

The Adventures of the Rainbow Sword



by

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Book One

Quest for the Jewels

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Chapter One

As Duncan's eyes began focusing, he found himself staggering down a steep, leaf-covered gully through the deep woods far from where he had camped the night before. He remembered very little about the time in between sitting next to the small campfire he had built before dusk and the dawn that was now breaking. Very little indeed, he thought as he felt the reassuring weight of the broad sword and scabbard strapped against his back. Stopping quickly, he listened to the sounds that echoed through the early morning mist bearing new life to the smell of earth and decay rising from the ancient forest floor. As he slowly turned his head, the pale morning sun broke the defense of the overhead canopy and struck his cold gray eyes. Suddenly, he remembered! Feeling for the nearest tree with both hands outstretched like a blindman, Duncan dropped to his knees and leaned back against the towering elm. His mind was remembering what his eyes were not seeing.

That yellow light, the same color as the flames in his campfire last night, he remembered! He was sitting next to the fire, eating the rabbit he had trapped earlier in the afternoon, watching the flames flicker and dance when an image appeared in the glowing embers. A man, tall with long silver hair, encased in a coffin-size jewel the same color as the flames and the morning sun. He appeared ancient but something buried deep in Duncan's mind told him was not nearly as old as he looked. It also told him that he knew the man, though friend or foe, he couldn't recall but he knew the man was from his past and that he was to go to the cave of Theik, the Troll. There he would find help to aid him on his ..quest.

Quest, he thought, what quest? I have no need for a quest, I...

He stood. Slowly, he looked around, thinking, And I sure as the Deep Pit of Darkness am not going to see a human-hating Troll, not in a thousand years! He turned and started to walk south but slowly he turned north toward the Mountains of Running Fire. A numb feeling told his mind this was the right way and as much as he wanted he couldn't find the will to turn away again. A short damn thousand years, he thought as he picked out a sapling and cut it down with one stroke from the dark broad sword. Taking a small knife from his belt, Duncan began stripping the leaves and small branches.

"What the..?" He asked himself out loud when he saw his hands and arms were covered with soot. Then he remembered more. After seeing the vision in the fire, long yellow flames had exploded from the jewel, lashing out at him like a serpent striking at an unsuspecting target. Duncan had managed to dodge the first three blows as he scrambled back like a crab fleeing the sea but the fourth and fifth flash struck both his arms, leaving them as if they were on fire and at the same time feeling colder than the coldest north wind had ever felt. The sixth whipped at him seemed larger than all the others combined. He remembered it hitting him fully in the face, the night sky exploding with hundreds of thousands of bright yellow lights. After that, he remembered nothing until this morning.

A few leagues further north, Duncan stopped next to a small stream, removed his leather jerkin and began washing his face and arms. His reflection startled him, his jet black hair was gone and in its place was the most golden hair he had ever seen. Even his once black eyebrows and lashes were gone.

"What's happened here?" Duncan asked aloud, frightened by his new appearance. "Surely I'm still dreaming!" He thrust his hand into the clear water, trying to splash the golden head away but stir as hard as he could, he only managed to muddy the bottom.

His mind was telling him to run, to get away! He wanted nothing more than to be left to his simple life of wandering about the world, with only himself as his responsibility and no one else to look after or care for. That was the way he had grown up, alone, and that was what he was use to, no one except himself. He slipped the jerkin back over his head, stuck his arm in the scabbard strap, picked up his stick, turned and ran. As the cool water splashed his chest and face he realized he was not going south as he thought but north again. Something was forcing him on, against his will and the only thing he could think about was the yellow glow that surrounded the silver-haired stranger. A dull ache in the back of his mind told him that the color or something to do with colors was the cause of all his troubles but how could that be?

The rays of orange light were stretching at long angles as the sun was settling into its nightly bed, still Duncan trekked on through the old forest. Hunger pains stirred as the scent of wood smoke and wild grouse filled his nostrils, then near panic swept over him as he realized he was no longer alone in the forest. Sometimes, hunger is a lot stronger than fear and since the 'quest' had begun earlier in the day, he had eaten only a few dried-up berries as he passed by them.

Slowly, he stalked around the clearing ahead looking for the quietest way to edge close enough to see what or who might be sharing this land with him. Leaning his head around a large oak very timidly, he was surprised to spy a tall old man with a long black cloak pulled loosely around him.

He doesn't look dangerous, scary, but not a threat, Duncan thought to himself, stepping across a long ago fallen tree and scraping his feet purposely so not to scare the old fellow.

"You sure are a noisy creature!" The dark hood bobbed up and down. "I've listened to you stomp on your way here like a drunken bull, frightening nearly every critter within five leagues of your path!"

Duncan eased closer to the small fire, watching the old fellow poking the dying embers into life then slowly turning the wooden spit that held the almost baked bird. "Are you traveling far?" Was all Duncan could manage after the man's rebuke.

"As far as the Gods will allow." He said as he waved his arm with an open, uplifted palm.

"Mind some company, till the morning?" Duncan asked as he sat and crossed his legs where he was welcomed. "Maybe even longer." The old man pulled off a wing and handed it to Duncan, his face shadowed beneath the hood so that little was revealed of his features.

"Thanks." Duncan took the meat and quickly ate it as he thought about the man's reply. "The name's Duncan." He added as he separated the wing bones.

"I know who you are." The man chewed the skin of the other wing. "I probably know more about you and what you're doing here than you do!" He said between bites. "Mine's, Graynor."

Duncan stopped chewing and looked up from the fire, trying to see the face behind the words that had sent chills up his back. He wondered what Graynor meant. He thought about his past. The old man was in none of his memories. "But I'm just wandering through! No other reason than that and I'm quite sure I've never met you before now." Trying to hide his real purpose for traveling these woods.

"I didn't say we had met before." Graynor tossed the bones into the hot coals. "I don't blame you for not trusting anyone to knowing the task set before you, boy! I'm certain that you probably don't believe you're here, this far north, yourself. And with no horse, no bedroll, not even a traveling companion." The old man looked toward the path Duncan had earlier come down. "At least, not a human one anyway." He tugged the leg and thigh from the bird, handing it to an unsure Duncan before taking the other for himself.

"I have a deep feeling that I should thank you for your fine hospitality and take my leave." Duncan replied, thinking he had the whole northern forest and he happened to run upon an old man touched in the head.

"I'm not crazy, boy!" Graynor answered as if reading his mind. "Although, I have been call that from time to time." He offered Duncan a pull from an old wineskin.

"I think you've mistaken me for someone else." Duncan said, taking the wineskin gingerly, half afraid of what the old man was drinking.

"It's safe." Graynor seemed to answer Duncan's thoughts as he took the bird from its perch above the fire, laid it on a stone and cut it neatly into two halves with a small belt knife, one half he shared with Duncan. "Eat! It may be a long time in coming again."

"But there's plenty of game in these woods! No reason to go hungry unless you're slow or stupid." Duncan returned, still taking what was offered him.

"And neither should go where you... we're headed."

"Why do you insist that you know where I'm going or that I'd allow you to tag along anyway?" Duncan asked wondering just what the old man really knew.

"If you don't then you'll surely die and all the time I have spent preparing will be for naught! My life

will end if yours does before you complete what will be the hardest quest set before any mortal man since the sands of time started to run." He took the hood with both of his hands and slowly pushed it back to reveal not the ancient sage that Duncan had expected, but instead, a middle-aged man with ice blue eyes, a sharp nose, short stubble grew instead of a long beard and long golden hair streaked with gray. That golden head spooked Duncan for a moment, it was the exact same color as Duncan's own newly acquired hues.

"You born with that hair?" Duncan stammered.

"The same as you, born from the flames." Graynor replied shortly.

"The golden jewel?"

"The same and yet just a small piece of greater things to come, Good and Evil." Graynor tossed the remaining bones and scraps into the fire then added a couple of small logs. "Help me gather a few more limbs before dark. I don't want to be caught in these woods without a light. Things here don't fear steel like those that live closer to civilization. They hunger more for fresh blood!"

"I'll help although you sound as if you're trying to frighten a small child and it's not working!" Duncan stood, looking for a place to start as he drew the black sword from its well-oiled leather scabbard.

"We haven't the time to chop it out here, bring limbs and all." Graynor stated as he moved in the opposite direction, replacing his hood.

With a single blow Duncan sliced through a dried hickory about five inches thick. He was amazed with the keen blade each time he had to use it. It had been his one true friend and traveling companion for as long as he could remember. Duncan's childhood memories had eluded him for many years. His father's memory was a complete blank. At times, because of that darkness, he was sure he was fatherless and a bastard. He could recall his mother's loving face but not her name nor anything else about her. And it was the face of his mother that haunted his dreams when he was feeling down or lonely, with no place anywhere nor anyone to turn to and call home or family. Although he had made some friends during the last several years of his travels, he'd never shared the close bond he had watched between families he had come to know. He felt a deep empty ache wanting to be filled in his heart, a hurt from needing to be loved and being able to give that love back.

Dragging the long poles back, Duncan was startled by a shadow that moved in the corner of his eye. Turning his golden head quickly, he could see nothing but the trees and the shadows they cast upon the brown leaf-covered ground. Dropping the poles, he pulled the sword free from its cover and walked toward a dark spot beneath a clump of twisted willows with their limbs drooping to create the perfect cover for would-be spies or other creatures that would wait for the right moment to attack. The limbs and leaves swayed slowly as he approached.

"Duncan! No!" Graynor's voice had an air of danger and concern about it.

He jumped back, poised to fight whatever was there hidden by the darkness as Graynor moved closer.

"You can't win this battle with that sword!" He said as he tugged on Duncan's sleeve, pulling him back. Raising his arms upward to the sky with his hands shaped like a cat's claws, Graynor began drawing runes and reciting a chant in a tongue Duncan knew but couldn't recall what the words meant. As fiery runes began appearing in the air, the willow limbs moved faster and faster until a light exploded

in the darkness among the shadows. The limbs flew out from the tree's body like the quills of an angry porcupine. Two huge eyes darted toward Duncan and then Graynor, screaming the most blood-curdling cry Duncan had ever heard before blurring across the forest and out of sight.

"What was that thing?" Duncan asked weakly from fear.

"An Oberoc." Graynor replied as he turned back toward the campsite. "One of the lesser creatures that live in the Deep Pit of Darkness." He walked with Duncan back to where Duncan had dropped the firewood. "We'll probably need that." He pointed to the wood and turned away.

"I thought things like that were just children's stories that parents passed from generation to generation in order to keep their youngsters in line." Duncan said as he grabbed the pole-like trees and took off after Graynor.

Near the fire, Graynor sat and answered him. "Almost all legends, myths and stories have a starting place. Some have more truth than others and a few are plain out and out lies. You may find that your worst nightmare is someone's strange idea of a joke or you may find that what you pass off with a laugh is one of the most real and dangerous creatures in the history of time!"

"Are you telling me that thing wasn't all that bad?" Duncan dropped the wood at his feet.

"No! It was dangerous enough and even more so when you corner it with no way of sending it 'home'! You were lucky I was close by or you might be dead right now. You have a lot to learn! Let's breakup this wood and I'll start teaching you tonight before we go to sleep."

"You want to teach me to kill those 'things'?" Duncan again unsheathed the sword and began chopping the poles into short pieces with single blows.

"No one can kill the creatures of the Pit! They are immortal like the beings that placed them there in the beginning. They can be controlled and contained, somewhat, by those beings both Good and Evil, who know how but they can never be destroyed. And long association can cause a mind to be left as blank as a newborn child, sometimes for eternity. Why their mere touch can destroy the soul and even kill a mortal man! They're best left to the hellish Pit that's their home and jail." Graynor laid a couple pieces of Duncan's wood into the fire.

"And you think you can teach me to control them or at least, to banish them?" Duncan asked as he chopped.

"I will teach you how to feel them, how to avoid them and lastly, how to send them back to the Pit but never how to control them! That requires the close contact that can destroy you and release those creatures to roam the world at will then mankind would be in constant fear of being eradicated from this world."

"That should be enough." Duncan said as he sheathed the black blade, sat in front of the warming fire across from Graynor and crossed his legs. "Could you feel that creature before I... cornered it?"

"I felt it and another one's presences as I heard you coming through the forest but it backed off as I started 'searching' for it. I had assumed it was passing through on who knows what errands for one of the Elders. I won't make that mistake again! The other one is still out there, easing closer as we speak. We'll let it get close enough so we haven't far to walk before confronting it." Graynor spoke calmly, like it was

an everyday event in his life. "We need to prepare and if you've listened and learned well when it's time, I'll let you send it 'home'."

"But I'm not ready yet to face one of those..things again so soon!" Duncan told him clearly scared. "Even after you teach me what I'll need to know I may not be ready! Not even if I live to be an old, old man!"

"There's nothing for you to worry about, much." Graynor assured him. "I'll be here if you start to falter. This is something you need to learn so you can face them head on, your life now depends on it. And I'll be able to guide you now but I'll not be with you all the rest of your life! You will have these things looking for you far beyond the time span of ordinary men, much because of the quest you are destined to..attempt. Because of that quest, you have become an object of certain concern from a few beings that may or may not wish for your success and a few others that are watching just to keep up to date on the 'game'."

"I don't care for the 'game'! And I sure don't want to be forced to play against my will!" Duncan's voice was raised though he was trying to be quiet.

"As far as I know, you have very little choice in the matter! Your life as well as all the others of this world is what's at stake here! I may look old enough but I'm not ready for the grave and I sure as the Pit of Darkness am not going into it without a fight, and that includes fighting you too, if need be!"

"From what I've seen so far, I wouldn't want to fight with you, the way you sent that thing back to the Pit. And since last night, I..I don't seem to have much say in the way of what direction I take, like I have no will of my own." Duncan told him as he thought about what he considered a hopeless situation, fighting forces that he wanted nothing at all to do with.

"I'm sorry about helping you come here.."

"That was all your doing?" Duncan jumped to his feet. "I should send you back to the Pit or whatever in the Darkness you came from!" He started to pull the black sword from his back.

"Don't be so hasty!" Graynor replied. "I only helped guide you slightly off the path someone else had placed you on. I did not cause it!"

"Someone else? Who else?" Duncan demanded confused as he remained standing with the sword half-drawn, waiting for an answer.

"Alas, Duncan, I do not know." Graynor looked deep into Duncan's eyes. "I think it's someone who would like things to change for the better. Someone who's at least on the side of Right. In the past few years, I have seen the scales tipping toward Bad or Evil as some would say. Darkness would be best to describe the forces that are meddling in the works beyond nature. The Pit doesn't contain all the evil or unruly creatures and beings in the universe. The forces of Good or Light would have to completely agree for the first time to combine their energies before all that is tainted can be locked-up and they're not about to do that, not in the next hundred millenniums anyway."

"And how is it that you come to know so much about the doings of the forces of Good and Evil?" Duncan asked as he slowly sheathed the dark sword and sat, again, still wary of his new companion.

"That is indeed a long story." Graynor answered as he poked at the fire.

"Better get started then." Duncan returned. "The time's not right! You first must learn how to expel the minor Demons, such as that Oberoc, back to the Pit." Graynor lifted his head. "I'll tell and teach you all I can in the days and nights to come. Let's pray that time will be on our side. Tribulations are nearing and they will be great even with our fight. Pray Duncan that you can live long enough to gain the powers and knowledge to not only win all the battles but the war as well!"

"But I need to know who you are! And where are you coming from? How can you expect me to trust a total stranger when it comes to my life?" Duncan was nearly pleading for answers with his hands held out in a helplessness gesture.

"I have watched as you aimlessly trekked over most of this side of the continent. I saw your troubled days and the happy ones. I watched as your body grew from that of a lanky youngster into a strong and intelligent man. I looked at you as a son sometimes, wanting to come to you and shield you from the pain I knew you felt from being alone! Alone with no one to call family and few friends you cared enough about to share your feelings. But I dared not, knowing what your future was to bring. Knowing the strength you would need to distance yourself from your feelings so you could fight and overcome the obstacles that will certainly be thrown in your path. So you could do what must be done to win the struggles that will lead you to that last foe and the chance to put the Dark Forces that want to dominate and destroy life as we know it on this world, back into their place. Put them in a place where they will hopefully never escape again until the end of all that is!"

"Do you know the weight you're trying to put on my shoulders?" Duncan was truly confused, almost dazed with all he was hearing from the man who insisted he had been around him during all those lonely years.

"Just that of the world but I think you can handle it! Not easily but well enough that mankind has a chance in surviving."

"Let's slow down a bit." Duncan replied slowly. "Suppose you tell me how come I cannot remember ever seeing you, even at a distance?"

"There are many ways to 'see', not all need be in person. The simplest of animals will sometimes freeze-up and send out the images of what it sees if you know how to feel those 'sendings'. And not all men are limited to moving about in their flesh and blood bodies! Some can send their 'spirits' out and control where they go, what they hear but with a little danger to their human form. I have looked at you in many ways, Duncan, but only once in the past seven years have I visited in human form. That was the night I left you that black sword you're so fond of."

"You were the one?" Duncan remembered now seeing the man's form nearly out of sight and walking away from his camp those long years ago. "You gave me a friend, did you know that?"

"Yes." Graynor nodded. "I knew it would become your friend, to watch over you when I could not."

"I thank you for that much! But why couldn't you come to me in person, to be my friend?"

"To come more than once would have risk exposing you to the Powers that you would have to face someday. You would have been destroyed and I nor the world could not take that chance!"

"But why me? What is it that makes me so 'special'? Why not one of the Good King's knights? Surely

they are better trained for a quest than a poor wandering bastard!" Duncan exclaimed, not wanting to believe any of what he was hearing.

"That sword is not all it appears. It has a long history of fighting for what is right, as it will again for you. Its history as well as the branches to your family tree will be revealed as you continue your journey. Those roots run deep."

"You know my family?" Duncan quickly asked, hope filled the ache in his heart for the first time in his life. I do have a family, he thought.

"Yes." Was Graynor's single word response though he longed to tell Duncan everything but it was too soon.

"Where are they?" Duncan demanded. "Who are they?"

"They were once the most powerful family living on the Amar, the Fourth Continent. They were also the most loved by those siding with Good. And the most feared and hated by those that loved Evil. But they were good people! Many of their friends would have and others did, gladly offer their own lives to insure no harm came to them. After the deaths of hundreds of their followers and friends, they were finally driven into exile by the Dark Forces that you now oppose."

"Exiled? Where to?" Duncan needed to know more. He wanted to go and find to them tonight.

"I don't know where they are right now, Duncan. No matter if I did, I wouldn't dare say their location aloud, even with the shielding that black sword provides."

"What 'shielding'?" He drew the sword and looked at it as for the first time.

"You can't see it with your eyes. That sword has a protective aura that surrounds it, that aura hides you from certain prying eyes. It protects you and those around you in a small circular area. Your father used it to conceal you and your mother until you were separated by fate and trickery!"

"Are my parents still alive, Graynor?" Duncan asked, nearly holding his breath as he awaited the answer.

"Your father is at the present time, although I don't know for how long. Your mother, I cannot say Duncan. Then I was with your father the last time, he commanded me to get that sword to you. He knew that you were the world's one and only chance to defeat its enemies and that sword was your only aid for survival. He would not tell me where your mother was, I really don't think he knew for sure himself but he did say she was safe. Shortly after he relinquished his hold on the black sword, his enemies captured him and his comrades." Graynor looked out into the darkening forest, searching for some kind of comfort that did not come. "I'm sorry I could do no more for him."

"Can I?" Duncan inquired hopefully.

"Maybe! It all depends on a lot of things. Like how quickly you can learn the chants and spells that will protect you from your foes out of the Darkness. Or how much strength and power you received through your parents' bloodlines and finally, how far you are willing to go and how much you can endure to gain the strength you must have to defeat your enemies!"

"Then we had better get started. It seems like I have a lot of things to learn before I can go 'home' for

the first time. How long can you stay with me? I think that I will probably be in need of a companion and a teacher, as well as a friend."

"Friend till the end, if fate will allow me."

"We will make it so!"

For the better part of the night, Graynor taught Duncan spells and chants. How to move his fingers and how to draw the runes in the air to reinforce his spells. Duncan learned quickly, that pleased Graynor greatly, it showed him Duncan's blood was as his father's. Duncan's abilities gave him hope, his first real hope in the last seven years!

Shortly before dawn, the second Demon of the Pit moved closer to their camp. When it was in sight, Duncan wove the Binding spell as easily as an Elder. The beast screamed as it winked out of the predawn air and was sent back into the Pit of Darkness. Duncan close his tried eyes, praying silently for the safety of his mother and father before falling into a deep sleep.

Graynor watched the stars and listened to the night sounds. There was so much to do and so little time. He would teach Duncan as best he could, the jewel and armor would take care of the rest. If Duncan was the man his father believed! As he closed his eyes and sleep overcame him, he too prayed for them all.

Chapter Two

The sudden snapping, popping and hissing from the campfire as Graynor extinguished it with the waterbag startled Duncan, awakening him from a deep and tiring slumber. In his dreams, he had battled one ugly demon after another trying to win his way through a cave opening where his screaming mother had been tied to a dead tree and was being tortured by hideous beast and Demons from the Pit of Darkness. His body ached from swinging the black blade blow after blow throughout the intense battle. His arms and legs were feeling extremely weak. I'd have felt better without sleep, he thought to himself, stretching and yawning trying to work out the soreness.

"Good morning, Duncan." Graynor spoke cheerfully. "I trust you rested well?"

"No, I believe I would feel better if that demon had sent me to the Pit instead." Duncan sat up rubbing the mater from his tired red eyes.

"Close encounters with Demons do sometimes cause restless dreams, and sometimes, I have believe even an... occasional nightmare." Graynor poured the rest of his water into the small pit. "I'll fill the bag for traveling. You need to refresh yourself before we set off?"

"Ah..You mean relieve myself." Duncan asked as he stood brushing the dirt and leaves from his

clothes.

"Yes, and wash a bit of sleep from your eyes." He turned and walked away. "The stream is this way."

Duncan threw the sword across his back and followed Graynor, muttering to himself about Demons. He dropped to his knees and began splashing the cold water from the tiny clear stream over his face and hands as Graynor filled the waterbag upstream.

"You ready?" Graynor asked as he hung the bag over his shoulder and pulled the cloak closer to his chest.

"I have little choice as I see it. If I don't go, it may be the end of everything!" Duncan dried his hands on the sides of his trousers and started walking north. "Besides, I've never met a Troll before, have you?"

"No! And I don't fancy meeting one now. Is that where we're going?" Graynor looked surprised.

"I thought you knew!" Duncan said as he retrieved the walking stick he had cut the day before. "The way you were hinting about knowing my quest and all."

"I know where you will wind up for the final battle but not the route that will lead us there." Graynor stated as he fell in step along side him.

"North to the Mountains of Running Fire to see a Troll named Theik. Have you every heard of him?"

"Yes." Graynor replied, solemnly.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well what have you heard or know about him?" Duncan asked feeling a bit agitated by Graynor's slow or unwilling response.

"Trolls aren't what I expected." Graynor spoke quietly. "They hate men. Something to do with mankind making babies and building houses everywhere. Jealousy, that's my opinion! You see they breed once ever hundred years or so and can barely remember where their caves are. Actually, I think they smell their way back. Stupid creatures but no one can agree to put them in the Pit. If they're left alone, they won't roam far from their caves unless they are breeding and then they won't go south far enough to endanger men. Still, I shudder to go near their mountains."

"Can they talk or can we communicate somehow?" Duncan wondered aloud.

"Just barely. More like they grunt. Are you sure that's the right place?" Graynor asked. He dreaded Trolls a lot more than a Demon.

"Yes, that's what I felt in the vision right before that yellow snake slapped me silly." Duncan remembered stars exploding in his head. "Something I would like to avoid again if at all possible!"

"Would you mind telling me all about this vision? It'll help pass time as we walk and maybe I can gain a bit more of a clearer understanding as to what we may be up against."

"Sure, anything that might make this a bit easier." Duncan explained all that happened the night before

last, all that he remembered until his lights went out.

"You say the man looked old and you knew he was not?" Graynor asked after Duncan finished.

"Yes, with long silver hair." Duncan paused in the path for a moment then looking Graynor in the face, added. "I felt this was a good man with a good heart that held no ill-will for anyone. I felt as if I knew this man. Do you have any idea who he might be?"

