancing at Beau and Bekki and Loric and Phais. "Our business lies elsewhere-in Dendor, in Aven, with King Agron-for we have a coin to deliver."

"Two thousand?" asked Tip.

"Aye," replied Vail. "Of the full Horde, two thousand were slain outright before the gates of Mineholt North. Another thousand of their fallen perished on the field at the hands of the mercenary bringers. Another two thousand or so perished from their battle wounds along the way of the retreat. We slew another thousand in raids along their route. And finally the blizzard slew half of those who remained."

Beau was counting on his fingers. "Huah! That leaves two thousand, right enough, of the two thousand they started with."

"What about our own casualties?" asked Tip.

Vail shook her head, sudden tears springing into her eyes. "We came away not unscathed. Full two hundred fifty or so of our own will ne'er answer the bugle again."

"Two hundred fifty Dylvana?" blurted Beau. "But that's fully-"

Vail pushed out a hand. "Nay, not Dylvana only, but Drimma and Baeron and Daelsmen as well."

"Still, it is a lot to lose," said Tip.

"Aye," replied Vail, tears streaming. "And one was Andal... his death rede... it came to me. I did not even know he loved-" Vail choked back a sob.

Tipperton reached out and took her hand, almost as small as his own.

They sat in silence for a while as Vail regained her composure, and finally Beau looked about the common room of the Red Goose and said, "Tip, why don't you play and sing a song."

Tip looked at Vail-her features drawn, her eyes glistening. She smiled wanly. "Something gay, if thou wouldst."

The next morning dawned to a grey overcast, the skies threatening snow, while below, in the streets of Bridgeton, riders assembled in the morn. Prancing they came, and plodding as well, mounted warriors with eyes deadly grim: Dylvana and Daelsmen on swift horses, Baeron on massive steed, Dwarves on ponies.

Throughout the night rumors had flown that Prince Brandt and his guard had ridden away in the dark, heading for the ruins of Dael, yet Brandt came riding in among his kinsmen, putting the lie to such.

Tip and Beau, Loric and Phais and Bekki, they all stood on the stoop of the Red Goose and watched as the Allies assembled, and Vail rode to the porch and said good-bye to them all, dismounting long enough to embrace Tipperton and wish him well.

Melor, too, came to the stoop, especially to bid Beau good-bye. Yet even as he did so, bugles blew and the column, like a ponderous multilegged beast of great length, surged into motion and slowly drew away, heading for the eastern gate of Bridgeton. And Tipperton could see at the back of the train the heavy wains of the Baeron coming last, with Wagonleader Bwen standing on the seat of her wagon and bellowing some command in her native tongue at the drivers of the wagons behind. She turned

about and plopped down in time to wave a cheery farewell to the Warrows and Lian and Bekki the Dwarf, and then she, too, was past and away.

"Come," said Beau. And he led Tip running along the column and to the gate and up a ramp to the top of the beringing city wall, Phais and Loric and Bekki following after. And they all watched as the column and train emerged from the east gate to clop and rumble across the bridge spanning the Ironwater River, each of the five feeling somewhat guilty for not riding with the Allies to war. Yet Tipperton had his own mission to follow, the others to ride with him as well. And so they watched as Dylvana and Daelsmen and Dwarves and Baeron rode out from the city and into the land beyond.

Long they stood in the chill winter air as the column drew away. And finally, when the last wagon rumbled 'round a far turn, Beau said, "Well, that's that." Even so they remained where they were watching and watching still. And as they did a flutter of flakes began drifting down in the day. It was Year's Start Day, the first day of January, the first day of the two thousand one hundred ninety-sixth year of the Second Era of Mithgar as Tip and Beau and Phais and Loric and Bekki stood on the Bridgeton walls. It was, as well, the very first day of the second year of a great and terrible war.