Graynor hesitated for a few seconds, then said, "Your father, I'm afraid." Graynor shook his head and continued walking. "I pray we will be in time to free him."

"My father? But who has him?" Duncan inquired as he resumed his long strides down the animal path again, determined to get to the Rivers of Fire by nightfall.

"Janax Nerbo!"

"Who is he and why does he have my father?"

"He's a powerful wizard who's meddled in the Dark Arts and dealt with Demons far too long! Nerbo's lost all control over his own purpose. I really doubt he has any real freewill of his own left! I would say the Dark Lord is now controlling him, feeding him power that he thinks he's created by tapping into things with those Arts and his own evil mind. When he has his the objective within his grasp, he'll crush Nerbo like a leaf and discard what's left for the lesser Demons' morning meal."

"I thought at one time, he would forget dabbling in the Dark Arts and become the man that your father and I always wanted him to be. He was our friend for many years and we watched as he slowly changed from a kind, gentle person into a devious and dangerously evil man. The Darkness has caused him to be hated and scorned by those that once called him 'friend'."

"Do you think my father is being held at the Troll's cave in the mountains and that's why I'm to go there?" Duncan questioned, hopefully.

"No, Duncan." Graynor answered regrettably. "You will be in search of a number of items your father hid when relinquishing his powers and becoming mortal, well almost mortal."

"What? Mortal?" Duncan stopped in mid-stride, shocked and asked. "Just what or who is my father?"

"Like I said before, he was once one of the most powerful men in the world, even the universe for that matter. Some might have called him a God but he was not. He was one of those born from the Beginning and as he grew so did his powers."

"My father is one of the Elders?" Duncan was clear stunned. He wanted answers as he searched for a place to sit.

"Yes, he was. He gave those powers up when he married with your mother. He gave them up for a child!" Graynor answered as if he was afraid to say much on the matter. "He was going to tell you himself after you became of age, a few months from now."

Duncan spotted a fallen tree near the trail and headed to it. "Let's stop for a short break. You can explain it better sitting or maybe I can accept it better." Duncan dropped his walking stick to the ground and leaned up against the small log.

"Your father...Duncan this is not right! Your father wanted to have this talk with you, or one similar to this. It just doesn't feel right, I've said too much already!" Graynor folded his arms and looked away. He wanted badly to tell him everything that lay ahead.

"You must, Graynor!" Duncan cried out. "I have no one else I can ask! The way I see it, it falls to you by default."

"What if I tell you what I think you should know?"

"But will that be enough to win the battle or the war?" Duncan asked.

"Both, I hope."

After a long silence, Duncan said, "Well?"

"Oh, all right! Where was I at..Oh yeah. Your father met your mother when she was but a maiden, he saw an unlimited goodness in her heart. Somehow, he always managed see the good in everyone. After several years of courtship, they were married. Your father was still an Elder then. Of course, your mother never knew, still doesn't know and if you find her remember, it's not your place to tell her! Your father, heaven knows what he'll do to me for breaking my vow of silence, your father was never going to tell her. He could not stand the thought of what she might say to him if she discovered what he had left behind for her."

"As their lives together grew and changed, they also grew and changed. They began to feel as if their lives were lacking something, a child. Your father knew he could never father a child with a 'mere mortal girl' as the other Elders called her, not unless they agreed to grant him that privilege, all of them. Like I said before, they have never in history totally agreed on anything and that was no exception. As a result, the only way your father could sire a child was to give up all his powers. Probably, the greatest sacrifice a man, any man, ever made for a woman."

"The one thing the Elders did finally come close to agreeing on was that he had to divide that power. It was good only for as long as he controlled it, if the Dark Forces ever found it, it was their's. Then the balance between the two would tip toward the Dark side and considerably so because your father was very strong. So somewhere, I know not where or if even in this world, he found the most beautiful jewel anyone would ever see, the Rainbow Jewel."

"It was something, Duncan! Six-sided, each side was a different color of the rainbow; red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet. He took that black blade you carry and magically split it perfectly into six pieces, each a different color. Each piece about as long and as big as two joints of a man's finger. He then placed each piece into the hilt of that blade, stuck it in the ground hilt up and stepped back."

"You should have seen the light that danced in the air, Duncan!" Graynor threw his long arms toward the sky and twisted this way then that. "Beams of red, yellow and blue twisting, twining, bending and bowing, up, down and around. Violet, green and orange mixing, creating more different colors than you could ever imagine possible. The sky was alive with the most beautiful show since probably the beginning of time, if then!"

"All those colors and more shot forth from your father, he was surrounded by an aura like double rainbows. Then as suddenly as it had begun, it ended. Over a million years of knowledge when into that jewel. Things he had learned about the universe, the spells and chants, the history of this world and a

thousand others, the names of Dark Lords and of the Elders, yes and even the lesser Demons of the Pit! A million years of everything under the stars!"

"But not all his power when into the jewel, some he placed in that blade and the armor that he wore. Then he was as a mere man, capable of dying a mortal's eternal death! I cried, Duncan! I fell to my face and cried! Not only for his lost but that of the world! The world had lost its greatest champion, the one true knight that stood up and fought for the wronged and the weak, but alas, he would do battle no more."

"He saw me there on the ground weeping and helped me to my feet, wiped away my tears and said, 'Weep not for me, my friend, for in this I will continue throughout time by way of my children.'

Graynor looked at Duncan. "I wasn't weeping for him, Duncan! I was weeping for the world!"

"He must have loved my mother a lot." Duncan said somberly.

"And you, too, Duncan. You both were his entire world. He wanted only your happiness."

"What happened to the jewel?"

"By the magic that is contained within them, he hid them in different places throughout the world he had visited at one time or another. They're hidden along with the pieces of his armor. He kept only the blade to shield his family and friends."

"Why would anyone want him if he no longer has his powers? What good is he to this..Janax Nerbo?" Duncan questioned.

"He knows where the power is! It is hidden in the jewels and he alone knows where! Nerbo wants that power and if your father talks before you can retrieve those six pieces then all will be lost. The world will be in chaos, ruled by the Dark Forces. They will free the Demons and other hellish beings from the Pit to enforce the law. That law will be all for the 'followers' of Darkness and nothing but scorn, hate and death for those who would resist."

"Then we must hurry!" Duncan stood.

"Yes, we must." Graynor followed Duncan's lead once again.

For most of the rest of the uneventful day, Duncan remained quiet, Graynor respected Duncan's need for silence. Indeed, he had placed, more like slammed, the weight of the entire world onto the young man's shoulders. Duncan would need time to think, to reason out what demands had been suddenly thrust upon him. Up until now he had been responsible only for himself. Now the world's well being was his lone responsibility, what would he do? Graynor prayed it would not cause Duncan to thumb his nose at the world and run.

Duncan stopped in his tracks, holding his hand up to his mouth and signaling for quiet. Listening hard, Duncan could hear heavy footsteps coming closer. He pointed at a clump of bushes nearby, both men moved as quickly and quietly as possible to get behind them, placing the bushes in between them and the approaching noise. Suddenly, directly in front of them, a manlike creature appeared. It stood more than half again as tall as Duncan, shoulders wide and bare except for a coat of thickly matted hair. Its face resembled that of a hog, except blunter, as if flattened by the blow of a heavy object.

As Duncan's eyes scanned it, he saw the creature was carrying a small, young deer. Duncan then

realized he was gazing at a Troll. The skin crawled on the back of his neck as his hand instinctively began reaching for his sword. Graynor stopped his arm long before he took hold of the hilt. No, he slowly mouthed.

The Troll stopped, sniffed the air, looked down the path he had been following then looked at the bush where Duncan and Graynor were hiding and grunted softly. He stood as frozen as did the two men for several minutes. Duncan was nearly afraid to breathe. The troll sniffed the air again, tossed the deer over his shoulder and resumed his walk on down the path.

When they could no longer hear the footsteps, Duncan said, "That was a Troll! I thought we were the next thing it was going to eat." Duncan knelled on the ground, breathing heavily.

"I, too, thought we were finished. I would rather face a hundred, no, a thousand Demons. At least then I'd have some idea what I'd be up against!" Graynor joined Duncan on the ground breathing hard from holding his breath and being so scared.

"Just how am I going to fight something of that size?" Duncan wondered aloud.

"Let's pray it's slower than it looks!" Graynor replied.

"Surely you jest! It was carrying a deer! And I didn't see a bow or a spear. Matter of fact, I didn't see any kind of a weapon. Just how do you think it caught it?" Duncan was clearly shaken.

"Maybe trapped it? It really doesn't matter, we have to continue! Hopefully, we can get in and out without running into that beast again."

Duncan swallowed and took a deep, slow breath. "Let's go then and get it over with before I turn my back to this place and keep going until I reach the Changing Seas."

Graynor nodded and tailed Duncan to where the Troll had stood only minutes ago. "We might as well follow it and hope we can avoid anymore of the ugly beasts. I can still smell the stink."

"I pray that between the odor and the noise that accompanies it, we can keep our distance." Graynor motioned for him to go on in the lead. "Do you think it saw us?"

"I'm not sure." Duncan answered as he walked slowly along. "But I do believe it smelled us."

"Yes, I'm almost sure of that but why didn't it come looking for us?"

"The sword! Maybe it shielded us."

"I don't think it works on Trolls, Duncan. I could be wrong though." Graynor stated.

"I hope so!" Duncan said as he stopped to stare down into the valley that opened up below the path.

"The Rivers of Running Fire!" Graynor broke the silence. "It is told that it's 'waters' are made of rock. Rock so hot it had long since turned into liquid. The heat must surely be very intense."

"How will we cross that?" Duncan asked had he moved on.

"If the Troll caves are on the other side then we'll cross it somehow. Surely, you're smarter than a Troll." Graynor said in jest.

"And not nearly as ugly." Duncan laughed halfheartedly. He really no idea as to how to joke and share in friendship, even one as strange as their's was beginning.

The path down into the valley was wide and well worn from hundreds of years of use. Nothing grew on this side of the hills nor deeper into the valley, the heat and feeding habits of the Trolls had long ago eradicated all forms of vegetation. The heat grew with each passing step until they stopped a few strides short of the first stream of Running Fire.

"I don't see a bridge, do you?" Duncan looked farther up stream.

"No." Graynor answered. "I don't think one would last very long around here. I believe we'll have to jump across, very carefully, too." Duncan smiled, ran to the edge and leaped. Landing with plenty of room to spare, he turned to Graynor and waved him over. Graynor shrugged his shoulders, jogged to the edge and jumped with almost as much concentration as Duncan, very little. Still, he landed several feet pass the opposite edge with considerable grace.

"Show-off." Duncan said as he turned his back to him and walked on.

Around the next bend, the three volcanoes that gave life to the River of Running Fire came into view a league or so to the north. The wide red and orange mouth of the largest volcano was spewing rock and ash, lighting the darkening evening sky with an eerie red glow that sent a wash of dread all over Duncan. He wanted to turn back, to run where he would feel safe once again but he only slowed long enough to remember there was no place he could hide from himself.

Minutes later, the main flow of the lava was in sight. "Think you can jump that?" Duncan pointed.

"No, I'm sure I cannot." Graynor stated. "And I doubt you can either."

"Me, I agree." Duncan looked up and down the River of Fire seeking a way across. "There, that side is higher and it narrows a bit."

"But how will we get back across?" Graynor asked as he walked along side Duncan.

"We're not over there, yet."

"Nay, but I don't care much for Trolls, Duncan."

"Neither do I." Duncan returned. "You had better run as fast as you can this time." Duncan walked up to the edge, stepped back several steps then ran and jumped.

Graynor watched, his breath held as Duncan sailed over to the other side, clearing the edge by at least three feet. Graynor moved back, ran, jumped and missed the edge with one foot. Luckily, Duncan had anticipated that he might not make it. Duncan's strong hands caught Graynor's shoulder and arm then helped pull him forward, preventing him from falling backward into the burning lava.

"Thanks." Graynor said as he limped away from the edge.

"You alright?" Duncan asked, concerned with his leg.

"I strained a muscle a bit but I'm fine, really."

"I told you to run fast."

"Duncan, I'm not a child anymore! It's hard for me to run."

"Then you had better pray those Trolls don't come after you or you'll be their lunch."

"I pray I can surprise you if that occurs."

"Magic doesn't work well on Trolls, remember?" Duncan pointed at the openings at the base of the mountains they were nearing. "One of those, the tiny upper one, I think."

"Then I'll grow wings and fly. Lead the way and try to stay away from the main cave. It's going to be dark soon and I hear Trolls are just as fond of hunting at night as they are of eating baby deer."

"I shudder to think of spending the night here." Duncan eased up the side of the mountain wishing this was all a dream and he would wake up at any moment.

"Perhaps we should be extra quiet for a while." Graynor said in a low voice.

Duncan nodded as he glanced behind them then continued climbing until he reached the small cave's entrance. Peering cautiously inside, he motioned for Graynor to follow and crawled inside.

The cave opened large enough for them to stand upright a couple yards back from the entrance. Duncan thought it looked like some of the caves in which he had slept as he wondered around the different kingdoms. How he missed those days already.

"I have a candle and some tinder, we'll have some light in a moment or so." Graynor spoke barely above a whisper.

"The way this place stinks, I'm not sure I want to see what's in here with us." Duncan murmured, slowly turning his head away from the sparks of the flint and steel.

"Ah, good." Graynor said as the candle began burning. As the light filled the area, they could see bones of all sizes and shapes littering the stone floor. Small and large furry things running everywhere.

"I hope they've had enough." Duncan spoke softly as he lead the way deeper into the cave.

The farther back they went, the wider it got until it opened up into a large room. Stalactites of all sizes hung overhead, some connected to the stalagmites on the wet floor. In spite of the volcanoes being so close, water dripped from them like the morning dew in a forest, tinkling and chiming in small puddles. Duncan would have enjoyed the chance to explore and soak in everything but time was pressing him like a knife between his shoulder blades.

Graynor tried to keep up as Duncan moved quickly in and around the stalagmites to the rear of the room. He knew when Duncan was close enough, he would be able to feel the first piece of the Rainbow Jewel.

"There!" Duncan cried in a soft shout and pointed at a niche in the wall. Snaking his hand back into a hole, he pulled out a dusty wooden box. "This is it!"

"Yes, I would agree." Graynor answered. "Now open it and let's get out of here. I need to get back into the forest with those nice Demons."

Placing the box on the floor, Duncan kneeled and slowly lifted the lid. An object made of heavy

reinforced leather was the first thing they both saw.

"Put it on, Duncan." Graynor said hastily. "It was your father's. It's called a cuirass, a breastplate made from leather.

Duncan gently picked up the tooled brown dyed cuirass as if it was made of eggshells. Graynor helped Duncan position and lock the gold buckles that held the two pieces, front and back, together.

"Fits okay, I guess." Duncan said as he shifted his shoulders back and forth then side to side, almost proudly. "Not nearly as uncomfortable as it appears."

"Now, remove the jewel!" Graynor said in a tone that was more of a command than request.

"Okay, don't get pushy!" Duncan joked.

"I'm not! It's just that this candle is not going to last much longer." Graynor held the candle closer to the box. Its flickering flame casting a dim light to reveal a small cloth sack in the corner. Duncan's hand shot in to remove it.

He carefully untied a golden string and dumped the contents into his open hand. "It's beautiful!" Duncan breathed as the dim light of the candle caused the yellow jewel to sparkle and then on its own it began glowing so that the light overpowered the candle's luminescence. As if in a trance, Duncan drew the sword from his back, stuck it hilt up into the solid rock floor then carefully positioned the jewel near the hilt and snapped it into place.

Suddenly the room lit-up as if the sun had dropped into it. Actually, Duncan thought the jewel's glow was brighter than the midday summer sun. The glow extended out toward Duncan, then like a flame from a fire, it leaped out and engulfed his body. Graynor could see the power and raw energy it transferred directly to Duncan. Duncan nearly fell backward from the shock. Just as suddenly, it dimmed to a bright glow leaving Duncan's body glowing with its own aura.

"Let's go!" Duncan cried as he pulled the sword free and headed for the cave's opening. "They know we're here, now."

"Yes, no doubt." Graynor could now hear what Duncan had heard before he grabbed the sword. The Trolls were outside grunting, screaming and crying out in the most hair-raising voices he had ever imagined.

"They're climbing up!" Duncan stepped out into the now night air that was heavily laden with sulfur and Troll body odor.

Two large Trolls, nearest the top, suddenly yelled and leaped to the ground. Duncan turned to Graynor and spoke, "Did you do something?"

"No!" He answered, astonished.

"What scared them, then?" He asked.

"How would I know, we're not that ugly." Graynor returned then said, "We had better go! They might get their courage back at any moment." Then he saw that the aura that had been around Duncan was still there. "You're glowing, Duncan!"

Duncan held out his arm and looked. "I guess I scared them." He moved along side the stream of the burning lava, searching for a place to cross while watching the Trolls that followed. It was absolutely terrifying to see more than dozen Trolls at the same time.

"Jump!" Graynor shouted as he leaped the flowing lava not far from where they had crossed earlier. He cleared the edge by several feet .

As Duncan landed next to Graynor, the largest Troll screamed, broke into a run, more like a gallop, heading straight at the two men. Surprised but not unprepared, Duncan swung the now yellow glowing black sword in a half circle, slicing completely through the Troll's upper torso and right arm. The Troll fell in three huge pieces. A scream of anger and sorrow from the other Trolls broke any feeling of pride Duncan might have had.

"We'll have a better chance if we run and don't look back!" Graynor said watching the other Trolls across the liquid river.

"Lead! I'll watch your back!" Duncan pointed the blood-covered sword at the trail.

Minutes later, still running and breathing hard, both men glanced back hoping they were not being followed. Duncan wanted to stop, he felt sick. He had never killed anyone before and somehow, maybe through the power and knowledge he had received from the jewel, he knew that the Troll was like a person. Not human as Graynor and himself but still it had the right to live. It hurt his soul to know he was responsible for its death. This was another thing to bring up when he stood face to face with Janax Nerbo! One way or another that man was going to pay! His head pounded along with his heart and feet as he ran on into the pale night.

Somehow, he had thought his meeting with Theik the Troll would be something men and Troll would have talked about for many years to come. I guess they still will but not in the same sense, he thought to himself. Definitely nothing like in his dream.

Chapter Three

After well over an hour of running, jogging and a lot of rather quick walking, Graynor stopped, leaning for a moment on a small sapling before dropping to his knees. He was gasping for breath, exhausted. His muscles throbbing from the years of little exercise other than walking. He had been tired when they had reached the cave but now he was ready for a long sleep.

"Don't sit down!" Duncan, too, was breathing hard. "We must keep walking or our muscles will hurt really bad."

"Mine couldn't hurt any worse." Graynor replied, rubbing his aching calves.

"Just to be on the safe side, let's go on. I have a lot to think about and we do need a bit more distance between us and those Trolls."

"They're not coming after us or I think we would already be hanging from a spit over their cooking fires." Graynor stood very slowly. "I've heard stories of Trolls and something's not right, they should have stopped us. Or at least tried!"

"Not should have but could have." Duncan rolled those thoughts over and over in his head trying to figure why they weren't dead. "They could have stopped us at any point but for some reason didn't. I thought all along that I was suppose to talk to Theik, the Troll. That we were to talk about things, things that would change the way Trolls and humans lived together in the world, for the better. I've surely made a mess of things, Graynor!" Duncan pulled at the arm of his companion and started him down the path at a brisk pace.

"We can't know that for certain, Duncan! You may have been supposed to kill that Troll all the time. Dreams of destiny are not always the clearest form of communication. Some things have to be interpreted by hindsight, not foresight!" Graynor knew Duncan needed to have some of the responsibility lifted from his shoulders, it was going be hard.

"What do you mean?" Duncan glanced behind them.

"You look at the dream and the outcome before deciding what parts were meant to happen and what parts your mind made-up to have a good story, one worth remembering."

"Are you saying I might have made-up that story?" Duncan could not believe what he was hearing.

"No, just colored the parts that were dull."

"What about the rest of it, did I make it up, too?" Duncan was almost mad.

"I didn't mean you made anything up! It's just that we don't always understand all the little pieces. Maybe it'll come in another dream but we can't stop because we don't understand!" Graynor's voice was nearly shouting.

"Okay, but I hope I get a clear answer soon. We have a long way to go and I need a clear mind."

"You know where the rest of the jewel is?" Graynor asked, hopefully.

"No, not all of it but I do know where the next piece is." Duncan answered and kept right on walking.

"Where?" Graynor almost skipped to keep up with Duncan's rather hurried pace.

"How do you like cold?" Duncan probed.

"It's not bad if you have layers of clothes, a good fire and a house with few drafts. Why?"

"Then we had better start looking for some things to take along, this time. A couple pairs of heavy britches, blankets, food, maybe a couple of horses. Any idea what we can use for barter or money?" Duncan asked.

"Yes! Where Duncan? Where to?" Graynor demanded.

"The Crystal Ice City of the Winter People. Duncan answered slowly. "I hear it's cold there."

"Cold?" Graynor replied, wondering why Ambrose, Duncan's father had hated him so much. "It is rumored by the few that's ever been there and returned that there's been no running water since the city's founding. And humans have even been frozen solid before entering the city gates. It's another place I would be pleased to only know of its existence!"

"Look on the bright side, maybe we'll be killed before we get there!" Duncan said as he drew the black blade. "Stay behind me, not too close though." He whispered softly.

Graynor could see nothing as his eyes scanned the trees and bushes but his ears told him something was slowly stalking them from both sides. A long thin quarterstaff blurred in the corner of his right eye. As he ducked, Duncan's blade shot out to neatly sever the wood only inches from the wielder's hands. Then just as quickly, Duncan turned the blade sideways and knocked the brown and green robed assailant to the ground.

"Thomas!" A young woman's voice screamed as she flipped over a small thorn bush and landed on her feet like a cat with her dark quarterstaff threatening Duncan's face. "If you've killed him then your life is mine!"

"He's not dead, yet." Duncan calmly replied, not taking his eyes off her hands. "But if you keep that thing in my face much longer then you both may die!"

She studied Duncan for a moment before lowering her staff and moving to her fallen friend's side. "Thomas?" She spoke softly as she pulled the hood back to reveal Thomas was a young boy no more the twelve years old at most.

"A wee bit young to be a highwayman, don't you think Duncan?" Graynor asked as he too, knelt to examine the boy's head.

"A bit young to be a bandit at all!" Duncan mumbled.

"He'll be okay." Graynor told the young woman. "But he's going to have a real headache! You mind telling us why you're out robbing people, especially us?"

"We didn't mean you any harm." She looked up at Graynor then Duncan. She knew in that instant, their lives would be intertwined for the rest of their existence in this world. "We haven't done anything like this before. We're hungry, cold and homeless, thanks to our father."

"Your father is responsible for you two trying to rob us?" Duncan asked.

"Indirectly, more or less." The woman replied, as she let her mind wander back to a few days ago. "More the fault of the bitch he married."

"That's not the way a person should talk about their mother, no matter what their disagreement!" Graynor stated.

"She's not my mother! My mother's dead. Killed by an ugly old Troll named Theik more than three years past." She told them. "Thomas, my brother here, and I ran away from our home, the one that my

father left to our stepmother when he died a couple months back. We wanted to stay but it was like living in a prison not the home we loved and grew-up in. She treated the farm animals better than us, we had to leave!"

"You had a roof over your head and food to eat, didn't you?" Duncan said quickly, not giving the slender faced woman the sympathy her story demanded. In a way, he was glad to hear about the Troll's murderous ways.

"Yes, we were allowed to sleep in the hayloft of the barn and eat what scraps she would have tossed out to the chickens. And of course, we always managed a few vegetables when we caught her head turned." She stared Duncan straight in the eye. "Not a bad life for the daughter and son of a man that was a very successful farmer, rancher and half owner of the local mill."

Duncan suddenly felt shame for what had been forced upon the young woman and her brother, he wished he had bitten his tongue. He felt the urge to sweep her up into his arms and hold her until all her troubles were gone but something held him back. A life of loneliness caused him to be afraid, afraid to approach the woman, afraid of the chance of rejection. Afraid that she would deny him the same feelings he suddenly felt for her. Something deep inside said, reach out to her and something else said, run.

"We will hold no ill will for you nor your brother." Graynor broke Duncan's deep trance. "You both can accompany us south and maybe you can find a place to call home, again. Alright with you, Duncan?"

"Uh..Ahh..If they can keep up." Duncan said as he stared back down the narrow trail, again.

"My name is Ember Ann. My father used to tell me he named me that because I was the flame of his life! Can you believe that?" She said bitterly.

"Yes. It doesn't mean he didn't love you when he remarried.." Graynor was interrupted.

"Oh...my head. Sis..Are you all right?" Thomas was coming to, rubbing his head.

"Yes, I'm fine. How's your head?" She brushed the light colored strands of hair from his pale and thin face.

"Like I was kicked by a mule. How'd you do?"

"No better, I'm afraid. I did sort of make friends with the two we jumped, though." She half smiled and nodded toward Graynor and Duncan.

Duncan and Thomas spoke at the same time as Thomas raised up on his elbows to look at the two strangers he had attacked minutes earlier.

"Can you stand?" Ember asked him.

"I think so." Thomas answered as he slowly stood, wobbling slightly.

"Sorry I hit you so hard." Duncan said softly as he quickly moved to steady the boy by grasping his upper arm. "But my sword and I feared for my life."

"Your sword?" Thomas asked, thinking his hearing was a bit off.

"We're sort-of attached." Duncan shrugged his shoulders as if joking. "Want to try walking? We're in

bit of a hurry."

Thomas nodded as his sister moved in to lend him an arm and another shoulder to lean on. "Let go." He shook them both off and slowly limped southeastward.

Duncan felt the urge to move into the lead but thought it best to stay back and help Graynor keep an eye on the two would-be bandits. He bit his tongue when Ember said their mother had been killed by the Troll, Thiek, so had Graynor. He wondered why? Still, it made him feel better knowing that he killed a murderous Troll and not an innocent one. Maybe, he was supposed to kill him, only time would tell.

"Let's camp there." Duncan pointed to a small concave opening in the side of the rocky hill near the trail they were traveling. The sun was sinking into a cloudy western sky. Rain's coming, Duncan thought as he watched Thomas and Ember start cleaning the area and gathering wood for the night's fire.

"Graynor." Duncan called him out of hearing distance from their newly acquired friends. "I'm going to have a look around. Maybe see what I can find in the way of supper. You keep a close watch on those two, I don't trust them all that well."

"You be careful, too. There's something that's not right around here and it's not them. I can't put my finger on it." Graynor slapped him on the back and turned back toward the campsite. "Try to be back before dark." He added.

Cutting himself a long cane pole from the bank of a nearby stream, he made a spear about six feet long. His first several attempts at spearing the small trout in the shallow stream yielded nothing but a blunted point that he resharpened and tried again and again. As his aim improved, so did his luck. In a short time he had close to a dozen small fish lying on the bank.

Stepping from the water, a dull ache filled his head. Staggering back into the water, he looked down. The man in the jewel floated deep beneath the surface. Duncan startled at first, spoke, "Father?"

"Duncan, my son. Listen carefully. They know you are alive and have a part of the power. They don't know how much. You must be on watch for them. The jewel pieces will help you as much as possible but you are the key piece when the armor is complete. The sword will guide you when the pieces will not. Hurry, my son! The sands will soon be empty."

"No!" Duncan yelled as the image faded. "Father, I have a lot of questions!" But his father's image was gone. He had so many questions that he desperately needed answering. How could his father not care? Why did he leave so fast?

Duncan stumbled from the stream, fell to his knees and slowly gathered the fish by slipping their gills over the cane spear. As he returned to camp, all he would think about were the questions that remained unanswered. The main one he needed answered, was his mother alive and if so, where was she?

"Duncan? You okay?" Graynor asked as Duncan handed the fish to Thomas.

"I saw him, again! My father spoke to me." Duncan said as he and Graynor moved away from their two new companions.

"What did he say?" Graynor asked, seeing the experience had shaken Duncan quite tremendously.

"He was still encased in the jewel the size of a coffin, only purple. No, it was violet in color. He said,

'They know I have part of the power and to watch out, they're coming for me.' Then he was gone again. I didn't get to ask him anything!" Duncan dropped to his knees and stared out into the twilight at nothing.

Graynor wanted to hold him, comfort him but dared not. Although he was afraid for Duncan, afraid this quest would be too much for him to handle, he dared not to get any closer than friend. He was afraid if something happened to him, Duncan would turn tail and run, then all would be lost. He was afraid to allow Duncan draw strength from him, afraid he couldn't always be there for Duncan and when the time came for the ultimate clash between the force of Light and those of Darkness, Darkness would win because of him. No, he had to help Duncan learn to stand on his own two feet, to stand alone and defeat the forces that coveted the world!

"Duncan, you'll get your answers!" He stood over to Duncan's side and squeezed his shoulder gently. "I promise to help you get them. Together, we'll beat this thing! Was there anything else that he said that may help us?"

"Something about the sword knowing the way when I nor the jewels knew." Duncan looked around to see Thomas and his sister busy cleaning and preparing the fish for the fire. He was surprised to see a thin aura surrounding Ember. That's odd, he thought, I don't recall that being here before.

"Graynor," He stood. "Do you notice anything odd about Ember?"

"No, I don't see anything unusual or odd. Why?"

"She has a glow around her. I didn't notice it until just now." Duncan answered as he thought back to earlier in the day. "I'm almost sure it wasn't there when we first met."

"Maybe it has something to do with the jewel or it may have to do with the vision." Graynor looked at Ember, squinting his eyes and seeing nothing more. He was sure her aura was there, Duncan's father had the same ability.

Duncan reached for the sword, to feel the jewel. Suddenly the glow around Ember exploded outward, filling the air around the entire campsite. Duncan was so surprised, he fell straight backward onto his butt as he was forced to shut his eyes. As he pulled his hand away from the sword to help break his fall, the glow softened again.

"You all right, Duncan?" Graynor asked, astonished as well as alarmed to see his friend falling like a drunk.

"Yes, at least I think I am." Duncan moved his hand closer to the sword's hilt, the glow expanded out from Ember, only now the boy, Thomas, was also glowing. Duncan turned his head back to Graynor to find he was glowing, too, and as he moved his hand back, away from the sword, the glow faded.

"Well, which is it? You okay or not?" Graynor demanded, the worry plain to see in his face.

"I'm fine." He stood and brushed off the dust. "Let's see if we can help with supper." And walked over to the dying fire.

"You're a great fisherman." Thomas told him as he neared the fire. "These are going to taste great!"

"Luck has a bit to do with it, Thomas." Duncan returned, seeing the two siblings had everything under control. Well-matched team, he thought.

"You and your friend been on the road very long?" Thomas asked.

"Total time, longer than your age. Together, only a couple of days." Duncan replied as he broke some of the wood into smaller pieces and gently lay them flat and against the already red coals.

"But you two act as if you've been friends for a lot longer than that!" Ember Ann stated as she slowly rolled the fish on the sticks over the hot coals.

"We share a common interest." Duncan looked shyly at Ember seeing the flames flicker in her eyes as he answered. For the first time, he realized just how truly beautiful she was. Her hair was tinted red from the glowing fire although he remembered the blonde curls that bounced out from under her hood during the day's journey. He watched as her lips moved to form the words he was hearing.

Something was moving in the darkness, something that didn't belong in the world of mortal men. Duncan jerked the black blade from his back as he leaped to his feet, searching the surrounding area for the approaching danger.

"What's wrong?" Ember whispered as she and Thomas moved in behind Duncan.

"We have company!" Duncan told her calmly as he saw Graynor drawing runes in the air.

"Duncan!" Graynor almost shouted. "I can't find a spell to send it back, I don't think it's from the Pit. You may have to defend us with that sword but make sure you survive above all else!"

With the sword pointed out into the darkness, Duncan could sense the steady movement of a huge animal. Its path was straight toward the campsite. Troll? Duncan asked himself. He didn't think so. He could feel the evil presences of the Dark forces though he knew the creature was just of one body.

Two yellow eyes filled the pathway they had earlier traveled. Duncan's heart pounded heavily as sweat trickled down the middle of his back. He was worried he might not be able to stop whatever belonged to those eyes and it would kill not only him, but also Thomas, Graynor and worst of all, Ember!

"It's a Dark Tracker!" Graynor said aloud, shrinking back beside Duncan.

"A what?" Duncan questioned him.

"A Dark Tracker, sort of like a hunting beast only as large as a horse and as deadly as a snake. Don't let its teeth, or claws scratch you or you're dead." Graynor warned him as he picked up a small log to use as a club.

As the midnight colored shape eased closer, Duncan could see the confusion in the thing's eyes. It didn't know which of the four people it was after. At first, it moved at Graynor then Duncan. As Ember and Thomas darted behind a large boulder next to the cliff, its attention followed them. Then as if the wind shifted directions, it turned its focus solely upon Duncan. Slowly, like a cat stalking a mouse, the distance was halved between them. When Duncan moved left, it matched him. If he moved back, it followed.

"I thought this sword was supposed to hide me from things like that!" Duncan shouted at Graynor.

"Nothing can remove a Tracker from a prey's trail, nothing except death." Graynor answered, calmly. "Yours or it's!"

"I was sure you were going to say something like that." Duncan said as he stepped toward the Tracker. It stopped in its tracks. "Hey, I think I scared it!"

The Tracker quickly raised its right front paw and swiped at Duncan, almost playfully. Duncan's arms flew over his head as he jumped back but he wasn't as quick as the Tracker. Its claws struck the leather breastplate, saving Duncan's heart from being ripped out. But that didn't stop the force that hit him, he was knocked back about ten feet or more, onto his backside. The Tracker leaped up into the air to pounce atop of Duncan's chest. Duncan saw it coming and dived under the creature. Just as quickly, it turned and swiped again only to meet the black blade as Duncan swung it in a semicircular motion from right to left. The Tracker screamed in pain as the blade severed its right front paw. Anger caused it to stand upright on massive rear legs and scream sending birds and other forest critters running for their lives before the Tracker leaping at Duncan again. Duncan had hoped it might and was ready. He jumped under it again, only this time, he rolled to his feet and squatted. As the Tracker's leap took it over his head, he thrust the blade deep into the cat's chest and leaned forward toward its rear feet, ripping a gash past its stomach. The Tracker screamed out one last time then collapsed to the ground, partly on top of one of Duncan's legs.

He was trying to kick free as Graynor and Thomas ran forward to help him. With both of them, pushing and pulling, he was freed in a few seconds though it felt like it was eternity. None of the three took their eye from the dead creature for more than a second or two as they slowly eased back to the fire.

Ember ran to him and asked, "Are you okay?" The sound of fear and concern rung deep in her voice.

"Yeah, my chest hurts a little bit but I believe I'm fine." Duncan moved over to put the cliff to his back and the fire in between him and the now dead Tracker.

"Let me have a look at it." She immediately began searching Duncan's body for any sign of injury, paying particularly good attention to his back, shoulders and chest. The glow radiating from her like that of the sun.

"Just a few bruises." She informed him. "I think tomorrow you'll be quite sore."

"I can believe that." Duncan answered as he rolled the ball of his left shoulder by moving his left arm and feeling of it with his right hand. "It's sore right now."

"Oh! The fish!" She turned her back to Duncan and began turning the sticks, again. "Sorry." She finished and turned back to Duncan, who was watching as Thomas and Graynor inspected the Tracker, at a safe distance.

"Sorry? For what?" Duncan was curious.

"I almost let your supper burn. It would be awful to let you eat burnt fish after saving our lives." She told Duncan in a tone that held more responsibility in it than Duncan had seen in anyone, probably even himself as he was defending their lives. Duncan lay back and covered his eyes and laughed until he had tears in them.

"Duncan." Graynor spoke, looking down at him. "I hate to interrupt your..fit of joy but I think we're still in a bit of danger."

"I'm so happy, I barely noticed." Duncan replied sarcastically as he sat up shaking his head in

disbelief. "We have had Demons, Trolls and now horse-size cats with poison teeth and claws after us everyday, at all hours. We have a time limit that we must beat or all we know will be ended and the sands are running faster than we dream possible. Just how can it be worse?"

"Those things run in pairs!" Graynor sat down and pulled off a piece of the half-done fish. "The other one should be here any minute now. Better eat a bite, we may have to leave in a hurry." He bit into the fish.

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" Duncan cursed as he too pulled off one of the blackened fish and began eating. "You two better eat, too! This could be our last meal together, ever."

After eating a couple of the fish, Graynor said, "I'll be first watch tonight. You three should try to get some sleep. I'll wake you, Duncan, when it's your turn."

Duncan helped Ember arrange the leftover fish around the fire so it would dry somewhat by morning to serve as breakfast and traveling tack, what little would be left. His hand accidentally brushed the back of Ember's, he glanced at her green and brown colored eyes for a long time, wondering which color was dominant. Her face turned red when she discovered his gaze. Duncan felt something more than causal concern as she stared back at his face with her lingering thoughts.

"Have you ever been to Damar before?" She asked.

"No, I've only heard its name spoken in passing." Duncan answered as he thought back to different conversations he had heard or chanced upon during his travels. "And now that I've given it more thought, I haven't heard anything good about it or it's people from anyone. I wonder why?"

"It's not a good place, I've been there." Ember sat back facing the fire and looked deep into the flickering flames, Duncan saw the hurt in her tender face. "In fact, that's where Papa found the 'thing' he married after mother died. It is an evil place, filled with bad people and their wickedness."

"What kind of wickedness?" Duncan asked.

"The sale of people, their flesh for fun or whatever the buyers demand, even to die if they so demand. It's not a place that a decent person would go to for any reason other than to burn it to the ground and put an end to its abomination on the world."

"Those are very strong feelings!" Duncan was shocked to discover the kind of hate the innocent looking woman held in her heart for the Damarians. "Your stepmother sure put some kind of hurt on you."

"I knew of the city people's ways long before the Damarian bitch entered into my father's house!" She spoke angrily. Duncan could see the aura that surrounded her, wane and dim as her hate rose from her heart.

A horrible scream filled the darkness, cutting their conversation short and unfinished as far as Duncan was concerned. He excused himself and went directly to speak with Graynor. Shortly, he returned to find Ember and Thomas cuddled face-to-face beside the fire, both seemed to be asleep. Duncan lay down on the opposite side and covered a small flat stone with sand to use as a pillow then closed his eyes and drifted off to dream of the evil city.

Chapter Four

Duncan was still sleepy as he walked the widening road toward the city of Damar, one of the most evil places in the world, according to Ember. Duncan decided he would reserve the right to hold his opinion until he had been there and saw it firsthand. He suspected Ember's hatred and jealousy toward her stepmother to have swayed her thinking that way. Maybe she's forgotten our conversation last night, Duncan thought, although the glow around her was still down like a dying candle.

The second Tracker had walked the hills all night screaming and crying a sad song for its slain mate. Graynor had no idea whether the beast would attack them as the first one had or stalk them waiting for its chance. Duncan believed it would attack eventually, probably as soon as it was through mourning. Graynor knew for a fact that they could not outrun it, not even if they crossed the Adarin Sea. With no escape, sooner or later Duncan would have to face it, one on one.

Duncan looked forward to a chance to trap a couple of rabbits for supper that night as game was beginning to get more plentiful the farther south they advanced. Ember had told him and Graynor that Damar was still a good three days of travel away, providing real highwaymen didn't attack and kill them all beforehand. She had looked at Duncan like she was making a jest about the part there they were all killed. She had let him know she believed he could protect her from anything. Duncan liked the fact that she admired him for his courage, what little he thought he had.

Ember told them everything she could remember about the city of Damar. When she had last been there, Alman and his wife Cadius were the ruling monarchs. They had three sons, Peckius, Alvius and Davius, that helped see to the everyday affairs of the city, the collection of taxes on the sale of slaves and a dozen other criminal activities that she thought kept the treasury bins overflowing as well as making a few city officials rich from tossing everyone out. A small bribe would go a long way, a larger one would go even farther and a man with a slit throat would keep all the rest in line.

"Sounds like a place we would normally want avoid but we're sort of pressed for time." Duncan told her.

"You go there and you may run out of time." Thomas spoke from the other side of his sister. "As for me, I won't go there! I would like to live a few more years, at least until I reach manhood."

"I don't think you or your sister, either should enter there." Duncan spoke boldly, trying to take a leader's role. "I want you two to go and circle around until you find the west road out of the Damar, about a half of league or so out from the walls and wait there on me and Graynor. Hopefully, we'll be able to find you a better place to settle down than Damar."

"We'll go where we please!" Ember shot at Duncan a look that nearly knocked him down. "Don't go

telling us where we can or can't go, you're not our father!" She stomped out ahead into the lead.

"You have to watch that temper, sometimes it makes her act a bit crazy." Thomas offered. "One of the reasons we were living in the barn. I really think she likes you more than she's willing to let on. She's never had a boy friend, any male friends for that matter."

"Really?" Duncan asked, wondering how any woman as beautiful as Ember managed to be passed over by suitors.

"Papa wouldn't allow any." Thomas answered his silent question. "Something about not being proper after mother died then not soon after he married the wicked Wanie. Wanie, that sort-of sounds like a cow's name, doesn't it?"

Duncan laughed and shook his head. "Was that her real name?"

"I never heard Papa call her by any other." Thomas looked up at Duncan and lowered his voice again. "You should have seen Ember flinch every time Papa called her name, 'Wanie, my love'."

"Was she as bad as Ember says?"

"Worse! She took over everything that was mother's and gave nothing in return. We suddenly lost mother's love and then father's, but we still tried to stay and help her. I hope we find a place we can learn to love as much as we did our old home. It's hard to think about, you know?"

"I know about not being loved. What it means to have no one that wants you or even cares if you wake in the morning. I know what it means to want to make your parents proud, to want to please them and to know they're not there." Duncan said sadly.

"Did you runaway or something?"

"No! We got separated somehow. Maybe someday we'll run into each other, again."

"Yeah, if they're alive, you at least have a chance."

"I wish it was different for you and Ember. My heart breaks to see her in such pain." Duncan wanted to run to Ember, to hold her until the hurt subsided. "Do you think you can get her to stay outside of the city and wait for us? I'd feel a lot better about going into that city if I knew you two were safe."

"I'll try but don't even think about making her! She doesn't usually move in any direction she's pushed. Hardheaded and quite stubborn like our mother, I believe." Thomas smiled thinking of his mother. "Remind me to tell you about her sometime but I'd better go talk to Ember or else she'll think I'm planning more than I am. She's liable to add another goose egg to my head just for talking to you for so long."

"Tell her it was my fault." Duncan said, dreading the return of her wrath.

"Maybe by tomorrow I can talk her into doing the sensible thing. I'll try!" Thomas quickly bounced on ahead to catch up to his sister who was by now around fifty yards or so into the lead.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully except for an occasional scream from the surviving Tracker. Ember allowed Duncan to close the gap between them to about three or four steps. Duncan was thankful it didn't attack the tiny troop as they wound their way closer to Damar. He didn't feel like fighting

another creature that size for a long time to come, a couple hundred years from now if possible.

As nightfall descended upon them so did small gangs of bandits. The first attack came a couple hours before dark. Two bearded and dirty, not to mention smelly old men stepped out from behind a tree next to the road as Duncan and his fellow travelers approached. Duncan and Graynor asked them to retreat if they valued their lives but they persisted and Duncan quickly ended their criminal careers as well as their lives. After dragging the two dead men out of the road and hiding their bodies behind some brush, they continued toward the city. Thomas was pleased with the short sword and crossbow Duncan presented him with after relieving the ex-bandits of all their possessions.

Not twenty minutes later, another gang attacked them, only this time they numbered five. A surprise bolt from Thomas fell the largest and ugliest. Duncan's blade glowed as it swung back and forth, striking the one going after Ember and slicing him from shoulder to waist. A few moments later, the rest fled with a variety of wounds, more than one would die before they reached help.

Both, Thomas and Graynor had received minor cuts, Thomas' on his forearm and Graynor's on the side of his hip. Neither was more than a scratch but Ember couldn't have managed to make more fuss over them if they had been mortally wounded. Duncan was reprimanded in very polite but stern words of how he allowed it to happen and how to prevent it in the future. Duncan smiled while nodding his head in the appropriate direction when he understood that an answer was required. The longer he thought about most of her lecture, the more it made sense. She had some great suggestions that he thought he'd do well to remember.

Duncan and Graynor dragged the two dead men from the road and relieved them of the purses they no longer had any need. Much to their surprise, both contained many silver and gold coins but not nearly enough to purchase all the supplies they needed of to head north.

The nightly camp site Duncan found later was of poor quality, but it provided the only safe place they could find next to the road and nearly open in all directions. Graynor built a fire with little opposition, they would need all the light possible to see if the Tracker chose tonight to pay a visit no matter what else might use the flames as a beacon to walk in, uninvited.

Another night with little sleep, Duncan told himself as he nearly fell to the moss covered ground next to one of the three large water oaks that was the only shelter within sight. Quickly though he dropped off to sleep. The others sat by the crackling fire, quietly talking as the sky slowly darkened.

The smell of a rabbit roasting forced him to open his eyes. The sun was long gone, the pale moon and glittering stars had long since taken its place. Graynor was sitting cross-legged with his back next to the dying fire, watching out into the darkness. He held his finger against his lips when he saw Duncan stretching and yawning, pointing out at the black veil.

Trouble, Duncan knew at once. He slowly eased over to the warming coals. "What's out there?" He asked.

"The Tracker, I think. It's been circling for more than an hour now. Every once in a while, it grunts sort-of like a giant cat purring. I can't tell whether it's happy to be with us or not." Graynor spoke slow and softly, his eyes not once looking away from the darkness. "Have some rabbit, Thomas shot two with that crossbow. He must be pretty good with it or lucky one, I haven't learned which but I was still thankful for the rabbits. Those two, they've had a rough life in the past year or so." He nodded toward

Ember and Thomas, asleep next to the fire.

"Not as bad as it could have been." Duncan said barely above a whisper, pulling the hind leg from the hot rabbit.

"I guess they could be slaves or even dead." Graynor replied, sarcastically. "Duncan, they're part of what we're attempting to save! They're not bad people! Time and fate have changed what was once a stable life for them into something that's ever changing for the worst. Their stepmother was probably a good person when their father met and decided to marry her but as the Darkness spreads so does the evil! And the evil changes people's ways. Their simple, relaxed way of life is no more and it may never be again. Hopefully, you can turn the world back into a place that decent people can live and have a happy future.

"The world is not and never has been a surefire happy place, Graynor! It does have its bad faults! And good ones. But there are things that you nor I can change, but we will go on." Duncan ate the rabbit and watched out into the night, listening as best he could as he chewed.

"Maybe your eyes will open up and someday you'll be able to look and know what and where the true Darkness is." Graynor said pointing out into the black night. "There! Can you see it's eyes, they're pale green with sparkles of red?"

"I do." Duncan tossed the rabbit leg bone into the fire and felt for his sword. As his hand touched the hilt, he saw the Tracker as clearly as it were daylight. "Graynor, it's not the pure evil we were expecting! It's alone and confused. But I know it will attack. We're all it's enemy now and if we don't kill it as quickly as possible, it will finish us."

"How do you know that?"

"I feel certain things, ever since I put on this breastplate and placed the yellow jewel in my sword. I seem to just suddenly know some things."

"Then the Dark side does know the balance is appearing where they can feel it again. That it's free for the taking if they are strong enough and they have eons of knowledge to use against us." Graynor stood and glanced back at Thomas and Ember then said, "You wake me at the first sign of trouble. I've a lot to think about before morning."

Duncan nodded and tugged more of the rabbit from the stick as Graynor walked over to where Thomas and Ember lay then took his place beside them.

The Tracker paced back and forth long after Duncan had tossed the bones to the dying coals. He could hear its low growl as he added pieces of wood to the fire. Maybe it'll get tired and go away, Duncan thought, leaning back on his elbows and staring up at the sky searching for the stars and wondering if they knew how all of this would turn out. Wondering why one minute he wanted to be close to Ember and the next he wanted to be far away from her and her brother.

Was he attracted to her just because she was female? He had never felt the least bit of love for any woman. A thousand different questions and answers ran through his head as he watched the darkness for trouble. The number one question that kept popping up was why wasn't the sword's magical shielding hiding him from the Demons or the Trackers? How were they finding him? And just how long would it be until they sent something he couldn't defeat with the sword or the simple chants and spells Graynor

had taught him?