Chapter 4

The rest of that day and all the next, Tip and Beau, Phais and Loric, and Bekki took advantage of the services of the Red Goose Inn, enjoying hot baths and hot meals and cool ale and rich red wine and sleeping on soft feather beds. And they sang sad and sweet and rousing songs in the common room of the inn, to the delight of the townsfolk and guests alike, for although a force of Dylvana had been ensconced in Bridgeton for several days and had sung in the taverns and inns, still the townsfolk never got enough of Elves and their singing, for they were the best bards of all... or so it was said. Yet here not only were the Lian singing, but one of the Volksklein as well- "... Him with his silver stringed lute and his high, sweet voice, and the other wee Volksklein dancing a jig now and then. And would you believe it, one of the Dwergvolk sometimes bursts forth with one of those Dwergish chants, his own voice sounding much like a load of gravel sliding from a wheelbarrow, I'd say. And you can't understand a word he utters-pah! that language of theirs. Even so, I must admit it truly stirs the blood. And at times when the Dwerg sings, that little Waldan, the one who dances, he marches about with his chest stuck out and mug of ale in hand, and sometimes the crowd follows after. And occasionally the Lian Guardian, Elven lord that he is, he joins right in, and don't you wonder how an Elven voice can wrap itself around that tongue? But best of all is when the Elven lady sings and the lute-playing Waldan sings harmony and the Elven lord sings counterpoint."

Needless to say the common room was packed to overflowing when the news spread that "Waldan and a Dwarf and two Lian were singing in the Red Goose, and another Waldan danced to the tunes."

And for two days, two Waldans, two Elves, and a Dwerg sang and chanted simple songs, tragic songs, glad songs, and songs of derring-do, of ships on the sea and Dragons in the air, of lost loves and loves found, of storms and rainbows and treasures vast, of hewing stone and harvesting grain, and Silverlarks and Draega-the great Silver Wolves of Adonar, large as ponies and deadly foe of the Vulgs-and other such creatures of legend. And more, much more, did they sing and chant and march and dance, and all the peoples of Bridgeton, it seems, came to the Red Goose Inn.

Over those same two days as well, the comrades tended and cared for their animals, feeding them good grain and sweet water and giving them rest. The five also replenished their diminished supplies, Beau especially making certain that there was enough tea to last all the way to Dendor. "It's going to be cold, bucco," he said to Tip, "and hot drink will come in handy, right enough, morning and evening both. -Nighttime, too."

"Assuming we can build fires," replied Tip.

"Oh, Tip, do you think the whole of the way will be rife with Rucks and such?"

Tip threw an arm over his friend's shoulders. "Surely not, yet regardless, we'll take all the tea with us."

And so, for two days the companions relaxed and sang and danced and drank and ate... and made ready to resume their quest, a journey ahead of them still, for on a thong about a small neck they rested a plain pewter coin, a coin that one of them had promised to deliver and fulfill the wish of a long-dead man.

On the third morning after the Allies had gone from Bridgeton, Tip, Beau, Phais, Loric, and Bekki rode forth as well, faring eastward across the stone bridge above the Ironwater River, frozen in winter's cold. They followed the Landover Road, and intended to stay on this route until they reached the gap where Riamon ended and Garia began; then they would turn almost due north and after some days cross the Crystal River to come at last into Aven. Even then, it was some leagues more the

would have to travel through that land to reach King Agron's court. Altogether it would be a journey some five hundred twenty-five miles from the walls of Bridgeton in Riamon to the walls of Dendor Aven.

Beau moaned when he heard of the distance they yet had to go, but gestured behind and said Tippeton, "Well, bucco, at least we got our hot bath and mulled wine, and, oh, but wasn't the singing fun?"

"Don't forget the hot meals and soft beds, Beau, for I imagine we'll not see the likes again for many a day... perhaps not until we reach Dendor itself."

"How many days till then, do you think?"

"Twenty-five or thirty, if nothing goes wrong."

Beau groaned. "Oh no, a full month."

"Belike," growled Bekki riding alongside. "But there are towns along the way, and if they are yet standing--"

"Oh, Bekki," interjected Beau, thrusting out a gloved hand, "don't talk about towns along the way, mean, no sooner said than something awful is likely to happen to them."

Riding in the fore, Loric turned and asked, "Dost thou think that merely speaking of them can bring ill fortune?"

"You never know," replied Beau. "Everything's all connected somehow, and I wouldn't want to tempt fate."

Bekki snorted, but said nought.

Sighing, Tip looked at Beau and said, "Sometimes, Beau, I wish I hadn't told you about events and stones and ripples in ponds."

Out front, Phais laughed, but Beau's jaw shot forward and he said, "Well it is, you know... all connected, I mean."

And Phais called back, "Good and bad alike, Beau, good and bad alike."

Beau frowned and looked at Tip and turned up his hands, and Tip said, "I believe what she means is that you are thinking only of the bad things bringing bad. But good things bring good as well."

Beau's eyes narrowed. "Hoy, now, if good brings good, and bad brings bad, does that mean good can sometimes bring bad?-Huah! Of course it does. Just as bad can bring good."