As the darkness was slowly replaced by the warm morning sunlight, the others began waking. The Tracker had moved deeper into the forest as quietly as a housecat easing through a grassy meadow as it stalked a butterfly. Keep your distance and we both will live another day, hopefully, Duncan thought as he glanced back to see Thomas and Ember wake up and begin stretching. Duncan smiled back at Ember as she smiled the most beautiful smile he had ever seen on any person's face and he liked it. He wondered what she thought of him?

"Is it safe to go into the edge of the woods?" She asked as she moved closer to the fire.

"I think so but you had better keep a watch over your shoulder." He answered, wondering how she remained so pretty even after a night of sleeping on the ground.

"G'morning." Thomas spoke as he sat down cross legged next to the rabbit that had roasted all night. He took a nearly black piece and began eating it.

"Good morning, Thomas. You slept well?"

"Yeah. You know, for some reason, me and sis feel safe with you around." Thomas replied to Duncan very sincerely.

"I'm not some hero." Duncan said, not wanting to be looked up to by the youngster.

"I know. We just feel as if nothing bad will befall us as long as we're with you."

"I'm still not taking you into the city." Duncan replied sternly.

"That's okay with me, as long as you will come back after me . . . us when you get through." Thomas' answer surprised Duncan.

"What about Ember?" Duncan was curious. "What does she say about us leaving her waiting alone for awhile?"

"I believe she'll agree, at least she'll stay because I will. I'll tell her after while. You just be close by to keep her from killing me. I don't think she'll take it too well."

Duncan nodded, hoping Ember would be reasonable but he doubted she would. Sometimes, he thought women did things just for spite and not from any amount of reasoning. Reasoning was not some women's strong point.

"Where did it go?" Graynor asked from behind Duncan, startling him.

"Don't sneak up on me like that!" Duncan teased. "It moved on toward the city a little bit ago. I think it likes our company."

"You have a weird sense of humor, you know that?" Graynor joined Thomas in eating part of the rabbit.

"It's definitely mixed up. It could have attacked at any time during the night and would have had a good chance of winning but it just paced back and forth all night long." Duncan shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"It will attack." Graynor told him, between bites. "When it believes you have dropped your guard and are vulnerable, then and only then will it leap in to kill you and have its revenge."

"How are these things finding me? You told me the sword shielded me! Is something wrong with it?" Duncan asked.

"The Trackers are not from this world, Duncan. They were born where science takes precedence over magic. They tracked you by the smell of your father would be my guess. Let us pray that they weren't sent after your mother."

Before Duncan could say anymore, Ember had returned. Thomas handed her a leg of the rabbit and Duncan the final piece. Graynor helped Thomas kick dirt into the fire pit. Duncan turned and walked toward Damar with the others following.

The day's journey was for the most part uneventful. The Tracker stayed out of sight but remained only slightly away, always keeping them within easy reach. The bandits and highwaymen were few and far between, it seemed as if they knew of Duncan's party far in advance and steered clear.

As they picked a campsite for the night, Ember started yelling at Thomas. Telling him that he was crazy and that no one told her what she could do or where she could go. Finally, she was silent. Thomas had won but being the winner doesn't always make you the most popular person around. Ember's silence was more deafening than the shouting, she totally ignored Thomas and Duncan. Both were victims of the deadly looks she shot out from her hazel eyes. Thomas was the blunt of her assault while Duncan received what he considered a shy smile instead of the hateful looks she should have shown.

Just before dusk, the Tracker growled out it's challenge and leaped into the open. Thomas jumped in front of Ember to protect her. Duncan drew his sword, walked slowly out to meet the dark creature, trying to draw its attention away from the others.

The huge catlike beast circled Duncan, heading for Graynor, who was chanting and drawing runes in the air, hoping accidentally to hit upon the right spell. With a swing of the sword, the air whistled as the glowing sword split it. The beast turned its head back at Duncan, bent low, its belly to the grassy ground. It growled softly and leaped at him.

Duncan was ready. The first Tracker had taught him what to look for. When the beast sank to the ground, he watched for the legs and the shoulder muscles to flex, at the same time he dived forward, twisted and hooked the sword in the Tracker's flesh. The hot liquid that hit his arm told him he had cut his foe deeply but it was not the blow he had intended. The cry from the beast sent goose bumps all over his body.

He looked back to where the Tracker had landed, it was turning to ready itself for another leap. Blood was dripping from its belly. Duncan dropped low and leaned in his stance, waiting for it to leap. The Tracker didn't jump, instead it too dropped as if it was going to jump then half crawled closer to Duncan. With a single swipe of the big front paw, it knocked the black blade from Duncan's hand. Before he could move, it was standing face to face only a couple of feet away, it's steamy breath burning Duncan's skin. It had him helpless now, he would be killed then the others followed by the entire world.

"No!" Ember screamed.

Beside her Thomas stepped forward, lifted the tiny crossbow and fired a wooden bolt into the beast's face. As it turned its head toward the siblings, Duncan leaped to where the sword had landed a couple of yards away, rolled and came up with the blade in his hand. He turned and launched himself at his dark foe. Repeatedly, he thrust the blade into the black beast's chest. It screamed and tried to swipe him with a paw again but he was ready this time. Ducking under the thick leg, Duncan came up as its leg passed by and pushed the glowing blade up through the Tracker's jaw and into its brain. As the sword touched the upper part of the skull, the huge paw hit Duncan as it came back. Duncan flew backward, hitting the ground with his head as the Tracker drew its last breath.

When his eyes opened again, he found all three of his friends were staring at him as he lay with his head in Ember's lap. All three asked him at once if he was okay?

"I still don't know." He answered, his head was spinning and the taste of his own blood was strong in his mouth. "Is it dead?"

"Yes." Ember said as the other two nodded. "You looked as if you had been killed too. I was scared to death."

"Me, too." Thomas told him.

"Thanks for firing that crossbow bolt into it, that probably saved my life." Duncan smiled and put out his hand.

"You were trying to save ours. Besides, it was the only thing I could think of at the time." Thomas' face was red as he took Duncan's gloved hand.

"I'm sure glad you did." Duncan said.

"I'm proud of you." Ember pulled her brother close enough to kiss his cheek. "You, too." She added, leaning forward and kissing Duncan lightly on the lips

Duncan, even though it embarrassed him, liked the way it felt. His lips tingled and feel so cool. He wanted so much for her to do it again. He closed his eyes, imagining he would feel her lips on his, only this time he was puckering and kissing her back.

"Did you hurt your mouth, Duncan?" Graynor asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"What?" He queried.

"Your mouth. You had your lips stuck out like they were hurt or else you were trying to kiss the moon."

Ember was snickering as she, too, had noticed what he had been doing. Duncan with his reddening face, raised up and kissed her firmly on her lips then stood slowly and walked over to look at the dead beast.

With one hard pull, he retrieved his sword from the head and wiped it clean on the dark fur before returning it to the scabbard. The Tracker was large enough to have killed any creature in the world, how had he managed to survive? He looked and thought of the strength that once laid beneath that black glossy fur. Truly amazing we weren't all killed, he thought as he stared at the long white teeth that gleaned like icicles hanging from it's gaping mouth.

"Let's hope it's the last!" Graynor spoke. Duncan hadn't realized anyone was near him.

"You know it didn't react at all the way I expected." Duncan told him.

"Yes, I saw that. You signaled your next move, I think." Answered Ember who had joined them along with Thomas.

"How's that?" Duncan asked, quickly. It upset him to think the woman knew or thought she knew something he didn't.

"You committed yourself first. You moved into your defensive posture ready to counter it's next move before the Tracker showed that move, so it did something else. You committed too early."

Duncan thought about what she had said and with Thomas and Graynor shaking their heads, he also agreed with her. He remembered waiting for the Tracker to leap. He had signaled to it by lowering his body and leaning forward, he could see that now. How could Ember see it so fast?

"How do you know..about fighting?" Duncan wondered aloud, not meaning to.

"I don't, I just know the body movement that I saw and that huge beast had to see it, too." She answered. "You were very lucky to have killed it. The way it held itself, says it was bred for killing, killing with ease. If you have the chance to ever face another, wait on it and be ready for anything. I'm really not sure if you won a fair fight or not."

"What?" Duncan gasped.

"I don't think the beast's heart was truly in the fight. It seemed at first to want revenge by way of killing us all then it seemed to want to let you win. Maybe it's wanted to join its mate more. Does what make any sense?" She questioned their understanding of the animal's love for a mate.

"Yes." Graynor spoke first. "Loneliness and love are things that put strange ideas into people's minds, maybe the Tracker was no different."

Duncan thought about it and had to agree with him. Maybe the Tracker didn't want to face the future without its mate and choose this as the only way out of the things it was feeling. Who would ever know? He walked away slowly down the trail looking for a campsite a little farther away from the dead creature.

Suddenly, he felt eyes watching him from the darkness. As his hand went for the sword, he recognized what it was and lowered his sword back into the scabbard. He was drawing the runes and chanting one of the ancient spells Graynor had taught him before any of the others, including Graynor realized they were being watched. With a flash of white and a soul gripping scream, the Demon vanished.

"What was that?" Thomas and Ember asked at the same time, holding each others arms in fear.

"A minor Demon from the Pit." Graynor answered, calmly. "Well done, Duncan. I should have had the other one but you were too fast for me. It's probably giving someone it's report on us right about now."

"We're being watched and followed by Demons, too?" Ember inquired, not half believing what they were talking about.

"Just minor Demons, nothing to really worry about, as long as Duncan or I'm close by." Graynor told

her. "You need to work on sharing a bit, Duncan. I'd like to help but if you jump in before I can get my fingers to moving, I haven't a chance."

"Sorry, I'm a little anxious." Duncan continued down the trail. "I feel as if I'm walking on eggs. Like if I step the wrong way, everything will break into little tiny pieces."

"Maybe it will change on our way to the Ice City." Graynor assured him.

"Or else it will get worse." Duncan replied. "There, we can build a fire and hopefully spend the rest of the night in peace."

"Looks like a good spot. Thomas help me get a fire started." Graynor said as he begin gathering twigs and bits of straw.

Duncan found a large boulder next to where the last campers had had a fire and sat down, wishing this was all over. Ember sat next to him, offering to share her cloak as the night air was quickly cooling. Duncan smiled, shook his head no, folding his bare arms across his chest and hoped his pride would keep him warm enough not to shiver in front of her until the fire was burning. The first thing he needed to acquire in Damar was a warm cloak of his own.

Chapter Five

Duncan's dreams were again troubled that night, Demons, Trackers and Ember gave his mind all it could handle. Several times during the early hours before his turn at watch he was awakened by horrible and hideous creatures that were either chasing him or Ember. At first, he knew it was a dream and only a dream then the further into each sequence, the more real they became. Wet from sweat and cold he woke, shivering and searching for those things in his nightmares. After the last nightmare, Graynor joined him by the fire as his senses slowly settled and returned somewhat to normal.

"The darkness hides only what we want it to." Graynor spoke quietly to avoid disturbing Thomas and Ember as they slept on the other side next to the small fire.

"The dreams that invade and ruin my sleep, hides everything with darkness."

"In time, you will learn to master the evil residue that is left by the creatures that the Darkness has tainted. You have the power, now! I can feel it flowing like the pure waters of a clean cool stream. You will need to look deep in your being to discover where to start on the journey to a knowledge as old as the universe itself but it is there." Graynor turned from Duncan, his back toward the fire and lay down with his head on a moss-covered rock he used for a pillow.

Duncan silently excused himself and moved out a half a dozen yards away from the rest to a large

stone. There, he eased himself up crossing his legs and began watching out into the pitch-black night that reflected very little of the fire's light. His mind slowly seeking the passage he wasn't sure was there. The only things he could find were questions without answers and thoughts that only contained doubts about all that had happened to him. A lot of things he couldn't believe or understand.

As the night sounds fell, he became sleepy. His head tilted over, he jerked it upright, shaking it as if trying to fling the sleep away. He climbed off the stone and began walking slowly and quietly around the edge of the campsite. In the back of his thoughts, buried deep under the things that he thought of everyday, somehow he touched a light. It was dim but as he began to near it, he realized, it was what had been placed there by the yellow jewel. The knowledge he was seeking! It was as old as the world! Older even, he learned as he began probing the various points of light that stuck out like rapier blades. Somehow, he was able to grasp those blades and slide into the light, or rather to the edge of the light.

Everything he learned was like a single thought. Some things were only as long as a word and others as long as a paragraph on a scroll. Each was about a place or an event that happened at that place. The liquid fire of the Fire Mountains was in one of them. In another was the campsite where the yellow flames had struck out at him. The deeper he allowed himself to slide, the more information he was able to read or understand. He started slipping deeper and deeper until a large flash of yellow sent his mind reeling, the blackness of nothing followed.

"Duncan! Duncan! Wake up." Graynor was slapping Duncan's cheeks. Then with no response, he poured cold water from his waterbag onto Duncan's face. This time he groaned.

"Oh, what hit me?" Duncan asked as his eyes opened to see the three concerned faces staring down at him.

"We found you lying here when we woke." Graynor told him. "Don't you remember what happened?"

"I remember a light and then nothing." Duncan slowly sat up and looked around to discover it was indeed morning, early morning.

"So, you did find it?" Graynor asked.

"I'm not sure it's what you mean but I did discover something." Seeing the curious looks he was getting from Ember and Thomas, he decided to change the topic. "I guess we'll only get to Damar today if I get up and get started."

"You sure you're okay?" Ember asked as she helped him when he stood.

"Yes, I'm fine." He answered, thinking how good it felt having her touch him. Something he could sure learn to like was that feeling. "We need to find you two some food that will last until Graynor and I come out of the city."

Instantly, Ember's touch and attitude turned cold toward Duncan and Thomas. "I still think we should be allowed to go into Damar with you two." Ember said as if she was about to be punished for something she didn't do. "As long as we're with you and Graynor!"

"I'm sorry, but I refuse to endanger your lives. We just don't know what we're walking into." Duncan said as he started southward once again. Starnge, he thought, how fast she had changed her mind about entering the 'evil city'.

By the time the sun was high in the sky, Duncan had speared a few small fish from a cold stream not far off the road. Thomas had shot a grouse and Graynor had found several eggs from a wild hen's nest. Lunch consisted of the fish, the eggs and grouse were to be Thomas and Ember's supper and breakfast. By supper the last day, Duncan and Graynor hoped to be out of the city.

As the city of Damar came into sight from a rise just off the north bound road, Duncan and Graynor had said their goodbyes to Thomas and Ember. They had watched the two youngsters as they made their way east through the dense forest before continuing on the road. Duncan felt the urge to run after them but instead turned toward Damar and set off walking.

The tall wood and steel gates of Damar were being guarded by three armed pikemen, each busy as they went about the playacting routines of searches they were performing for the smiling wagon-handlers sitting patiently atop their loaded wagons. After the guards pocketed the bribes offered them, they motioned all the wagons through. They offered Duncan and Graynor no resistance as they, too, walked through the entrance and headed off into the noisy city.

A short distance from the gate and as far as they could see were vendors of everything imaginable. There were foods, cooked and raw even dried, furs and hides of every color, size and quality one would want, tools for any purpose, furniture of all kinds. Duncan had seen towns on market days but this was beyond anything he had even heard.

"This way." Graynor lead him down a wide alley and into another street of activities, not the likes of which Duncan had never seen before either.

"What are they doing?" Duncan asked lowly as he stopped in his tracks.

"Selling women for their services."

"What?" Duncan gasped.

"Whores. They probably get sold here each night and receive a tiny portion of the money." Graynor said matter-of-factly. "Let's move on and try not to attract too much attention by stopping in the middle of the street and dropping your mouth open like that. It's really not very worldly looking."

"Anything in particular we're looking for?" Duncan asked later as he was growing tired of all the walking around, looking and fighting the crowds.

"Yes. We're seeking a game of chance in which we might have a bit of good luck and thus turn our pitiful purses into chests laden with gold and silver." He answered with one eye shut and the other wide open, darting around wildly.

"But we've passed several games today."

"Not ones that would leave a man with even enough to pay for a good cup of strong drink." He replied with his eyes acting weird again.

"Oh.." Duncan said, milling over what his companion had said.

Just before dark, after a lot of short conversations with the likes of which Duncan cared nothing about, Graynor smiled and knocked on a dirty and well-worn door set in the side of a smelly alley near the city's outer walls. Though a peephole, a sliver of light showed quickly to be replaced by an eye and a man's

rough voice.

"Begone!" The man said as if he was barking out a warning.

"Alman sends his greetings." Graynor spoke back quickly.

"Well, why didn't you say so!" The man returned as he threw back the door and welcomed them in as if they were long time friends.

"That's more like it." Graynor handed the man a piece of their gold. "Something for your troubles."

"And if there's anything else, just call for Tiny George." He closed the door. "Cards up the steps. Bones down the steps. Women and drink are in the back."

"A friendly game of Bones sounds like a great way to work up an appetite for a pretty lady and a bit of drink. Don't you agree Duncan?" Graynor didn't wait for an answer as he headed down a dark set of stairs.

Duncan followed, unsure of what his role would be other than Graynor's self-appointed protector. At the bottom of the steps, the doorway opened into a large but low-roofed room lit entirely by tallow candles that only added to the smell of sweat and the overpowering odor of elen, the local drug of choice. Duncan had heard a lot about the people that used it but very little of where they grew it, he was assuming it was grown.

Graynor wasted no time in deciding just which of the Boning tables he wanted. He choose the one in the middle of the room, the largest by more than double. Duncan could see the players that stood around in a circle watching a finely dressed young man shake the coffin of bones then cast them out onto the well-worn tabletop with a funny-looking grin.

"Three crosses!" The nobleman roared half-staggering. "Who among you can do better?"

"I would like to try, my lord." Graynor boldly answered when none around the table replied. Duncan thought they looked as if they were afraid of the nearly drunk young man.

"And just who are you, old man, that you think your luck can oust mine?"

"Graynor, a newly arrived traveler in your fair city, my lord." Graynor bowed, playing the part for all he could.

"Well-spoken, Graynor!" The nobleman tossed the coffin to Graynor. "Put your gold on the table and see how the lady treats you."

Graynor placed two gold coins on top of the two already lying on the betting grave carved neatly into the wood. Placing the bones in the coffin, he shook them then tossed with closed eyes and moving lips. The crowd around the table started mumbling as the bones stopped their movement.

"An open Pit!" One of the bystanders nearly yelled. A muttering of surprise filled the room.

"Well done!" The nobleman slapped Graynor heartily on the shoulder. "Let us find another chalice of red wine and we will have another go."

"Yes, I agree." Graynor pocketed his coins and smiled. "I think a bit of good wine might loosen my

casting arm."

"Not for the better I pray, Sir." The man said as he took two silver chalices from a dirty and ill dressed youth who scurried quickly out of sight. He handed one to Graynor and with the other he raised his toast. "To your health, may it be good and to your luck, may it not."

"The same." Graynor answered as he turned the chalice to the ceiling and drank deeply.

"Your go." The nobleman said as he held his cup out to be filled again.

"Aye." Graynor placed three gold coins on the grave. "Not too rich for your blood, my Lord?"

"Nay!" The well-dressed man placed his three coins atop of Graynor's.

As the two men began again, Duncan eased back into the shadows along the wall and began watching the others in the room. A few had the look of many days without food or bed. More than one seemed past the stage of reason due to strong drink and or drug. Duncan watched a few use a pale powder in their drinks and some sort-of stuck it up their noses. He noticed the powder users seemed to become unaware of their surroundings for sometime. Their heads didn't move normally, like they were some kind of giant puppets on strings and their masters required time to think about how to move them.

Duncan was startled when he came to realize just how dangerous the drug was. Those people could be killed, murdered and they would never know what had happened. They were at the mercy of those around them. It sent chills up and down Duncan's back to think of all possibly be taking the drug within the city's walls. He had to stop it! If the jewels had the power, he would use it to put an end to the drug, someday.

As the night was replaced by morning, the onlookers thinned out. Duncan, too, was tired. The night before had offered very little in the way of real sleep. Graynor's purse was about as full as it would get this night while the nobleman's was finally empty as were those of a few other unluckier patrons. The unfortunate were struggling toward the stairs and Graynor was waiting for Duncan to follow when a man came screaming out of another doorway with a long knife in his hand.

He was nicely dressed and except for a spot or two of dirt and a couple of food stains, he looked very well-to-do. Swinging the long knife back and forth, he shouted, "Keep your filthy drugs away from my children or I'll kill your whole stinkin' lot!"

Without thought, Duncan's arm pulled his own blade from his back and neatly sliced the angry man's shorter blade in two. The man's mouth dropped open as he turned and ran out the door he had come through before anyone could grab him.

The nobleman staggered over to Duncan. "I thank you for saving my life. I'm forever in your debt." He removed his hat and gave Duncan a slow and long sweeping bow, remaining bent for so long Duncan thought he had passed out.

"No, my Lord. You owe me nothing." Duncan explained. "I could never let the blood of a new friend of my friend, Graynor, be spilled with no chance to defend himself. I am truly sorry for letting the knave getaway."

"Feel no ill about that! You have done yourself nothing but honor this morn. Come! Follow me and I

will treat you to a King's feast to break your fast then a warm bath and a soft bed to dream in until the moon arises and a new night springs forth to romp in once again as we please."

Before either Duncan or Graynor could respond, he was up the stairs and awaiting them. They could find very little in the way of excuses not to go so they followed.

Duncan would never have believed to where the man lead them. After leaving the alley, they headed for the heart of the city and directly arrived at a side door set in a gray stone wall that surrounded what Duncan knew could only be King Alman's castle. Instantly he knew this man they there traveling and gaming with was either Alvius, Peckius or the youngest Davius. They would need to keep on their toes or this could be their last call upon royalty.

"My Lord." One of three overdressed guards said as he quickly opened the iron gate and stepped aside at attention for his prince to pass.

"Gentlemen, this is my home, Castle Damar. She's smaller than the Good King's but she just as warm and comfortable. Come, this way to the kitchen."

People barely noticed the trio's entrance into the royal kitchen, they acted as if it was an every morning occurrence. The smell of bread baking caused Duncan's stomach to do flips with anticipation of things to come, he couldn't remember his last good home-cooked meal. They followed the Prince's lead, gathering a plate, a spoon, a knife, bread, cheese and then filling the plate with a mutton stew from a large caldron that hung over the fireplace. The prince nodded to a large wooden table that seemed to be the only one not in use at that moment.

Duncan and Graynor sat across from each other as the Prince sat at the head as if that was his normal position. Graciously, they waited on him to begin then quickly devoured the stew and were ready for seconds when another young man entered the room. He acknowledged their presences and strolled over to the table like the bearer of bad news that he really enjoyed delivering.

"Damn!" The Prince muttered as if he was not pleased by the newcomer. "It's too early in the day to deal with him."

"Good morning, brother. I see you're still up to your usual game and still alive." The other Prince stood behind Graynor, looking coldly at him and Duncan.

"Do you have anything of importance to say or are you just being your normal lovable self, Peckius?" Alvius asked as he passed a wine jug to Duncan.

"Both, dear brother." He twisted his torso as he lifted his body up by standing on his tiptoes. "Father wants to see you, now."

"As soon as I finish here." Alvius returned as he drank from his cup.

"I wouldn't make him wait too long. He's had half the guard out looking for you this night. He takes the rumors of an attempt on your life more serious than you."

"They're real enough. My young friend here," He nodded to Duncan. "Took care of saving my royal life this night."

"Father will be pleased with your actions, young sir. I'm sure he will want to thank you for the state

but I'm afraid that he's less than pleased with the heir to the throne. He seems to underestimate the enemies of the royal house."

"I won't rule a city I cannot walk around in on my own! The people don't have bodyguards, why should I?" Alvius questioned his younger brother.

Duncan thought that made sense then realized that the king would have a thousandfold more enemies than a commoner since he was the sole judge in many disputes and disagreements, the losing side would probably always hold a grudge. No, Alvius was wrong, he would never be able to walk at large without some form of guard.

"Brother, I pray you come to your senses before some assassin probes your heart with his knife." He turned and stomped out of the room.

"He's really not that concerned." Alvius pushed his empty plate away. "Fact is, he could care less in what form death takes me, he'll still be next in line for the throne. Sometimes, I think he and Davius are the major players behind the evil that has befallen my father's lands."

"But not the main players, your grace." Duncan stated as he, too, finished with the early morning meal.

"First, let's get one thing straight. I am Alvius, Al to my friends and those that save my life I consider as friends. My father, the King, likes all the pomp and royal protocol, I don't. I expect I will when I become king, if I live that long but for now I want to enjoy being a man. Your name is?"

"Duncan, sir."

"Well, Duncan sir, I believe my brothers not as pure as they would have father to perceive. The evil enemy that has swept through our land in the form of a simple white powder, is nearly impossible to fight a battle against. And it's even more difficult when unknown persons keep me lagging in the chase, I often believe those persons to be my royal brothers."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Graynor spoke for the first time since entering the castle.

"Not unless you know how to trap them and I've tried for the past year. I don't think I'm any closer than when I began! If anything, I cause the rats scurry away in my presences."

"Maybe some fresh faces are what you need!" Duncan looked at Graynor. "How would you like to go back to that place tonight and really have a bit of fun?"

"You're not thinking of buying...?" Graynor smiled. "You're taking a big risk, Duncan, if you're delayed..."

"We have to take a stand, get a toehold for good in the world again." Duncan looked at Alvius and back to Graynor. "I believe this is the place to start!"

"But...those of Darkness will take notice."

"Let them! They know we're coming. We'll give them notice to what side we'll be fighting." Duncan told him. "Maybe, just maybe, they'll turn tail and run."

"Not today, Duncan." Graynor mumbled, shaking his head. "Not today."

"Your gr..Alvius. We'll try to help you but understand, our time here is limited." He looked to Graynor for help in his explanation.

"We're sort-of on a quest that requires us to have completed and obtained all the necessary components we seek by a certain date or we forfeit the game." Graynor said slowly, picking his words carefully.

"What happens if you don't succeed?" Peckius asked.

"We..ah.." Graynor stammered, trying to find the right words.

"The world ends." Duncan said quickly.

"Oh.?" Alvius leaned back in his chair and studied the two men's faces for a moment. "My Gods! You two are serious, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid so, your..sir." Duncan returned. "It's really a long story and seems Graynor nor I have any choice in the matter of playing the game but we do have a say in the outcome. It's the ageless tale of Good and Evil on the battlefield, immortal foes locked face to face in a struggle that will decide the future of mankind."

"Well said, Duncan!" Graynor nodded.

"I've been thinking about it for days, now." Duncan told him.

"How long do you have to complete your quest?" Alvius inquired, not wanting to believe what he was hearing.

"Until Duncan's birthday. When he becomes of age then the battle lines will be drawn, whether we're ready or not." Graynor stared at his plate.

"Then maybe you should continue on your way."

"No," Duncan replied. "I have a friend who thinks this is the center of evil in the world. That you, your father and brothers let crime and drugs run rampant as you set back and watch growing richer by the day. I see she is wrong, you do care. And for that and some other reasons we must help you."

"Thank you but I don't see what you can do in a night that will help solve the drug problem I have secretly worked on for over a year." Alvius said.

"The people here don't know us and for that reason they'll trust us more quickly than they would you. We'll pose as being out of town searching for a dealer of elen in huge quantities. If we're lucky, we'll meet the top people before the night is over." Duncan explained. "We will need a bit of gold to show around."

"Why?" Graynor and Alvius asked nearly at the same time.

"The sight of gold causes greed and greed will cause a man to take chances he would not ordinarily take." Duncan stated. He had seen greed change some of the people he knew, these here should be no different.

"I'll get you the gold and as much help as you need." Alvius said as he looked about for anyone that might be trying to listen.

"I would rather do this with only Graynor and the less who knows what we're doing, the better chance we'll have to discover the ones in charge."

"I understand that but if you're found out.." He shrugged helplessly.

"We'll have to make sure we're not caught." Duncan told him. "Right, Graynor?"

"Right." He answered. Duncan knew he wasn't as sure of himself as Duncan was but Duncan had seen him in the streets, dealing with people. If the headman was out there, he knew Graynor would have very little trouble finding him.

"Let's get that bath and look the part then." Duncan stood and followed the Prince and Graynor out of the kitchen.

"I'll have a valet help you bathe if you wish." Alvius said as he escorted them into the large bathhouse.

"No but if you could find someone to do our clothes while we're here." Graynor answered.

"That would probably take too long. What if I try to find you some others?"

"Just don't get them out of the castle's closets. We don't want to look too rich." Duncan spoke up as he lowered his body into the large marble tub of hot water. "Oh...I've died and received my reward."

"I want mine to be women and wine." Graynor returned as the Prince left the room. "And a great feasting table that never runs dry of wine nor the food never turns stale."

"I'm tired, Graynor." Duncan eased back into the water, resting his head on a pillow.

"Do you trust him, Duncan?" Graynor spoke low.

"Yes, he's a good person." Duncan had touched his sword and saw the glow leap from the Prince when he was undressing for this bath.

"I hope you're right." Graynor said as he washed his head, his hair streaked with gold like Duncan's. "About him and this plan of yours."

"Me, too." Duncan rubbed the dirt from his arms and finished washing. "Let's go find those beds." He stepped from the tub and picked up his black sword. "I need to rest."

"Yes and so do I." Graynor said, yawning. "I have a feeling tonight will be as long as the past ones. Whatever happened to the good old days when a man went to bed at dark and rose at sunrise?"

"He discovered fire, and women." Duncan said as he lead the way toward the guestrooms.

Chapter Six

Just what woke Duncan from his slumber in the finest feather bed a man ever seen or even dreamed existed, he couldn't say. The feeling of something evil came over his entire body followed by pinpricks up and down the center of his back and neck. He could sense someone entering the room, standing near the door watching him and Graynor as they slept. Quickly, he threw the cover back off his head and grabbed the sword. He had been too slow. The figure of a tall man, spun and pulled the door together much too quickly. Duncan knew that to give chase was useless from the fading sound of running feet.

He crossed the room to Graynor's bed to find him covered head and ears, breathing heavily, still asleep. He had heard nothing. Duncan sat on the edge of his own bed and began putting on the clothes a servant had delivered just before he had fallen asleep. Soft, he thought of the fabric, some heads should turn tonight. He wondered what Ember would say if she saw him in these fine clothes.

"You sure do make a lot of noise everywhere you go." Graynor said throwing the satin covers off his head and staring at Duncan.

"If you've got such good ears and heard me then why didn't you hear the other gentleman visitor that came calling?"

"Who?" He asked, surprised.

"I have no idea." Duncan pulled on the shiny leather boots that went with the clothes. "I only saw his back as he was leaving."

"Was he here long?"

"I'm not sure." Duncan wiped a tiny bit of dust from the boots. "He left seconds after I woke. Looks like we'll need the keep watch no matter how tired we become."

"I agree." Graynor sat up and looked at the clothes he was to wear. "I think I'll like it here."

"Me, too." Duncan returned as he positioned the sword and scabbard across his shoulder. "Still we're leaving in the morning."

"But what about your plan and our supplies?"

"We'll locate the things we need as we look for those that control the elen. This place is not so large that we should be any longer than tonight. I'm sure a lot of people know of the ones we're searching, it's just a matter of finding the right price."

"Speaking of money, here." Graynor pulled out several of the gold and silver coins and handed them to Duncan.

"What do I need with these?" Duncan held the coins in his open hand.

"We may get separated or searched by the ones we're seeking." Graynor started dressing. "No use in

taking chances."

"Mind if I purchase a couple of good cloaks before we leave here?"

"That would be appropriate, better get a couple of extras and some good warm boots. These here things would let the elements in like nothing at all."

A knock on the door cut their list short, Duncan answered it. Prince Alvius stood on the other side leaning against the door frame with one leg crossed. Casual looking many would have said, to Duncan though he seemed carefree.

"Good afternoon, Gentlemen." He spoke cheerfully and stepped across the threshold, shutting the door behind him.

"Good afternoon." Duncan and Graynor returned.

"I trust you slept well and undisturbed."

"Well, but not undisturbed." Duncan stated. Seeing the Princes' eyebrows raise, he continued. "We had an uninvited visitor but he must have made a wrong turn. He didn't stay but a few moments."

"If someone was here, it was not an accident." The Prince was trying to figure out who it might have been. "Did you see him?"

"Just enough to know he was tall and trim, not fat." Duncan answered. "I don't think I would know if I saw his backside again."

"Tell me if you do recognize him as someone here in the castle, I'll take the proper measures." Duncan nodded.

"My brother, true to his word, told father that you saved my life and father is demanding to see you, both. He wanted to wake you two, hours ago but I reasoned with him. He's waited his limit, we're expected within the hour."

"I really don't want..." Duncan started by was interrupted by Alvius.

"It's a royal command. There's no way out."

"Let's go then." Duncan turned to Graynor. "If you're ready."

"You saying I'm slow, boy?" He asked Duncan as he faked a limp to the door.

"No, except maybe a tiny bit in the head." Duncan held his hand between his mouth and Graynor as if talking to the Prince.

"I heard that, boy." Graynor smiled and waited for his two friends on the outside of the doorway.

King Alman sat in a beautifully carved wooden throne on a marble dais with two steps leading up. He was a bit shorter and plumper than Alvius but the family resemblance was definitely there. The shape of their faces, the color of their skin, eyes and hair. Alvius shared none of his features with Cadius, the queen, who sat at the left side of her husband. She was shorter still and what Duncan or anyone else would have been called fat but was still quite pretty.

"My friends, Your Majesty." Alvius said as he raised from his bow and swung his arm to Duncan and Graynor, who were both on one knee with their heads bowed. "Duncan of Mina and Graynor of Esosia."

"Arise Duncan of Mina and Graynor of Esosia." The King spoke loudly as if the entire world was listening though the five of them and the Royal Guards were the only ones present. "I have heard only good things about the two of you. That you saved the life of the Heir to the Throne of Damar from an assassin's blade, for this We are grateful. A debt of this nature is hard to repay. If either of you has a want, then ask, if within reason, We will do what We can to fulfill that want. Be it gold, silver, land or position."

"We wish only a long happy friendship with the Royal House of Damar." Duncan said after a long silence. He wasn't sure it was proper to speak but took his chance.

"That is Our wish, also." The King answered Duncan. "We have these medallions that will ensure your entry into the House of Damar, anytime, you may have the need or desire, for as long as the House stands."

He stood and motioned for Duncan and Graynor to come forward. As they knelled upon the first step, the King dropped a large coined metal on a ribbon over each of their heads. From the weight, Duncan believed them to be solid gold.

After about a half an hour Duncan, Graynor and Alvius left the throne room and exited the castle grounds by another side door. Alvius had insisted that the Quartermaster be given their list of supplies before they left the castle, it would be one less worry on their minds that night. Alvius would keep his distance with a couple of Royal Guards and more standing ready. They would be watched discreetly but would be on their own until the rest of the guards got to them.

Duncan let Graynor do most of the talking. A lot of the market vendors were readying to close shop and had nothing to say. The others were very closed-mouth. None seemed to know what Graynor was looking for or else unwilling to say anything but Graynor was good when it came to wiggling information out of those that were defiant to talk. Finally, one person spoke a name and Graynor was on the trail like a pack of hungry hounds.

Shortly after nightfall, they had a meeting set up to talk to a man who knew a man that might be able to introduce them to the man whom controlled who got what when it came to elen or any other drug, as well as the best of slaves or whores. The talk Graynor handled with some of the sleazy street people made Duncan sick at his stomach, he had never thought about the evil activities some people dealt with just for a piece of silver or gold. He hoped to end some of that as soon as he was able.

In a tavern near the castle, Graynor ordered a mug of the local mead for Duncan and himself to drink while they waited. The tavern was a lot better looking than the place they went to the night before. A strong and fleshy barmaid brought them their drinks, Graynor flirted but she ignored him and winked at Duncan.

They were sipping their second round when the man they talked to earlier came in with a friend. Duncan noticed the quality of the second man's clothes were much better than his friend's though neither were as good as Duncan's or Graynor's, he hoped that would count for something in this dangerous game.

"I brought him. You'd better have the gold!" The first one spoke quietly but with a menacing voice.

"We have." Graynor returned. "Introduce us."

"Introduce?" The man raised his brows and looked strangely at the two. "Wes, this is the ones I told you wanted to meet you."

"What can I do for you gents?" Wes asked as he seated himself beside Duncan.

"A little business if you're up to it." Graynor stated. "Miss! A cup for our friend."

"We're looking for a good size supply of elen." Graynor told Wes after the barmaid delivered another round to the table. "We came up from Esosia and we need someone that can handle everything! That means the buying, transporting and helping setup our local people in Esosia. We're not here to waste time so if you're not who we're looking for, say so and we'll be on our way."

"Just how do I know I can trust you? You might be the King's own guards for all I know?" Wes said quickly.

"And you might be an alley murderer for all we know. Look around man, do you see anyone other than us." Graynor stood. "Let's go, Duncan. We've obviously been lead in the wrong direction."

"Don't be so hasty, friend." Wes motioned for him to sat back down. "Let's talk gold and prices."

"All right, but let's not waste my time." Graynor said sitting down. "Ten percent more than you get here. One quarter down and the rest on delivery."

"Twenty and half now." Wes spoke slowly.

"Fifteen and a third now." Graynor returned quickly.

"Done!" Wes held out his hand.

"Done." Graynor shook his hand, adding "We need to work out the details, like I want the shipment broken up into smaller ones so if one is lost the others will get through."

"We'll go talk to the boss and work things like that out." Wes drained his mug.

"But I thought you were the boss." Graynor lied.

"Ha..ha..That's good. We work it like this so that the boss is not out in the open. Now, give me the gold and I'll be back shortly."

"No, not if you aren't the man in charge. I'll keep it until I'm sure we're going to get what we're paying for." Graynor told him. "You can either take us to him or bring him here."

"Let's go, then." Wes motioned to his partner after a few seconds of thought.

"What do you think?" Graynor asked Duncan as they followed the two down one street or alley then another.

"If anyone was following, they're lost now." Duncan said barely above a whisper. "And those two are as bad as they come." He had touched his sword and saw no aura around either man.

"I guess we're on our own, then"

"This is it." Wes rapped softly on a weathered wooden door, stopped, counted and knocked again. "In here." He waited for his three companions to enter as he watched the street.

Duncan nodded a silent hello to the two huge brutes that stood on either side of the doorway. Three more who sat around a table, had stopped playing their card game to see just who or what kind of threat was entering their domain. Duncan hoped these men were no challenge to his sword and if he had room to swing it without putting Graynor in danger.

"Through here!" Wes barked.

In the room next to the alley, a tall young man sat at a makeshift desk counting gold and silver coins he had piled up next to several empty bags. He looked up with anger in his eyes at Wes. Wes was quick to move over to the desk and begin explaining the two strangers presence here.

"Sir, they want us to become business partners." He nervously twisted his woolen hat in his hands. "They're from Esosia."

"Wes, I'll talk to you privately when we conclude our business here." He said, sternly. "Gentlemen, I'm afraid that my business associate may have misled you. He tends to get too many hands in the fire and sometimes there's no fire but his hands are still there."

"He told us you could deliver a shipment of elen to Esosia for the right price, I pray he wasn't wasting our time. Duncan gets kind of sore with those that try to deceive us, they usually don't get a second chance." Graynor said as he walked over to the nearest chair and sat down.

"You sure have some set of balls, old man! Walking in here and acting like some all powerful king or something else." The man stood. "Your life could end here if I choose."

"Yours', too, but I didn't come all this all way to sit around and make threats. If you don't want my gold then I'll go elsewhere." He stood. "Let's go, Duncan. The night is still young." He started toward the door.

"Wait." The man said. "Maybe, I was being a bit hasty. Come, sit and we'll talk. Wes, get us some wine from the basement. Now, just what was the agreement you reached with Wes?"

"He agreed to deliver four separate shipment of elen to Esosia within the next month at fifteen percent more than what you get here, a third now the rest in four parts as the goods arrive safely in Esosia."

"That's a bit cheap for that long of a haul, don't you think?" The man behind the desk sat down and began figuring.

"If it's as well received as we think it will be then we'll leave the possibility open for renegotiation. By then, I expect we can expand eastward with very little to impede us."

Duncan was wondering what kind of business Graynor in when he wasn't out to save the world. He was very good at getting people to believe what he was saying. He hoped it wasn't something criminal or illegal.

"You have the gold with you now?" The man asked.

"Most of it, unless I miscounted." Graynor answered the man without hesitation, like he trusted him

completely.

"You are a brave man..."

"Graynor. And this is my associate, Duncan." He nodded at Duncan. "He protects my interest. What may I refer to you by?"

"Da..Dan, my friends and comrades call me Dan. You can too." The man stumbled.

"Well, Dan. Can we come to an agreement or not?" Graynor inquired as Wes returned with the wine and four mugs.

"I believe so, Graynor." Dan said after a long silence. "Pour the wine, Wes. I think this calls for a toast." He handed Graynor and Duncan each a glass as Wes filled them. "May our time together be long and profitable." He lifted his glass above his head.

"Guards! The Royal Guards! They're pointing at our door, boss!" A giant of a man rushed into the room to inform them.

"Get the gold, Wes!" Dan shouted. "We've got to get out of here. Tell the men not to let anyone through that door. You two come with me or take your chances up here." He grabbed the bagged gold from Wes and headed toward the basement door.

"Oh no you don't!" Duncan unsheathed the black blade and was instantly bathed in a yellow glow like fire.

Wes and Dan pulled their short swords from under their cloaks and charged Duncan at the same time. Duncan's blade swung upward cutting Dan's short blade in two and taking his thumb off with it. Dan's mouth dropped open in surprise as he grabbed the bloody stump in pain. Without hesitation he dropped the gold and shot down the stairs into the darkness. Wes wasn't as lucky, Duncan's blade came back down taking his head with it.

Graynor slipped back into the shadows as one of the other five yelled about what was happening before turning back to Duncan. He jumped from the doorway into the room only to be run through by Duncan's sharp steel. As he fell, two more quickly took his place. One spilled his guts as soon as he cleared the door, the other raised his long sword only to see Duncan's back swing sever his arm just above the wrist. He screamed as blood shot out from the stump like water from an artesian well. The man slumped against the wall, whimpering and holding the bloody dripping stump before passing-out..

Outside, men were slamming something solid repeatedly against the door. Suddenly, it flew open. The Royal Guards rushed in with Alvius between them, swords drawn and looking for blood. The last two defenders dropped their swords and surrendered.

"What happened here?" Alvius asked as he surveyed the blood and bodies scattered across the room.

"They had ideas other than going peacefully." Graynor spoke up when Duncan didn't answer.

"Duncan, you okay?" Alvius probed. "You hurt anywhere?"

"No, I'm not injured. It's...the bloodshed, I hate it." He wiped the black sword and returned it to its scabbard. "The head player got away down the stairs. He left something though." Duncan kicked Dan's

fallen sword aside to reveal the thumb he had lost.

"You men!" The Prince yelled. "We've one more down there." He pointed down the steps. "See that he doesn't get away, and try capturing him alive!"

"Did they hurt you?" Duncan turned and stared at Graynor.

"No." Graynor came over beside him. "I think you're learning to use that sword better with every brawl you're in, your father would be pleased."

"I doubt any man would be pleased by how quickly another can take a life." Duncan returned as he looked around the room for what was really the first time.

"Maybe you're right but he would be proud of the way you defend mine and yours."

"Your Majesty!" One of the Royal Guards came up the stairs.

"Did you get him?" Alvius asked.

"We're still tracking him by his blood. We found the hidden room that he passed through and it's filled with barrels full of elen."

"Let's take a look." Alvius motioned for Duncan and Graynor to follow him.

"That looks like enough to destroy the entire world by drug stupor." Graynor said as soon as they entered the newly dug room.

"Yes, it does. The King will be pleased with what you two have accomplished tonight." Alvius spoke proudly. "Why, the entire next week might be made into a holiday in your honor."

"We haven't time to celebrate, Alvius." Duncan told him. "As I said before, we're kind of in a hurry. We'll probably be leaving tonight if that Quartermaster has our list filled."

"But the King will..." Alvius stopped speaking, nodding his head up and down. "That was your condition, wasn't it? Well, the King will just have to be persuaded to postpone whatever honors he would have bestowed upon you two and your names until such time as you are able to return. Some may not see the importance's of your actions, but I do. I've played a drunk and gambler for a long time hoping they would slip-up and all the time I was knowing deep inside it was for naught. They knew and stayed clear of me and my men. I pray we have put an end to this evil in Damar."

"Yes, for now." Graynor told him. "But the evil that caused these men to do these things, is even now looking for those to take their place. You must be more watchful than ever. Those that cause men to do evil unto other men would mourn not for the loss of one who would oppose their doings."

"I will watch my back, Graynor." Alvius smiled. "I have been assigned that task since I could walk. I do so much want to be able to walk Damar's street without fear of attack but I can wait for that too. It's part of being a Prince, something that I would not force upon another but would not trade for anything, sometimes."

"You will make a good king, Alvius." Graynor said truthfully. "You have the qualities it will take, use your power wisely."

"Thank you for your faith.."

"Your Majesty." One of the Guards ran over to them quickly. "I beg your.."

"Go on, man." Alvius answered not as harshly as the guard thought he would.

"We have lost the blood-trail near one of the side gates of the castle." The guard replied as if he was scared of unleashing a death spell on the Prince.

"Did you ask the Royal Guards who went through in the past quarter hour?" Alvius inquired.

"Y..Yes, sire." He stammered.

"Well, who?" Alvius was wondering if he was going to need to treat this guard like a child or maybe give him an assignment elsewhere?

"The young Prince.." He blurred out. "And his clothes showed blood from an injury."

Alvius' face glowed red as he put together the injury Duncan had described and to where the man had fled. He shook his head in disbelief. "My own, brother?" He moaned.

"You men! Guard this place until I get back." He yelled at some of the guards. "Would you two join me?" He asked Duncan and Graynor.

"But..Yes." Duncan answered then followed him and Graynor out of the dirt walled room and up the stairs.

"I would not ask this of you. But you're my friends and I must be sure." He explained as he wrapped the bloody thumb Duncan had severed in a cloth he pulled from his pocket. "We'll need this too." He handed it to one of his guards. "Hold on to this until I ask for it." He told the surprised man. "Come along."

They walked quickly to the castle and entered by the same gate his brother had earlier. Saying little and stopping only long enough to question a servant. They went directly to the castle's Royal Apartments and knocked on the door of the one apartment his brother occupied.

After several very loud and impatience knocks, Alvius opened the door and rushed in with Duncan and the Royal Guards close behind to help protect him. Duncan spotted a bloody shirt in a corner, nearby was a brown wig, a hat and a coat that didn't look as if it belonged in the Royal Wardrobe. He recognized the articles as things the man, Dan was wearing. Dan was really Alvius' brother, Davius! Duncan wondered what would drive a Prince into doing the evil that he had, and to his own father's people.

"These are the clothes he had on." Duncan kicked them over to reveal they were drenched in blood.

"The youngest Prince is in audience with the King, Your Highness." One of the guards came in and informed the Prince.

"What lies is he telling?" Alvius demanded of the guard.

"Something about being attacked by a madman and nearly losing his life." The guard looked at the floor hoping not to be the blunt of Alvius' anger.

"That lying little brat!" Alvius rushed out of the room almost running down the hall and stairway. Quickly, he went through the double doors into the Throne room. Duncan, Graynor and the guards were right behind him.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion, Prince Alvius?" The King asked as Davius leaped behind his mother's chair. "Have you found the one's that attacked your brother, Prince Davius?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, I have Your Majesty." Alvius turned to Duncan and continued. "But he didn't know the man that drew his sword to face him, was a Prince, Sire."

"That's no excuse." The King stood and raised his voice, his plump face glowing cherry red. "The man will be tried and executed!"

"I'm sure you will change your mind when..."

"That's him!" Davius jumped out next to his mother and pointed straight at Duncan. "That's the one father. The one that attacked me!"

"Arrest that man!" King Alman shouted to his guards. They immediately ran to surround Duncan, their swords drawn.

Duncan's hand was holding the black blade before any of them had realized he was reaching for it. He was bathed in a yellow glow as he swung the sword back and forth, its hum warning the guards to back off.

"Stop it." Alvius screamed. "Father, he was working for me! We were trying to find the one that controlled the elen. We found him, Father. He's standing there with you, your own son!"

"What?" King Alman turned to look at his youngest child. "What he says, is it true?"

"No, Father! I could not shame you like he says!" He lied as he moved around to the side of his mother's throne again.