"Take care, my friend," called Phais, "for thou art now on a slippery slant, where thou may conclude that a good end justifies even the most foul of means."

"Oh no, I wouldn't do that," protested Beau.

Bekki glanced over at him. "Honor wouldn't permit."

"Indeed," replied Beau. "Indeed."

And down the Landover they fared.

Eastward they rode, ever eastward, an arc of the Rimmens Mountains in the distance to their left, the miles passing cold beneath the shod hooves. They rode by day and stayed in crofters' haylofts and open-air camps by night, the wayside inns along the way burnt to the ground or yet standing but abandoned, and these they stayed in as well and left a few coins upon counters when they rode away the next day.

In the late afternoon on the sixth day out they passed a wide swath in the snow where a well churned track swung away from the road and beat east-southeasterly. Tip rode down and looked long at the trail and then remounted his pony. He gestured at the ground and called out, "These are the marks of shod hooves and the ruts of wagon wheels. It's where the Allies left the road."

"Pursuing the Rupt," said Loric.

Bekki shaded his eyes, peering southeastward. "There," he pointed. "There lies the Skarpal Range. Standing low on the horizon, snowy crests just visible across the rolling land, loomed the jagged

peaks of a mountain range.

"That's where the Squam are heading," added Bekki.

"May Loden drive them all the way to their haunts," said Phais.

"May all the Grg be dead before any arrive," growled Bekki in response.

Tip spurred his pony up the slight slope and back onto the road, then he, too, turned and looked the range afar. "They won't follow any surviving maggot-folk into the mountains, will they?"

Phais shook her head. "Not likely. To battle on one's home grounds is one thing; to battle on the foe's is quite another. Nay, I would think they pursue and fell the foe at opportunity-ambushes, swift strikes, and such. But when they reach yon slopes, I think the Allies will disengage, for the ground is not well suited to battle."

"Is any ground ever such?" asked Beau.

Phais looked at the buccan and made a negating gesture. "Nay, Beau, neither plains nor mountains nor fields nor fens: no ground is ever meant to be blooded, yet there are times when nought else will serve. And if one must do battle, then one must choose wisely, for on occasion the ground determines all."

Tip sighed. "I suppose if any foe reach the mountains, it's better just to let them go, eh?"

Loric shrugged. "Some may follow."

Bekki grunted, then said, "As to fighting among the peaks and crags, none are better than the Chakka. If any pursue the Grg, it will be my sire and kindred."

"Well," said Tip, "pursue or not, kindred or not, as concerns our mission, 'tis moot. I say we push on, for the sun is low, and this is not a place to stay."

As twilight deepened they came to a stand of oaks sheltering a wayside inn, the hostel seeming abandoned, for no lights shone through the darkened windows, and all was silent and still. Yet when they tried to enter, they found the door to be barred within. Bekki drew the hand axe from his belt, and Loric and Phais drew blades.

"Maybe they left by the back way," said Beau, puzzled.

"Hush," hissed Bekki. "If the door is barred, mayhap there are Grg inside."

"Oh my," murmured Beau, backing away and plucking his sling from his belt, lading it with a lead shot.

Down from the porch they crept, where Tip took his bow from its saddle scabbard and nocked an arrow. Bekki slid his axe back into his belt and took up his war hammer.

"Ye three wait here," said Loric to Phais, "while Bekki and I go 'round back."

Phais nodded, and then as Loric and Bekki slipped through the shadows, she and Tip and Beau drew the animals after and took shelter behind broad trunks of oak. "Should any come running out," said Phais, "loose thy missiles at will. Yet should they draw nigh, take refuge behind me. And if there are too many, then leap astride thy ponies and flee."

"And leave you alone?" protested Tip.

"I will draw the horses behind and ride 'round for Loric and Bekki."

"You forget, Phais: Bekki won't ride a horse," said Tip. "I'll take his pony to him."

"And I'll ride alongside Tip," said Beau, "just in case a sling is needed."

Phais looked long at the buccen, then nodded.

Moments passed and the only thing Tip heard was the pounding of his own heart. But of a sudden "Yahh!" came Bekki's bellow, and the sound of splintering wood.

Gasping, Tip drew his arrow to the head, and Beau whirled his sling 'round and 'round.

Screams came from within, and the front door flew open, and Tip aimed "Hold!" shrieked Phais. "Tis women!"

Down the steps they fled, two women, as behind and backing out came a man with a bung hammer

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