"What lies are these?" The King demanded of Alvius.

"Father, we have two of the men that worked for him. We have a room full of barrels running over with elen. We have the blood trail that lead us to his rooms where we discovered the clothes he used to disguise himself as the leader of a drug smuggling operation. Father, we have what he left behind for me and my guard to bring to him." Alvius motioned one of his guards over. "This is yours, little Prince." Alvius unrolled the cloth to reveal the bloody thumb.

"I'll kill you!" Davius pulled a jeweled dagger from beneath his tunic and ran toward his father. Murder was clearly his intent. Duncan was out and between the guards like a shadow, the black sword glowing as it swung out and knocked the tiny blade from the Prince's uplifted fist without drawing blood. It happened so fast, Davius' empty fist still stabbed at his father's heart. As Davius stood there surprised, the Royal Guards wrestled him to the floor.

"Take him to the dungeon:" The King shouted. "Lock him up, the ungrateful royal pain in the .." He looked up at Duncan. "I'm sorry, Sir Duncan that I doubted you but it's hard to believe your own child.."

"I understand, your Majesty." Duncan dropped to one knee, sword still drawn.

"Looks like this House again is in your debt. Ask and it's yours."

"I want nothing for myself but for your subjects, I ask you to keep a more watchful eye on their welfare and listen to the things Alvius says. He cares a lot for your people, I can see it in his eyes and heart." Duncan stood. "We must go. There are forces that are ripping at the very fabric of the world. Graynor and I need to try to stop those powers if we can."

"I will go with you!" Alvius said, stepping forward toward the dais where Duncan and Alman stood.

"No, friend." Duncan stepped down to join Alvius. "Graynor and I have no choice in these matters but you do. Your place is here, helping rid your father's land of the evils that abound outside and inside the walls of Damar. You must stop them before more damage can be done."

"Duncan is right!" Graynor spoke up. "Your father needs you now more than we or our quest. Spread your goodness, force the evil to surrender and flee."

"Yes, if you force its eyes from us, maybe we can succeed." Duncan explained. "Fight the evils you see here and give the forces of Good a toehold in the world then see what can happen."

"We, my father and I will await the day you can return. Friends are for life! You and Graynor will be welcome here for your lifetime, as will your children." He clasped Duncan's arm with his right hand and Graynor's with his left.

"I'm sorry but we need to go." Duncan told him.

"Yes, I will see you to the Quartermaster's office, I'm sure he has your supplies ready." Prince Alvius spoke sorrowfully, the sadness starting to sink in.

"Your Majesty," Duncan said as he bowed. "By your leave."

"Yes." The King smiled. "May only good things befall you, Sir Duncan."

"And your Kingdom, Sire!" Duncan turned and followed Alvius and Graynor from the room.

Chapter Seven

Duncan thought of how good it felt to have the horse underneath him as they left the walls of Damar and headed east with the morning sun shining brightly in his and Graynor's eyes. Looking back he said a silent good-bye to the city fading quickly out of sight. He hoped Ember and Thomas would like riding a lot better than walking, he was sure he did. The King's Quartermaster had not given just enough to get by, no, he had filled Duncan's list and added things that Duncan would have liked to had but had never

dreamed possible. Cooking utensils were something he would never have thought of, he was very happy to have them though.

He was also happy for the company of the King's Guards that Alman had insisted travel along with them 'at least' to the border. Duncan would appreciate a good night's sleep or two. Yes, sleep would be nice, he thought, he needed a break from fighting someone every time he took a couple of steps forward, he welcomed the guard's help.

The sun was only halfway to its zenith when Thomas yelled from a tree-covered knoll beside the road. Ember's pretty face was shining as she realized it was Duncan and Graynor, they hadn't been abandoned after all but still a worried look washed over her. Duncan waved for them to come down and join him at the road. He sat on his horse for a couple of moments then leaped off and ran to greet them.

"Good to see you made it out of the evil city." Thomas spoke only loud enough for Duncan and Ember to hear.

"It's not nearly as bad as it was when we entered." Duncan said shaking Thomas' hand and lightly hugging Ember. "And we made some friends." He nodded back at the King's men.

"How'd you manage that?" Ember asked.

"It's a rather long story." Duncan said as he stared at her beautiful smiling face. Suddenly, realized he had missed that face. "But you've only been gone two days, it couldn't be that long!" Thomas interjected.

"It was a long two days!" Duncan maneuvered them to where two horses were being held just for them. "These will carry you from now on. They are your responsibility so treat them well and they'll take you with me. If you don't, you'll both have to return to Damar." Duncan was helping Ember up, she stared down at him in disbelief.

"You couldn't get me in that place if I was dying." Ember said, her eyes squinted and brows arched close together.

"We'll talk tonight when we camp." He turned and mounted his large roan colored horse. Glancing back to see all was ready, he again took the lead east. "This is sure good." Thomas stated looking up at Graynor in between bites of cheese and bread. "We haven't had any real bread in nearly half a year or more."

"Enjoy it, may be that long before you get anymore after this is gone." Graynor replied almost without thinking. "I don't even know if they have stoves or fires for that matter, where we're headed."

"They would have to have some kind of heat to keep them warm." Duncan told them from beneath the water oak where he had unrolled his newly acquired blanket that was feeling so good under his sore buttocks and tired back. "No one could live in that kind of climate without heat!" Graynor's statement earlier the day before had been on his mind all day.

"It maybe that to them the cold is like the warmth is to us." Ember said as she sat on the ground next to Thomas but still close to Duncan. "They might just require less heat than we do."

"What makes you say that?" Thomas asked.

Yes, I wonder that too, Duncan thought.

"Well, it's ..that some people like the heat of the summertime and choose to live in the south where it's hot all year long, or so I've heard. Other people like the colder north and hate the heat of summer."

"Yes. They may just be a little different from us and prefer the even colder temperatures that we don't like." Duncan said aloud.

"Not likely, Duncan." Graynor told him. "They're probably a lot different since they prefer temperatures that would chill our bones and freeze us to death if we had to live there."

"Let's make this a short visit then." Duncan said as he lay back looking up at the stars, wondering how far away they were. He was glad the Guards were staying tonight, it would be their last night together since they had arrived at the border shortly before stopping to make camp. Tomorrow, the Guards would bid them farewell and return to Damar but tonight their duty lay in protecting the travelers their Prince had entrusted in their care. One last night of rest without being woke in the middle of it for his turn at guard duty. Two nights in a row, it just didn't feel right!

As Ember, Thomas and Graynor went on with their questions and answers aplenty, he slowly drifted off to sleep. He was so at peace with himself and his surroundings, he didn't feel the Demon until it was on the outer edge of camp.

As he bolted into a sitting position, he heard one of the Guards shout, "Halt and be recognized!"

"No!" Duncan yelled as he heard the sound of a sword being drawn from its scabbard. "Don't!" Duncan began drawing the runes and saying the chants. The guard screamed. "No, damn you!" Duncan's anger forced words from his mouth Graynor had not taught him.

As the others began moving about and waking up, Duncan stood up and walking toward the Demon. Then it too began screaming and wiggling, trying to escape from the invisible net Duncan had woven around it, halting its advance and denying retreat to its Dark Master. Duncan slowly walked a complete circle around it, looking and studying the glowing almost shapeless being.

"You go tell your Master that I am still alive. That I will be there as soon as I am ready and if he harms one hair on my father's head, I will see him to the same Pit that you shall return to not to leave again. You are bound by me not to tell him where I am or anything about my friends". He drew several runes in the air that took life and leaped into the net with the Demon. It screamed and shivered, dimming as a fire dying. "You will tell the others in the Pit that I will cast them to a place far worse than the Pit if they help the ones that sent you. GO!" Duncan drew a large flaming rune and threw it up into the night sky, the Demon screamed as it blinked out.

"Duncan, you shouldn't have done that!" Graynor was clearly upset. "Now they'll know for sure we're trying to stop them."

"But I want them to know!" Duncan answered as he half-listened to the Guards mumbling huddled together in fear, partly from the Demon and partly from Duncan. "I want them to worry that we will succeed! Maybe they'll get in a hurry and make a few mistakes."

"I hope SO! I doubt that anyone or anything that can see the magic of the universe missed that rune of your's! They will know where we're at." Graynor was beginning to understand what Duncan's show had been about.

"So, by the time they could get here, we'll be long gone. That'll make them even madder!" Duncan looked at the fallen guard, he was glad he wasn't going to have to explain that to the man's family. Nerbo would pay someday, he thought as he walked back to his blanket. Graynor walked beside him, thinking.

"I didn't teach you those chants or runes, as far as I know only a few of the Elders even knew them." Graynor spoke slowly as he sat down beside Duncan's blanket. "How is it you know them?"

"I'm don't know!" Duncan tried to remember. There was nothing in his memory to explain how he obtained those spells. "When I felt what that Demon had done to that guard to get to me, the spells were just suddenly there. It was like I had them there in my mind all my life, like they were common words. Does that make any sense?"

"Yes, I would say your father either put them deep in your memory or they are part of what the yellow jewel carried. I didn't think you would gain that knowledge so soon."

"I just don't know, Graynor." Duncan shook his head. "I still have that feeling that says 'run'. And I want to run but at the same time I know I have to stay because there is no place that I can run to and live with myself even if I managed to survive what I could have helped stop, the evil that I let win its way into the world. But it's a struggle!"

"And it'll get worse before it gets any better." Graynor said calmly. "But you're your father's son, it will become better, someday. You will see to that."

"I pray you're right." Duncan flipped the blanket over his shoulders and lay his head down.

Graynor stood and moved to the fire, watching the Guards wrap their dead comrade in his bedroll. "So do I, Duncan." He whispered. "So do I."

As usual, the nightmares that followed his close contact with the Pit's Demons were the visions that Duncan remembered occupying his dreams. His mother seemed to be one of the main character in each demonic scene. She was bound to a dead tree with Demons all around her waiting for the right moment to sacrifice her. Duncan fought hundreds of Demons, all shapes and sizes. No sooner had his sword destroyed one and there would be another to battle before he could edge his way closer. As the trumpets sounded, she had been moved. Now she was tied to a large black stone and they would lay open her bosom and tear out her still beating heart. The largest Demon screamed a victory yell as he lifted the heart to the sky. Her blood pumping and squirting into the air from the dark red mass, running down his arms and splattering the over-joyed Demon's hideous face. Again, he had been too late. He leaped at the Demon that held his dead mother's heart, it cast him aside as he had done the lesser Demons. He needed more power, more strength!

He woke wet in sweat as usual, his muscles ached. He didn't wondered why. He did wonder how a dream could affect anyone as these nightmares did him? He knew one thing for sure, he needed the jewels, all of them. They were his only chance to stop the Demon of his dreams and time was running out!

Slowly, he stood to meet the dim new dawn. By nightfall, he and the others should be deep into the cold north that belonged to the Ice People. He hoped his meeting with them went better than the one with Theik.

"Graynor, help me wake the others. It's time to go." Graynor could hear the urgency in his voice. It

sent a cold chill of dread down his back. Duncan had been touched again by forces he wasn't able to deal with. Graynor hoped they didn't push him over that fine line and cause him to run. The world could never find another to take his place and he was it's only hope.

After a quick breakfast, they bid good luck to the guards and rode hard until sunset. For the next two days they would follow the same routine; wake in the morning, eat bread, cheese and a bit of wine then ride until they could barely make-out the trail. By the end of the third day, they could feel the icy breath of the northern lands of Ilaska, a snow and ice covered land that had been shunned by mankind since the beginning of history.

Duncan wondered why? The pale skinned people had never in any man's memory caused so much as the first injury to a human. Why did men avoid them so? Duncan hoped to learn that reason as well as a few others when he retrieved the violet jewel.

The information contained in the glowing yellow ball at the edge of Duncan's memories grew until it was like having a map that had been drawn in lifelike detail. Most of the time, he knew where every rock and trail would cross the one they were traveling. He was uncomfortable with the sense of *deja vu*. By the next afternoon, they would move into the coldest weather any of them had experienced in their lives. Duncan hoped they, the horses and three pack mules could somehow manage to survive.

"We should stop a little early tonight and practice putting that tent together. Tomorrow, it might mean the difference between whether we live or freeze to death." Duncan leaned over so he thought only Graynor could hear.

"Why? Is it really that cold?" Ember asked as she eased the blaze-faced mare between them.

"Better put on plenty of warm clothes in the morning or have them where you can find them with your eyes shut." Duncan answered. He was surprised she had heard him speaking to Graynor with the wind that was already blowing.

"Why, you're not in that big of a hurry, are you?" She cocked her head to one side and watched her brother as she listened to Duncan.

"No." Duncan liked the way she always looked for a truthful answer, he was growing fonder of her each day. "There's a chance that today will be the last day we have the bright sunshine out to help us see for the next week or so. If the wind and snow start blowing, forcing us to go on in blizzard-like weather then we won't be able to see our hands in front of our faces."

"Then just how will we stay together or find our way?" Ember grew concerned.

"We'll tie the horses and mules together, I could find my way there in the dark." Duncan said, matter-of-factly. We could go all night if we didn't require sleep, Duncan thought to himself.

"I hope we have enough supplies." Graynor told Duncan to pass the time.

"I doubt we'll think we do once we get there." Duncan returned. "From all I can find out, it's nothing but ice."

"Sounds a lot worse than the Fire Mountains." Graynor thought aloud.

"It is." Duncan moved ahead to look for a good spot to setup the tent and make camp. His real reason

was to be alone for a few minutes. After the past week of travel with Graynor, Thomas and Ember, he felt the need for sometime by himself. Being alone all his life made it harder to be around people very long, especially when he felt responsible for their well-being.

Stopping near a small southerly facing rockcliff, Duncan decided this was as good of a place as they had encountered yet to make camp. He had known it was here but it was even better than the 'memories' told him. By the time the others arrived, he had a roaring fire to warm by.

"After we set the tent up and care for the horses, I'll help with supper." Duncan told Ember as she warmed her hands. Thomas and Graynor's eyes lifted toward them, curious thoughts running through their heads.

The tent proved to be quite a challenge for the three men, if Ember had not helped, it would have served only for ground cover. Her wit amazed them all but Duncan was exceptionally taken by how quick she saw ways of doing things. Each thing she pointed out, drew him closer. He found himself standing near a corner with one of the two piece poles, daydreaming. If Thomas hadn't poked his ribs, he might have stood here all night.

"If that don't beat all," Graynor helped him push the poles in place. "A man so tired that he sleeps like a horse, on his feet."

But Duncan remained silent as he stepped back to get a good look at the assembled tent, although his face did turn cherry red when he glanced at Ember. It would protect them well, he thought, a lot better than being out in the open at night.

"Why does it have two rooms?" Thomas asked as he walked around staring inside of it then out.

"We'll need to put the horses in one to protect them from the same winds that would freeze us." Graynor responded to his question. "The four of us will take the other one."

"You ever sleep in one before? It looks like it'll blow away!" Thomas continued.

"No but I'm sure they're safe! The King's Guards use them all the time." Graynor smiled. "And I don't recall ever seeing one go by overhead."

Ember snickered and Duncan smiled. He had started helping Ember peel potatoes for meat stew and was listening to their conversation. Duncan smiled again at Graynor's joke, he was funny sometimes, even when he was trying to be sarcastic.

Snow was flying in every direction by the next afternoon. The cold was like the worst winter blizzard any of them could remember. The morning had started out as chilly and as the day wore on, the temperature steadily dropped. Luckily, the snow was only a light powder and the horses had no trouble wading through. As the snow fell harder, the light of day all but disappeared. If it had been not for the safety ropes, they would have all been lost from one another.

Duncan pushed on through the deepening snow, his cloak drawn close by a long woolen scarf. His eyes were nearly useless because of the dark and the blowing snow but he didn't need to see to know where they were or what was ahead. Time, too was meaningless, today would end when they or the horses could not go on.

Duncan knew the others were feeling the same things he was. The horses were enough to endure by themselves, add to them the wind, snow, no rest and barely enough food to sustain them from morning until nightfall and that's when you start to feel the world closing in on you. You're too tired in the morning to begin the day but do, and somehow by dark your eyes are ready to cross but before you can sleep, there is guard duty. He wondered how long they could go on, knowing they were just at the beginning.

Tonight, they would have to stop earlier than they had been or risk the possibility of freezing solid when the sun went down. Although they couldn't see it, the sun had helped to bring the daytime temperatures up into the region where they could survive without a shelter. But not at night, they would be lucky not to be frozen by morning in the tent.

By the time they reached the protected area Duncan wanted to make camp in for the night, the snowfall was slowing or maybe the tall rocks caused it to leap past them. Whatever the reason, they were all glad to see it slacken. Still, it was difficult to assemble the tent, especially wrapped up like fat mummies and trying to work with their heavy mittens. Duncan had been foolish enough to remove his and shortly after could barely move his fingers. Graynor said he was lucky they weren't frostbitten.

They worked hard to finish before dark. With the last animal inside and the doors tied together, they sat down on the animal packs and wrapped themselves up tightly in their blankets while Duncan lit a fire in the small metal brazier. The fire quickly warmed the tent enough that they could stop shaking and eat some dried meat and hard tack bread. With their stomachs satisfied, Graynor mulled a skin of wine, which they took turns passing around until it was gone.

As their bodies warmed, Thomas asked Graynor, "Why are we here, freezing half to death when we could be living somewhere those evil creatures wouldn't go?"

"There's no where they won't be if Duncan doesn't find the pieces of the jewels his father hid before the evil Janax Nerbo took him prisoner. You see, the powers of good and bad are nearly balanced, neither side can get the upper hand on the other one. Duncan's father..hid certain powers that were used by the good, the evil now wants to know where they can get their hands on that power. That why Duncan's here, I'm here to assist if I can." Graynor looked at Thomas' young face wondering why he couldn't have been spared this burden. Why this child wasn't home in his warm bed, dreaming of playing games, fishing or pulling practical jokes on his sister? "Why are you here, Thomas?"

"I really don't know." The boy answered as if he have been expecting him to ask. "I like Duncan! It's.. that..well..when I look at him, I see someone that will protect me no matter what. Someone who will show me what's right and teach me what's good. He feels like the brother I've never had. I like being with him, and it sure beats being a highwayman."

Graynor laughed then asked. "Even with the things you have seen, the blood, the Trackers and the Demons?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad you decided to come Thomas." Duncan interjected. "Helps keep Graynor off my back and out of my hair." He joked.

"Duncan, I'm not on your back." He thought for a moment. "Well, anymore than I have to be."

"Let's rearrange these packs and hopefully they might help keep us a bit warmer tonight." Duncan stood. He was tired. He couldn't remember being this tired anytime during his life, he hoped the others weren't as bad.

After moving the supplies to form a semicircle around the brazier, they opened the inner door that separated them from the animals. The night would be cold, man and beast would need to share the heat from the brazier and each other's bodies.

"How about some more of that delicious hot wine, Graynor?" Duncan asked as he lay back against the packs and wrapped himself loosely in the blanket. "I've been thirsty all day long and too cold to even attempt to take a drink."

"I see no reason why we shouldn't." Graynor warmed and sweetened the well-watered wine then passed it around. Minutes later, they were all sound asleep.

The cold night had been good to them. They all awoke to find no loss of toes nor fingers. The horses and mules were all alive and grumbling for their grain and water. Small embers in the brazier quickly ignited the tiny wood shavings Duncan sprinkled among them, in minutes they had a good fire but the same ice cold food as the night before.

Duncan felt rested, he hadn't fought with Demons or anything last night. It was good to awake that way, he thought as he helped feed and saddle the horses. For him, it was a beautiful day! Opening the tent door to the outside, he found the snow was still coming down and while the tent offered little in the way of protection from the cold, inside was like summer when compared to the outside.

"Damn!" Duncan uttered and closed the flap.

"What's wrong?" Thomas asked stepping over to the flap and peeping out. "Sure is cold out there." He quickly closed the flap and headed back to the brazier.

"Better put on more clothes today." Duncan said as he followed Thomas to the blazing fire. "It's a bit colder this morning than yesterday was."

"Drink this, we probably won't stop again today until you're ready to drop." Graynor handed Duncan and Thomas a cup of the warm wine.

"Thanks." Duncan drank nearly half, it felt good going down. "I don't think we'll be riding all day today." He said then drank the rest and passed the cup back to Graynor.

"We're not going to have to walk in this stuff, are we?" Ember asked, surprised by his statement.

"No, I believe we're getting close. We covered a lot of territory yesterday, a lot more than I thought we could have. If I'm right, sometime today we'll arrive at the Crystal Ice City. Let's get this tent down and squared away while we're still warm, I've a feeling it might be of use to us again."

Ember and Thomas swept snow off of the tent with pine branches tied together as Duncan and Graynor rolled, mashed and rolled some more. Nearly a half hour later, they had it on the pack mules and were again roped together heading toward wherever Duncan led them.

The cold wasn't bad the first hour or so. And like the day before they wrapped their faces so that even their eyes weren't exposed. Ember said they should do something for the horses and mules, so they

draped them with their blankets and bed rolls. Duncan didn't even argue one word about it, that point alone gained him more ground with her than all the flowers that grew during the summer. Her eyes sparkled as she helped see to the 'horse cloaking' personally. Duncan felt for the animals and knew they wouldn't have a chance without the horses to speed them through the snow.

By mid-morning, the temperature dropped and the wind and snow picked up. The horses and mules took turns of stubbing up and not wanting to move an inch farther. Several times, Duncan and Graynor got off their own mounts and pulled or pushed to keep the little party moving.

Noon found them still at it. Both Duncan and Graynor were so tired they were having trouble climbing back onto their mounts. Thomas and Ember had offered them assistance but had been told in no uncertain terms what would happen to them if they stepped one foot from their own mounts. Still, they were gaining ground or snow.

As Duncan climbed back on his horse for what he thought was the thousandth time, the sky lightened, the snow began to fall in smaller flakes and the wind slowed then died completely. Suddenly, the sky was clear, the temperature began warming. Duncan thought it was still colder than any blizzard he had felt before but it was warmer than he thought it would be for the next couple of days.

Squinting and watching through slits in the woolen scarf wrapped around his head, his eyes slowly adjusted to the bright sunlight being reflected off the surrounding snow. He removed the scarf to get a better look at the glittering reflection of what Duncan thought were icicles hanging upside-down. As he rode closer, he suddenly realized what he was seeing.

"The Crystal Ice City!" He said aloud.

Chapter Eight

Spires that looked like crystal clear ice shot up from the snow-covered surface reaching for the bright blue sky. Some spiraled left, others twisted right like giant screws made of multicolored jewels and glass. One in the center stood taller by twice over the rest and colored like a blue male peacock, it was like a crown to the rest. "Buildings!" Graynor murmured. "What beautiful buildings!" He pulled the scarf from his eyes, stopped the horse and sat there staring, feeling overwhelmed by the beauty that had been hidden away here in this frozen climate.

"Is this where the Gods live?" Thomas asked.

"No! This is the home of the Winter people." Duncan kned his horse and rode on.

When they first noticed the Crystal Ice City, it had looked less than a league away but as they rode on

they soon realized it was closer to three leagues away. The Ice City grew larger with each passing minute and what had seemed a small fence became a wall of milky-colored ice blocks that rose more than a hundred feet above the snow that drifted next to it.

"That must be the gate." Duncan pointed. "We're going to make it before dark."

"I hope it's open." Graynor spoke softly.

"I'm not sure I want it to be." Ember's voice held the unmistakable sound of fear in it.

"Duncan will keep us safe!" Thomas told her, moving his horse along side the mare. "I'll help if he needs me."

"Thank you, Thomas." Ember lifted her right hand to his shoulder. "That means a lot." She said, quite sincerely.

"I doubt that we'll be harmed." Graynor explained. "These people have never harmed any humans before, at least I've not heard of them harming any."

"This place looks dead." Ember said as a sudden chill shot down her back far beyond that caused by the weather.

"We're being watched, Graynor." Duncan turned in his saddle and looked back at the snowy trail they had just ridden down. "And it's not the Winter People."

"Are you sure?" Graynor asked closing his eyes and reaching out with his mind to see what Duncan was feeling. "It's not the same kind of Demons, is it?"

"No, it doesn't feel the same." Duncan spoke soft and low. "It feels as if it wants to come here but it's afraid. It's afraid of the Ice City or the people inside."

"I have never encountered a Demon with the amount of power I feel radiating from that one." Graynor sounded worried. "Duncan, we had better see if these animals are up to a good run. If that thing catches us, I'm not sure we can defeat it."

"Go, then!" Duncan urged. "I'll watch our backs."

After a slow trot to get the horses warmed, they kicked their ribs hard and made them run for all they were worth. Duncan could feel the coldness that seeped from the creature's being, its roots ran deep into the heart of Darkness. The evil being's presence left a bad taste in Duncan's mouth, he spat but it remained there. Its coldness was moving closer, he looked back but could see nothing. He felt outward with his mind, evil was all he could reach. The horses sensed it too, they ran faster than any of them thought possible. But the evil was still gaining.

As they neared the gates, Duncan sensed they were losing the race, the creature was almost upon them. Suddenly, moving out away from the doors' sides, two pale blue men wearing long white robes appeared. If the horses had been as startled as the humans were, they would have tried stopping and went rolling or sliding through the gates. But the horses were more concerned about their own safety than the sudden appearance of blue people, they galloped at full speed through the tall open gates and into the walled Ice

City.

Dismounting as quickly as he could bring the horse to a slow trot, Duncan ran back to the gate unsheathing the black blade as he went. The two Winter people were standing in the doorway, facing out toward where Duncan could sense the Darkness. In their long slender hands each one of them held a staff made of shining metal with an orb on the upper end that was surrounded by hook-shaped knife blades. They lifted them high in the air and chanted, Duncan recognized the words but couldn't recall the meaning. Bolts of fire that looked like lightning shot to the area where Duncan felt the creature, the snow-covered ground lit up as brightly as looking at the sun. Instantly, Duncan couldn't feel the Darkness anymore, the creature was gone.

The two blue skinned people turned to Duncan and bowed their heads slightly like a formal greeting. Duncan returned the courtesy and smiled. The closer one spoke,

"Greetings to you and your friends." He looked back to where Thomas, Graynor and Ember were standing, watching and not yet knowing if the Winter people were friends or killers. "Welcome to our village, Tszer, it means Crystal Village in our language. We offer you shelter from the evil that follows you and from the elements that also would delight in your lives being extinguished from this plane of life."

"We have come seeking the things my father hid here from the sight of the Darkness." Duncan told them slowly, hoping he was doing the right thing. "We wish only to retrieve those things and depart as friends to such honored beings as yourselves."

"Your father is a friend of ours because of his actions and the goodness in his being. The Council will decide if you are truly the son of your father, and friend or foe. Come, we will give you a place in which you can refresh your bodies and relax your minds while the Council is being assembled."

"What about our horses?" Duncan asked as he followed them.

"You should take care of what belongs in your care." The speaker said and walked on.

"Sort of like riddles." Thomas said as he led Duncan's horse as well as his own. "I love riddles."

Quietly, they trailed after the two blue beings that offered them shelter but hadn't revealed their names. They found their walk through the city uneventful and unsettling. No one was in the streets or alleyways. As a matter-of-fact, they didn't even see another person until they were shown into a small spire connected by what looked like ice bridges at different heights to the largest spire in the city. There, another of the Winter People bowed to the entire party and took them into his custody like they were children that need a watchful eye.

"I am Po." He spoke carefully, like he was searching his mind to find the right words. "I am the..your guide. This is where you will rest while we await the assembly of the Council. I will provide you with what you may desire, if I am capable. You are allowed to move about freely as long as you are in the city. If you try to leave here before your..audience with the Council, you will be forcefully detained. The animals are to remain on the ground floor. The second floor will be your primary quarters. I will wait while you see to your animal friends." He led them into the ice-like building.

None of them could believe the space once inside nor the beauty. Light poured in from the clear ceiling and the milk colored walls making it as easy to see as if they were outside in the bright sunlight.

They quickly found the corral-like fenced-in area where they fed and left the tired horses and mules. Po then showed them up the stairs to their own quarters.

"Feel free to..explore." He told them. "My..room is over there, I welcome your presences." Po quickly bowed and left.

"Thank you." Duncan said watching the tall figure exit the room.

"These are not made of ice." Thomas explained to them as he moved about the rooms feeling the walls. "Almost like..glass except it's warm."

"Yes, it is warming up in here." Ember said as she removed her heavy winter clothing.

"There's one room in there with water that is both hot and cold that comes out into a big bowl!" Thomas re-entered the room after exploring. "Come see." He grabbed Ember's hand, almost dragging her off.

"Why do you suppose we must face their Council?" Duncan asked Graynor as they too, removed their winter clothes.

"I think the Council is probably the way their government works." Graynor sat on what looked like a chair, only long and soft, padded with fabric instead of wood, "Comfortable, try it."

"It is!" Duncan was surprised. "Softer than even a King's beds."

"Indeed." Graynor continued. "The Council probably rules in place of a King or Queen. They're usually selected by the general population to do the things that monarchs do, only councils do it a little better and sometimes, a lot more fairly."

"Sounds interesting." Duncan answered as he wondered what they had to eat around here. "Hungry?" He asked Graynor.

"Quite."

"Let's go look for something to eat, if we can't find anything we'll go down after the supplies in the packs. Cold food is better than nothing." Duncan stood and headed in the direction he had last seen Thomas and Ember going.

"Look what we've found!" Thomas and Ember were playing in the water that ran from tubes in the wall. "Feel, this one's hot."

"And there's food of a sort in that thing over along the wall," Thomas added. "But we haven't tried to get it out yet."

Both, Duncan and Graynor felt the hot water before moving onto the clear boxes that held what seemed to be fresh vegetables on the other side of a glass-like door that was locked. They pulled and pushed, looked for seams they might stick their knives into and force the covering open. Thomas joined them, adding his opinion to the problem.

Ember watched and snickered, quietly to herself as long as she could stand it. "Allow me." She said, loud enough to get their attention.

"Be our guest." Duncan swept his arm toward the glass-like door.

Gently, she touched a square at the bottom corner and slid the door to the right. "Cold in here." She removed a head of what looked like lettuce and examined it.

"Sure knows how to make a feller look bad." Thomas stated his feelings of her mental quickness, causing her to blush deeply as she lowered her eyes and looked away.

"Don't pay him no mind." Graynor placed his hand lightly on her shoulder. "He's just been outwitted by a young woman and it hurts his ego."

"Do you think it's good?" Duncan inquired as he nodded at the lettuce in her tiny hands.

"Looks and smells good." She answered and before anyone could stop her, bit into it. "Tastes great. Like fresh picked, only cold."

"Thomas, go ask Po if it's safe to build a fire and if so, we'll make a big pot of stew from some of these vegetables." Graynor said as he examined the different foods the boxes contained.

Shortly afterwards, Thomas came back and looked around the room. "That table over there." He pointed. "Po said it heats by sliding the 'controls', a little for a little heat and a lot for a lot."

Duncan returned from where the horses and supplies were with the metal pot that doubled as a brazier. "It's a bit dirty." Duncan told Ember as he handed it to her.

"We have plenty of water!" She said, quickly washing then placing it on the heat table half full of water. "Will you help me peel, Duncan?" She asked.

"Ah..Yes." He looked at her and wondered how anyone could deny that smile any request.

After they had eaten, sleep came easily. A few hours later, Po woke them.

"The Council is ready to receive you and your friends." Po was speaking to Duncan as the others were waking.

"Great! I need to get back what my father left here." Duncan told him. "Everyone ready? Good, let's go."

Po escorted them across one of the glass-like bridges that connected the small spire to the larger one. The walkway was level and solid although the entire bridge looked like a clear tube of glass or ice.

"What is this material that everything appears to be made of here in your city, Po?" Graynor asked, just to break the complete silence.

"It is a natural substance that is made from several different elements found in an abundant supply all over your world." He answered slow and thoughtfully, as if he might be saying more than was required.

"Is it possible for men, like us to make it?" Graynor continued.

"No, you nor any of your kind will acquire the technology for many hundreds of years to come." Po informed him.

"Well, how did you get it?" Thomas snapped at Po.

"We brought it with us when we came to your world." Po said almost sadly.

"You mean you were not born here?" Ember asked as the rest of her comrades were milling over Po's last statement in their heads.

"No, I was born..out there." He pointed to the sky. "Near what you refer to as the Dog Star."

"Why did you come here?" Ember asked.

"We, my fellow villagers, are...were explorers. We traveled from world to world, star to star observing the wonders of the universe until our vessel was bombarded by...rocks and we crashed here. Our vessel was unreparable so this world became our home." Po's face was filled with sadness that hadn't surfaced for many, many decades.

"I'm sorry." Ember said feeling bad about asking what she thought now had been the wrong question.

"Thank you but my sadness is not for the place that is now my home but for the wonders I miss seeing."

"I hope you can build another vessel and sail back again, someday." Thomas told him.

"This is the Council Room, please be yourselves." Po waited until they had entered then followed them in showing them where they were expected to sit. Their chairs, if you would call them that, were positioned at the opened end of a huge horseshoe shaped table. Around the outside of the table, twelve Winter People sat on both sides, the center seat was vacant. Po quickly walked around the table and took that seat.

"We can now welcome you officially to our village." Po spoke. "It is indeed rare we have the pleasure of receiving humans as yourselves, most of our visitors enter here by our choice. The ones we don't want to see usually turn back their first day into the winter wall. Your courage shows your reasons to come here weigh far more than the price humans place on their own lives. For that, the Council will now hear those reasons."

"We are here to get that which my father concealed from the forces of Darkness." Duncan stood after he realized they were waiting for a statement from him or one of the others, he quickly decided the responsibility was solely his. "Those forces seek to discover them also. They have my father held as their prisoner in an effort to force him to tell them where the jewels are hidden. Once they have them, they will have destroyed the balance of Light and Darkness. The side of Darkness would then be capable of obliterating the forces of Light like a snowflake on a hot ember. The world would be theirs, shortly after that, the universe."

"Our only chance, your only chance, the world's only chance and your home world's only chance is that I find all the pieces of the jewel and the pieces of his armor in which my father placed his powers of Light to help me battle those Forces."

Duncan sat and watched as the twenty-five members of the Council whispered and talked with a hand in front of their dark blue lips. The debate was very noisy and quite agitated at times, one by one each member of the Council sat back and crossed their long blue arms and said nothing more.

Po looked left to the twelve white robed members then right to the remaining members and nodded.

"The Council has decided to allow you the chance to find what your father has hidden from both sides. They unanimously agree that you, being your father's son, will be the only member of your party allowed to look for that which you seek. You shall be on your own, without help from your friends or the Council. If you fail, we will help your friends return to the land from which they came, they will not be allowed to come here, again. We must remain neutral because of an oath we took when we arrived here, though our hearts are very sad from the desire to assist you."

"You and your friends can return to the quarters which you have been assigned. Unlike before, they aren't to leave without my escort, that is for their own safety. You, Duncan, can start your search when you are ready. Listen carefully, your father has placed obstacles in the paths that lead to your destination. These traps were intended to maim, kill and stop all that choose them! Your life is in your own hands once you start. We, the Council wish you well."

Po walked to the door they had entered then waited for them as the other Council members exited through another set of doors. Silently, they followed him back to the rooms where they had been staying, each wanting more from the Council meeting.

"I shall be in the same room as before." Po stopped, not entering their rooms. "Duncan, things are not always as they seem. You can be sure that the straight and true looking paths are the most dangerous. I can say no more." He walked to his room and closed the milky door.

"Why can't we help?" Ember asked. "It's not fair. It should be our choice, not theirs."

"Yes, I want to go, too." Thomas said.

"It's not going to happen." Duncan told them. "You will stay here with Graynor and do as the Council told us. It's their city..er..village and they should know what's best for everybody. I don't think I'll be long." Duncan walked out the door and nearly ran down the stairs.

"Good luck!" Ember, Thomas and Graynor yelled after him. Each wondered if he would return alive or would this be the last time they would ever see him?

Down the stairs, around the corner and he was outside among the buildings again. The air was warmer than it looked, nothing like the winter weather to the south. The sun was shining brightly and still high in the sky, casting short shadows against the white stones that looked like snow covering the streets. He had only a feeling as to which way to go, he walked northward, looking and hoping for a clue.

As before, there were no people in the streets, only the same fleeing shadows he would catch a glimpse of from time to time. There were no living creatures outside except himself but alone had been his way of life for all the years he could remember. The building ahead was three-sided but that wasn't what made it stand out in his mind, he could see the inside like he had been there before. This was the starting point!

The three sides offered but one door, a tall one the same color as the building, cloudy like watered-down milk and no handle. Why would anyone make a door and no way to open it, Duncan wondered? No, it's just not like the ones I am used to. It will be like the one that held the food locked away. All I need to do is find it. There! He nearly shouted. A small triangular shaped cut in the material next to the door. Duncan touched it, instantly the door slid open.

"It would be nice if it was all that easy." He said stepping inside and looking around. Three ways to go, he thought to himself, seeing the three triangular hallways. Without thought he started slowly down the

middle one, on the third step a panel opened, out came a metal arm yielding a sword. As he leaped backward, the sword streaked by, nearly ending his life. By instinct, he drew his blade and sliced the metal arm into two pieces as it swung at him the second time. Breathing deep and looking down at the shiny pieces that lay at his feet, he continued.

His sword felt different than it had before, it was pulling him toward the hall to the left. 'The sword knows the way then you don't', the words of his father echoed in his mind. Lead on, black blade, Duncan silently commanded the sword as his heartbeat slowed to just above a loud thumping in his ears level.

Right at the end of the hallway, into the middle of three more openings then down the stairs. Across the shining floor and back up a set of stairs then up another and off to the right. After what seemed like days, the hallway came to a dead-end.

"Which way now?" He asked the blade, this time there was no pull in any direction. He inched forward, suddenly the floor fell away almost under his feet. Duncan stared down at his toes on the very edge of what seemed to be a bottomless black pit. On the other side of the pit, a wall had fallen at the same time to reveal a wooden box trimmed in gold.

"That's it but how do I get over there?" He estimated the hole was several feet wider than he could have jumped with his horse. No handholds on the walls, he was stumped. "What did Po say? Straight is the most dangerous and things are not what they seem. It's not real!"

He stuck his right foot out over the pit as if he was going to walk across then he lowered it. Through the darkness, he felt slowly until he touched a solid surface underneath. The pit was only knee deep so he stepped in with his other foot and eased forward.

"The straight is the most dangerous." He said and turned to the outer edge. Slowly, a half step at a time he moved around the pit. After nearly an hour of feeling for the solid places to step, he climbed out and stood in front of the box.

Taking the sword, he drove the point into the floor and picked up the box, setting it beside the sword. Kneeling on both knees before the box, he slowly eased open the lid and lay it back. Inside was a pair of leather gauntlets. Duncan picked them up one at a time, slipped them on and flexed his hands, making fists. He liked the way they felt.

Underneath of where he removed the gloves was a small velvet sack with a gold colored rope that was tied in a knot holding the sack closed. Untying the rope, Duncan poured out the contents into his gloved left hand.

"Beautiful!" He uttered as the violet jewel landed in his palm and covered the hallway with the violet light that emanated from within. As Duncan snapped the jewel into the black sword's hilt, that violet light ran like fire up both of his arms and engulfed his body in violet flames. He wanted to scream but could not as the jewel held him powerless forcing his mind open pushing its knowledge into his mind and flooding his memories like a raging river. It quickly became too much and he passed out from overload due to the racing images and words.

Opening his eyes, he found himself in the middle hallway next to the door by which he had entered the building. Sadness suddenly filled him. The jewel had given him the locations of each of its sister pieces except the last. It also told him of the power that was hidden in each piece of his father's armor. He knew

that he had seen his father his last time until he had all of the jewels and the power to rescue him while putting the Darkness in its place.

"Time to go." He told Graynor as he returned to the spire where he had left them.

"You should rest, first." Ember said. "The snow takes a lot out of a person. And it's plain dangerous to embark on a journey when you're so tired."

"I'll rest when it's over." Duncan snapped. He saw the hurt in her eyes and was immediately sorry. Good move, he told himself. "You're right, a little rest and then we'll start south again."

"I assume you were successful in acquiring the jewel?" Graynor asked.

"That and a bit more." He held up the gauntlets then lay down in the huge chair, covering himself with his cloak. "We're heading south when I wake up." He told them and closed his eyes, trying to sort through all his new memories until sleep found him.

It was morning the next day when Duncan woke again. He visited Po and informed him they were leaving, that time was running out for everyone. Duncan had a million questions he wanted answered about the Winter People and how they flew their ships? How long it took to get to their homeland? He asked Po if when this was all over if he could return and learn the answers to some of his questions. He was mighty happy when Po said they would be expecting him, and that he held more in his hands than just the power to defeat the Darkness but the power to help many others including the Winter People. Po accompanied him to the gate and said goodbye.

Duncan could still see him standing there as they were nearly out of sight. He wondered where the line between science and magic was drawn, and even if there was a dividing line.

By noon the winter winds and snow had died, the warm sun told them they would sleep beneath the open sky tonight. He knew Po and the Winter people were somehow controlling the weather, just how would be another question when he returned. His newly acquired memories told him they should enjoy the weather now. He knew in the days to come, the heat would beat down on them, trying to turn their bodies into sand and their bones into markers along the wayside.

Chapter Nine

Ember and Graynor had been worried about how withdrawn Duncan had become after retrieving the second jewel. They were worried that the Quest, Demons, his father being held prisoner and mother missing, were all too much for a young man to handle. Graynor told Ember he thought for a time Duncan was going to throw his hands up and run, calling it quits. But with each passing day, he had become more

and more his old self.

"I figure we've come well over two hundred leagues." Duncan said to Graynor. "What do you think?"

"Close." Graynor replied. "How many more? It's beginning to get as hot as the snow was cold."

"Couple of more days." Duncan looked into his memories. "We'll need to start putting in a good supply of water. It gets kind-of scarce in the Ghanty Sands, I'm told."

"I have heard you can cook without a fire. How are we going to survive a trek across those fiery wastelands?" Graynor asked.

"We still have the tent!" Duncan explained, "We'll stay in its shade during the day and travel at night. I can find my way through with my eyes closed."

"Just what here can hide the jewel?"

"In a place named the Deadstone Hills, we'll find a cavern, The Cavern of the Singing Serpents. They are the creatures that not only guard the red jewel but worship it as well. Seems father replaced their idol's eye with a new glowing red one." Duncan sounded like it was all an everyday event. "I dread trying to get in, find the original eye, exchange it and get out with my skin still attached."

"I seem to recall the Ghanty has a variety of deadly creatures long before you get to the center of its burning sands."

"Yes, but none that aren't killable!" Duncan was thinking about the gauntlets and looking forward to a chance to try them out but this desert was not the place he preferred to try anything new. He knew they would add unbelievable strength to his own and that strength was twofold more when used with his sword. "The sandsnakes and sandworms are the largest and most deadly creatures out here, that's the ones we'll need to watch."

"Everyone needs to be on guard at all times and never without a weapon capable of killing from a short distance, like a spear or lance." Graynor had no wish to tangle with any of the desert creatures, they were all of the most deadly variety that could be found anywhere short of the Pit. The Pit offered a better chance, at least you could feel those creatures, these if you felt them, you were dead. "We'll need to cut each of us a couple of long and stout limbs, some slender ironwood would be the best if we could cut it."

"Show it to me and I'll give it a try." Duncan hoped he could chop it. Ironwood was said to be stronger than steel and lighter than cane. That would make a fine spear if he could sharpen one.

"Right over there's a clump." Graynor pointed off to the side later in the day. "Its looks like a good place for sandsnakes, too."

"You three stay here and I'll go see if I can cut a few poles." He rode off to the ironwood stand, stopped and slid off the horse, wishing he had allowed one of the others to accompany him if only to hold his horse and watch his back.

He slipped on the gloves, drew the black sword from his back and swung. The blade passed through so easily, he nearly fell. Cuts easier than a pine sapling, he thought to himself and dropped a few more then started cleaning up the sides. As he tied a bundle of six, sharpened and ready to use, he saw something dart under the tall grass. When it didn't reappear again, he cut several more and began cleaning the sides

and sharpening their points. Two sparkles in the grass began growing larger between the ironwoods and its leaves. They were moving, straight toward him.

Stepping back nearer to his horse, he continued what he was doing. Suddenly, a sandsnake slivered in a blur right at him. Duncan dropped the stick he was sharpening point down and flipped it back into the tall grasses. As he tied another bundle together, it returned, again he flipped it into the grass and waited. Thinking it had retreated, he cut three more to go with the one he was now holding in his left hand and started for his horse. That was when he saw the sandsnake's reason for the little delay in returning, he had gone for help.

It had returned with a couple of its siblings and what must have been the grandmother of all sand snakes of the world. As the little ones took up positions in a semicircle around him, the larger one inched forward. Duncan hooked the two bundles on his saddle and eased the horse back. He thought she was never going to stop sliding her body out of the tall golden grass and ironwoods. When she did, he was stunned to see she was more than twenty feet long and a foot in diameter.

She could probably give the horse a good run before eating him and me, Duncan thought. Scare her, yeah, he thought. He bent his knees and stooped, picking up a handful of sand and stones which he threw at the large sandsnake. She remained undaunted, the three smaller ones however, attacked only to be flipped back into the ironwoods. That caused the largest one to rise upon its belly and sway back and forth. Its long slender tongue darting in and out its pale mouth. Somehow, Duncan knew that was her prelude to an attack and he didn't think he wanted to face her with the piece of ironwood he was holding so he dropped it and moved away from his horse.

Slowly, she lowered her head to the ground in Duncan's direction and cautiously moved toward him. Duncan held the black sword with both hands, looking from side to side for something to shield him or help kill the creature that was picking up speed as she came at him. Her mouth opened, revealing twin fangs the color of bone that sparkled in the sunlight but what shocked Duncan the most was the razor sharp teeth that also filled her mouth. They were for ripping flesh and muscle from bones, he was sure of that. He was also sure they weren't going to touch him if he had anything to say about it.

At the last possible moment, Duncan sidestepped her. As she passed by the black blade flashed back and forth faster than nearly any eye could follow. The first swing cut her head completely off, while the others chopped her body into several long pieces. Duncan was relieved she wouldn't get another chance as her head lay a half dozen steps past him, snapping and rolling, refusing to die.

Quickly, Duncan picked up the ironwood sticks, wiped the blood from the sword and climbed on his mount's back before the smaller sand snakes had a chance to do anything else.

"Let's get out of here, the native creatures aren't all that friendly." He handed an ironwood spear to each of them and quickly took the lead.

"Yes, we saw!" Graynor was the only one that answered. He moved up beside Duncan's horse and let them go stride for stride until the night was beginning to cool the air. When it seemed he could no longer control himself, he asked, "Do you know just how fast your hands and that sword were moving when you was chopping up that monster of a snake into pieces?"

"Like usual, I guess! Why?" Duncan wondered where his question was leading.

"I, nor Thomas nor Ember could even see them until they stopped. You were frightening!" Graynor answered with a shudder.

"I was frightening?" Duncan was shocked. "You should have been standing in my boots, I was the one frightened! Scared nearly stupid."

"I didn't mean we were afraid of you! I mean your skills are increasing by leaps and bounds. I'm certain now we'll have a chance when the time comes!" Graynor told him with pride in his voice.

"What's in this for you, Graynor?" Duncan asked candidly. He wondered why anyone would do the things he had told Duncan he had done and what did he hope to gain?

"I can't say." Graynor spoke so only Duncan could hear. "I could be out, doing what many people if they were in my place would probably do, drinking, having sex with every woman that came within two leagues of me. I could be out acting like a child instead of trying to help save the world from the evils that are about to befall it. The truth is..I miss your father and mother. I'm tired of closing my eyes and wondering if I'll open them again or whether I'll be killed by the very thing I want so much to stop."

"I miss my old life, the days that were carefree and simple. When I didn't worry about your father or mother or you, Duncan. I miss them so bad that I'm willing to fight Demons, face Trolls, winds and snow, sandsnakes, or anything that is thrown at me just to help get them back and to know that I can die in peace. And in my own time!"

Graynor looked at Duncan's eyes and added. "Is that too much for an old man to ask for?"

"I reckon not." Duncan answered. "Not too much at all!"

"Are we going to travel all night?" Ember's asked as her mare eased up beside them.

"No, we'll stop to eat and rest the horses a couple of times before morning then we'll set up the tent and stay in its shade until the sun is not too hot for us to go again." Duncan smiled at her.

"I don't know which is worst, being froze to death, cooked in the saddle or shaken by this horse until my hips are black and blue!" Ember told him.

"Don't forget about eaten by the beast." Duncan teased although he was concerned by her discomfort. "We'll rest in a little while! There's a water stop coming up, keep a sharp eye out for hungry snakes."

"You know, you sure have a weird sense of humor, sometimes!" Graynor shook his head, smiling at Ember's scowl.

"Indeed, he does." She dropped back to ride beside Thomas who had mule duty today and thus had his hands full.

"There! I knew it would be here." Duncan stood high in the stirrups, pointing south at the small oasis. "Let's go in slow and carefully."

Tracks of many kinds of animals were everywhere. If it required water and lived nearby then it had been here recently because this was the only water for over a dozen leagues in any direction. Duncan looked around and could see none of the ones watering now were the predator type, they should be fairly safe. Tonight, when the desert sun had set and the temperature dropped, almost every animal for leagues

and leagues around would come here to drink and eat.

"You watch, Duncan! We'll fill the skins and water the animals." Graynor said as he slipped off his horse. "I'll help with that Thomas!" He walked over to the mules and took part of the waterbags before heading to the water's edge.

"I hope that big ugly snake didn't have any mates that are out there looking for revenge." Duncan muttered as he stared at the slid-marks that came and left the area, a few were plenty big enough to accommodate a sandsnake of her size. I wonder why I keep calling it, her, he asked himself.

"Duncan, you going to let that horse drink or have you had a heatstroke sitting there?" Ember was standing beside him looking up with her hands cupped and shielding her eyes from the rising sun.

"Ah..What?" Duncan had been daydreaming as he watched the animals. "I'll water him." Duncan lead his horse to the edge and released his reins as the horse drank. He slowly looked the rare spot over, counting thirty-two palm trees and wondering what kind of bushes those were growing underneath them. Turning back to the way they had entered, he spotted company.

"They're back!" He yelled to the others, watching the three sand snakes coming down the side of a sand dune, the same one they had crossed to get here. Quickly, he went to meet them, giving the others a chance to finish filling the waterbags. Using the ironwood spear he flipped them back up the dune where they came at him again and again.

One step at a time he retreated nearly to the water's edge before stopping and flipping them into the water one at a time. Expecting them to quickly swim out, Duncan waited for them only now with his sword in hand. He would see to it they did not crawl out but once. Suddenly, the closest one disappeared then the other two, something in the water had sucked them under.

"Stay away from the water!" Duncan yelled. He was scared of whatever that thing was, it was large enough to grab one of them or the horses. "Let's get out of here." He pulled his horse away from the edge just as something huge beneath the surface swirled and splashed. A short distance away he climbed into the saddle and rode up the dune and around before continuing south.

"That was too close." Graynor said. "If not for those snakes, we would have never suspected anything was in that pool."

"And they might have woke it when Duncan threw them in." Ember spoke up.

"We'll never know," Graynor continued. "But we had better be a little more careful."

"This is not the forest." Duncan said. "Things here kill to survive and they're good at hiding, that's the best way to catch their prey. The better you can hide, the fewer times you go hungry. Everything out here is probably hiding, waiting on a meal, we need to avoid becoming the next one." Duncan liked the pool of knowledge he had acquired. If he thought about a subject, information was suddenly there about that subject but a lot of things were missing. It was like his memories stopped and continued on later leaving gaps. Gaps that he hoped would be filled as he found the other jewels and added their power to the sword.

The sandworms were one of those gaps, he knew the name of a lot of the creatures in the desert and what most looked like but not a sandworm. Without any idea if they could be driven away, avoided or

even killed, he and the others would have to rely on pure luck.

The next afternoon, the huge red sun was setting on the western horizon forcing the sky to change through a hundred variations of red, orange, yellow and countless other shades that Duncan could not begin to name. Those colors when added to the many earthy colors of the desert were nearly breathtaking. The desert's beauty overpowered the mind, causing them to drop their guard as their eyes darted from side to side, seeking, searching for more to fill and overwhelm their senses. With their minds elsewhere, the sandworm struck.

At first, Duncan thought it was a fallen tree, sticking out from a clump of the normal dried desert vegetation with sand blown up and across parts of it. They were almost upon it when Thomas saw its mouth open.

"Stop!" He yelled, pulling the reins of his horse abruptly to the right. His horse jumped quickly to the right, throwing him off balance and the rope that held the mules in line behind him did the rest. As the mules were slower to react, the rope caught Thomas across his waist and forced him out of the saddle. The impact knocked him out cold as he thumped flat on his back in the burning sands.

The others saw the sandworm only after Thomas' scream and had reined their horses to the side, also. They all saw Thomas hit the ground, watched and waited for him to get back up into the saddle. When he didn't move, Ember was down out of her mare's saddle and on her way to him only to be stopped by Graynor as Duncan kicked his horse's ribs and was racing to where Thomas lay stretched out like a ragdoll.

Duncan pulled up hard on the reins, leaning back in his saddle forcing the horse to drop his hind legs and scoot to a quick stop. Sand was flying as Duncan leaped from his horse's back, landing next to Thomas. Kneeling, he gently lifted his head, brushing the sand from Thomas' mouth and face. He's still breathing, Duncan thought as he caught the movement in the corner of his eye, which is a lot more than he'll be if we don't get out of here.

He turned his head to see the sandworm burying his own head about four feet from the rest of its segmented body. Close to four feet nearer to Duncan and Thomas, it surfaced again. Like a giant piece of thread, the sandworm's head pushed into the sand and out again as if sewing a piece of sandy cloth. Again and again, as it quickly closed the distance between them. Grabbing the sword from its scabbard, he knew somehow he had to get it to leave Thomas alone so he did the only thing he could think of at that moment, he ran toward the sandworm.

It stopped when its pointed head came up as Duncan, too, stopped. The shining mouth with circular rows of sharp teeth opened and closed as if tasting the air for his scent. Duncan noticed it had no eyes as he shifted his weight to his right leg, readying himself to swing the sword he had lofted above his golden head. The blind creature feeling the sands movement, lunged at the spot Duncan was standing.

The air screamed as Duncan's first swing cut the gaping mouth and part of its head from its body. Yellow fluid spewed out as the wounded creature slung its head from side to side, specks of yellow hit Duncan's gloves and began smoking. Duncan thought of retreating but the sandworm rose high again and thrust the injured head at him. Three swift strokes from the sword left large segments of the sandworm twisting and slinging more of the yellow stuff out everywhere. One drop hit Thomas' hand, he screamed as he regained consciousness and rolled in the sand. As Duncan turned and ran to him, another drop hit Duncan's left arm, Duncan too screamed as he dropped to his knees and grabbed a handful of sand, trying

desperately to rub the yellow glob off.

As he rubbed, the pain increased until he was nearly ready to blackout. Taking his short knife from his belt, he scraped the yellow stuff off, the pain remained. He was suddenly aware of Graynor standing beside him with a wineskin, he used it to wash the residue off Duncan's arm. Immediately, the pain level fell, Duncan could again stand.

"Thanks," He allowed Graynor to help him to his feet. "Let's see to Thomas."

Ember was pulling the yellow glob from Thomas as they got to him. Graynor poured wine on his hand, instantly the pain eased off and his face returned to near normal. As Duncan pulled him to his feet, he said, "Sorry, I wasn't watching the trail too good."

"Nonsense," Graynor slapped Thomas on the back, gingerly. "Seems you were the only one paying attention. If not for you, we all could have been killed by that thing."

"He's right." Duncan added. "I didn't see that thing lying there until you yelled. It's a miracle we're not all worm food. Are you able to ride, we need to cover a lot of ground before the sunsets and rises again?"

"Yeah, let me get a drink and find my horse." Thomas took the wineskin from Graynor and squeezed then handed it to Duncan.

"He's growing, Duncan." Graynor said as Thomas walked off to retrieve his horse and the pack animals with Ember's help.

"Yes," Duncan smiled as he watched Ember mothering over her younger brother. "And putting on a few muscles, too."

"He'll probably make a fine man if he lives that long." Graynor slowly climbed into his horse's saddle. "You take the mules for a while, let him catch his breath."

"How's he going to learn anything about perseverance and responsibility if you keep babying him?" Duncan joked as he mounted and rode over to where Thomas and Ember were waiting. "I'll lead them until you're at least breathing normally again, if you don't mind."

"I can.." He hushed and handed the lead ropes to Duncan and smiled, knowing Duncan was right. "Thanks."

"Don't feel bad, the day's not over, you'll get another turn before morning." Duncan joked and kicked his horse into the lead, thinking about how badly his arm had burned with just a drop of that stuff touching his skin. He was sure glad it had been only a drop, anymore than that and he felt he would have died. He looked down at the red spot still on his arm, hoping it didn't get any worse. It had already begun to swell and turn pink around the edge.

The rest of the day passed uneventful. At dusk, they stopped, watered the animals from the waterbags, ate a light supper of hard bread and soft cheese, rested awhile and continued at a slower pace. Duncan's arm and Thomas' hand had swollen half again as large as normal. Both had a slight fever that the desert night quickly changed to the chills.

Throughout the night, animals and other creatures passed by close enough to be heard and sometimes seen, nothing attacked them though. Duncan was pleased, he knew he didn't have the strength to fight

anything for very long. He doubted he could stay in the saddle until dawn but somehow he managed.

As the red-orange sun peeked over the eastern horizon, they stopped at the peak of the tallest dune around for leagues. Duncan and Thomas did what they could to help setup the tent, which wasn't much. After it was up, they barely managed to walk inside and roll out their beds before going to sleep leaving Graynor and Ember to feed and worry as they took turns at guard.

The heat of the day would have been unbearable if the tent hadn't had roll-up flaps on the windows all the way around. Graynor and Ember kept passing time by making their rounds to each of them. There, they would stand watching out over the shimmering sands hoping for a stronger breeze before moving to the next window. They were both happy that most of the desert's deadly creatures ventured away from their own shades only at night.

Ember was relieved when Duncan's fever broke by noon, Thomas' however didn't break until late in the afternoon. Both drank enough water to drown and both were soaking wet as if they had drowned.

Duncan took some clean clothes, waddled into the partitioned side with the animals and began changing out of the salt stained perspiration soaked clothes. He fell to his knees as he bent to slide his britches off. A cool hand grasp his shoulder and helped to steady him, Ember's hand.

"You shouldn't be.." Duncan started.

"Let me help you." Ember interrupted raising her eyebrows as she spoke. "It's all right."

Duncan was so weak he had little choice. She helped remove his shirt, poured water from one of the waterbags onto a cloth and washed his face, back, arms and chest.

"Here," She handed him the cloth. "You do the rest." Her face reddened a bit as she disappeared then was back when he had finished. As she silently helped him into his shirt and britches, her face reddened again. After hanging his clothes up to dry, they went back into the main room of the tent. Duncan wanted to put on the scabbard and sword but felt as if the added weight would topple him like a chopped tree so he dragged them across the floor.

"Try to eat something." Ember said as he sat. She handed him some stale bread, hard cheese and a full wineskin then knelt by Thomas, checking his head to see how hot his head felt.

"I sure wouldn't want to get very much of that stuff on my skin." Duncan said after a long pull from the wineskin. He noticed the spot where the yellow glob landed was crusted over by a scab and the area around it was not nearly as swollen as when he went to sleep.

"Thomas is cooling off, too." She told him, happily. Her relief plain to see. "He's going to be all right!"

"Good to hear." Graynor set up looking toward Duncan. "You going to be okay?"

"Yes." Duncan drank more of the wine and ate a bite of cheese on the hard bread. "Yes, I believe so."

"Good." Graynor was truly pleased. "You want to get some sleep and I'll keep watch, Ember?"

"Yes, if you don't need anything Duncan." She looked at him for an answer.

"No, go ahead." Duncan replied, happy that she had thought of him first. "And thanks."

She shook her head and added. "If Thomas wakes before me, wake me." She lay down next to her brother and was quickly asleep.

"Seen anything out there?" Duncan quietly asked Graynor as he moved from window to window.

"Not even a bug." He sat next to Duncan and drank some of the watered wine Duncan offered. "How are you really feeling?"

"Like I've been rode hard and put away wet." Duncan smiled weakly. "Really, not bad except I'm weak as a kitten."

"You should see if you can't go back to sleep and don't worry, I can worry enough for two."

"We should have gotten a little of the yellow stuff in something, it would be good to stick on your enemies." Duncan laid his head back and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the sun was closing in on the western horizon. Ember had cleaned Thomas up, he was sitting across from Duncan holding his hand on his forehead. He looks like I feel, Duncan told himself, really bad.

"How you doing, Thomas?" Duncan asked.

"Good, I guess." He looked at Duncan. "Let's not do it again, though, what do you say?"

"If you feel like I do, you'll have to feel better to think about dying." Duncan joked. "And no, I don't ever want to do it again. Think you can ride?"

"Yeah, you?" Thomas returned.

"I'm really not sure, Thomas." Duncan found the wineskin he had earlier. "I feel like my horse rode me."

"Me, too." Thomas shook his head. "But I think I can ride if I can find the strength to get in the saddle."

"I'll try if you will! I really don't want to stay in one spot in this desert any longer than necessary."

"Me, neither." Graynor added to the conversation. "Ember and I, we'll roll up the tent and get everything ready. You, two, watch out for the sandworms."

After everything was packed, they had helped Thomas and Duncan onto their horses, Ember looked at Graynor and said. "I sure don't look forward to fighting those worms with these sticks!" She shook her ironwood spear at Graynor and punched the mare's ribs with her heels.

"I wouldn't want to face her!" Duncan said as he kicked his horse.

The same good luck held that night as the one before, nothing attacked them. In fact, they saw fewer and fewer creatures as they moved farther south. Duncan thought of that as kind of weird but shrugged it off as good luck. The next morning, he would change his mind.

As the false dawn's light showed them more colors and shapes than the waning moonlight had, Duncan and the others began to notice the bones that lay scattered all around them. They had definitely wondered

into something's feeding ground, they prayed to be out before it returned to think they were it's next meal. From the looks of the bones, prisoners were unheard of here as the bones ranged from small to long, even several yards long with hundreds of ribs.

"Snake bones." Thomas uttered.

"Sssh." Graynor spoke softly. "Any noise may bring it here."

As quiet as mice stealing seeds in front of a sleeping cat, they went on through the graveyard, nothing moved. A few leagues later, they breathed a little easier.

"Let's get that tent up, the sun's burning my head off." Duncan broke the silence. "And we need a place to hide." He laughed as he slid from the horse and began unrolling the tent, thinking of the puny defense the walls on cloth would really be if they were attacked.

Chapter Ten

The heat was nearly unbearable their next day in the tent. Graynor said he believed they were lucky not to have been cooked or to have had a heatstroke, them and the animals. He also told them that maybe it wasn't from the heat but fear. The fear they had received passing through that boneyard and that fear caused their temperatures to rise.

"It's just plain hot!" Ember said, drinking from a waterbag. "But it'll be cool after while. You have to keep reminding yourself that when the sun sets the heat will go with it."

"How much farther, Duncan?" Thomas asked from the window where he was watching the trail they had made.

"A little ways from here if I am correct about where we are. You know, some of these dunes look alike." Duncan closed his eyes and tried to focus on the jewel's map, at least he thought it was contained in the jewel. "I want to leave you two," He pointed at Ember and Thomas. "Not far from where I need to go into the Deadstone Hills tonight."

"But..." Ember started to argue.

"No 'buts'!" Duncan said sternly, holding up his hand as if trying to stop a charging animal. "We'll have no discussion or pouting this time. Graynor said that legend has it that when you enter the Cavern of the Singing Serpents, you lose all control and wander about until you fall victim of the Serpents. They eat human flesh!"

"The only thing I know about the Cavern is the location of the red jewel and the way to keep from

hearing their songs. I like your company but still I will not risk your lives in the Cavern! Is that clear?"

"Yes." Thomas answered for the both of them. He knew Duncan was right but still he wanted very much to be with Duncan and do anything he could to help. Ember, he knew, just wanted to be with Duncan. She's in love, she says, the very thought caused him to roll his eyes. He hoped they could talk each other out of following Duncan or it might be a long night.

"Graynor, you will go with me until we get close enough to see the Cavern then we'll decide if you stay or go back and wait with Thomas and Ember. Agreed?" Duncan asked, hoping Graynor would go back and stay with Thomas to help keep Ember safe until he could return.

He nodded 'yes' and lay back against his bedroll, hoping nothing would go wrong. He could see the attraction growing stronger between Duncan and Ember. He wondered if Duncan would make the same sacrifice for love his father had, giving up the powers of a god. He doubted if Duncan understood what the jewels and armor were transferring into his being. Of the things he would be able to do and places he could go with that power if he could control it instead of letting it control him. At times, he too regretted the lost but this was not the time for remorse.

The Singing Serpents were rumored to have once been a nomadic tribe of desert dwellers that looked and walked upright like men but slowly they had lost their limbs as they grew to depend upon their bellies to move them about throughout the stone caverns. That or something to do with the singing they had learned and used to catch the food they required to survive. Why Ambrose had hidden a piece of the jewel here, he couldn't figure. Duncan's life might possibly end before morning.

They left the pack animals at the tent taking only their horses and water as they set out on the short trek into the Deadstone Hills. The sun had been gone down for close to an hour when Duncan and Graynor left Thomas and Ember on a large boulder high enough to offer them some reasonable measure of security and protection from things that might want them as the next meal. Thomas had untied the bundle of ironwood spears Duncan had cut four days ago and was sorting them. He looked confident in his job of protecting Ember, Duncan thought as he rode away.

The Cavern of Singing Serpents wasn't close enough to endanger Thomas and Ember, at least Duncan thought not anyway. He and Graynor tied their own horses to a small bush and walked quietly to a knoll where Duncan hoped they would be able to see the Cavern's openings. Both were fairly sure the pebbles Duncan had spent nearly an hour finding beneath the sand and covering with strips of thin cloth before pushing them into his and Graynor's ears, would stop the sounds of the Singing Serpents. Slowly, they eased their heads up over the stones between them and the Cavern, both wanted to run as they lowered their heads more slowly.

In the dim light of the moon, they saw what appeared to be the largest gold and black striped snakes in the universe, dancing. Duncan had thought the sandsnake he encountered earlier was the largest snake alive anywhere, he had been wrong. The ones he and Graynor saw dancing were four times that size. Duncan knew he could never live through a fight with one of those, they were the size of trees. That had been their bones he saw scattered in the sands with the other bones, but what could have fought these creatures and lived?

He pointed to where they had left the horses and eased off the knoll, praying they weren't noticed. He had no wish to die tonight.

"Well, do you see a way in?" Duncan asked when they reached the horses.

"I saw only certain death if you try to sneak in there." Graynor was clearly shaken. "How many did you see?"

"Eight large ones and probably nine or ten littler ones. We need a diversion of some kind." Duncan told him. "Did you see anywhere we might start maybe a rock avalanche?"

"No." Graynor answered worriedly. He knew Duncan had to have that jewel no matter what, even if he had to sacrifice his own life to give Duncan a chance to get it. "I could ride in there and then ride out as fast as my horse will go. Maybe they'd chase me and give you time to go in."

"What?" Duncan was shocked. "You'd be caught and killed in less time than I could snap my fingers. And then how would I get out? We need some help!"

"And just where are we going to.." Graynor's brows rose high. "No, Duncan. You don't even know what that thing is! It could kill us all!"

"We're for sure dead if we attempt to go in there and them things having their little party at the door!" Duncan was trying to keep his voice low as he untied and handed Graynor his reins. "Let's go, this place gives me the willies."

"Me, too." Graynor climbed in the saddle and followed Duncan to where they had left Thomas and Ember. Both were still sitting on the rock, watching as Duncan and Graynor rode up.

"Did you get it?" Thomas was first to ask.

"No!" Graynor and Duncan said at the same time.

"Why not?" Ember inquired, happy to see them return, anyway.

"No safe way in." Graynor answered. "About twenty of the biggest, ugliest snakes in the world, dancing and playing right in front of the Cavern. Damnedest thing I ever saw."

"Why didn't you just walk in there with your sword drawn and let them have it?" Thomas looked at Duncan, waiting for an answer.

"The odds didn't look all that good from where I was." Duncan smiled. The boy expects a lot from me, he thought to himself. "But I think I can find something to get them to leave me alone for a while, if you two want to help."

"We'd love to!" Thomas answered, ready to do anything Duncan asked of him.

"Wait until I tell you about it, then you might not be so fast to say yes." Duncan told him. Then he explained what he had in mind.

"You are crazy!" Ember announced, shaking her head in disbelief. "Can you imagine how dangerous a creature that feeds off those Singing Serpents must be? How are we going to get it to do anything?"

"Food." Duncan said.

"I've seen what that thing eats and short of our horses, we've nothing to offer!" Ember went on. "And I

sure as the Pit don't want to be the bait!"

"I would leave here before using you for bait! Leave without the jewel!" Duncan looked down at the ground, hurt to believe she would even think that of him. "I was thinking, it's possible we might trap and kill a few critters, the less dangerous ones and use them as bait to lure that creature into the area the Serpents were dancing. That may be enough to drive the Serpents away from the entrance to the Cavern and give me a chance to get in, unseen."

"Or at least cause a bit of confusion." Graynor nodded in agreement of Duncan's plan. He couldn't think of anything better and he didn't want to stay in the Ghanty Sands any longer than necessary, time was running out.

"I hope it works!" Ember said as she allowed Duncan to assist her in getting down from her boulder perch.

"It'll work, have a little faith." Duncan said, smiling as he looked at her face in the pale moonlight, holding her for any extra second or two before turning and remounting his horse.

Ember wanted to say more but couldn't, this wasn't the time or place. She wished it would come soon, there was so much to tell him. The desires she felt were rising along with her temperature whenever he touched her for even the briefest moment. As time had gone by, she knew she would want him more and more. She also knew she was falling in love with him, if only he would return that love. Climbing onto her horse, she rode along side him. He may have misunderstood but she would gladly die so he could complete his quest. Silently, she prayed it would never come to that.

The four of them rode out from that rock on what could only have been called a killing spree. Duncan had but one thing in mind, slay it quickly before it kills one of us. That left little opportunity for their prey to get away or the other's a chance to do more than watch. Thomas was still proud of the 'game' he shot before Duncan swift death struck. Within a couple of hours, they had what they considered more than enough bait, now came the dangerous part of Duncan's plan.

Riding back into the boneyard, Duncan hoped he was right about the way the creature there would react to the free food he was ready to leave it, if it was there. A sudden movement to his right nearly caused his horse to bolt from beneath him. A giant worm and snakelike creature had spotted him or smelled the dead carcass he was dragging. Duncan dropped one of the four ropes he was holding and turned toward the Deadstone Hills, a quarter of his bait was left behind him.

"Take it." Duncan said softly as he watched over his shoulder at the beast pouncing on the dead desert dog Thomas had killed with his crossbow. "Yeah!" He rode quickly dragging the other dead things behind him.

Duncan's horse was fast but the creature behind him was nearly faster, before he was a half a league the snakelike thing was only a couple dozen yards away. Loosening another rope and letting more food drop, Duncan was pleased and relieved as the creature again pounced on its catch. His horse, although tiring, seemed to sense the danger, he dug his heels into the sands and ran as fast as he could.. To Duncan's surprise, the creature didn't catch up again but he could see it was still tracking him by the blood trail he was leaving. Thomas was right where he had left him only a few minutes ago, Duncan dropped another carcass just to keep the creature interested and rode up to Thomas.

"I see it took the bait." Thomas said, sitting on a horse that looked large for a young man his size.

"Yeah and it's fast, too!" Duncan's horse slowed to a walk. "Let's go, I don't want that thing any closer than it is already." And they rode off together, watching over their shoulders as much as ahead.

Thomas was ready to drop his last rope as they spotted Ember and her horse standing on a high dune waiting and watching. Off to her right, something else moved, Duncan recognized its shape at once and spurred his horse.

"What? Where are you going?" Thomas yelled after Duncan. Then he too, saw and knew the shape.

At first, Ember thought Duncan was having some kind of nightmare then she saw what he was riding at with his sword held high and posed to strike. Then seeing the sandworm and the direction it was heading, she was to have been it's next meal. Suddenly, she was weak all over.

"Go!" Thomas was shouting as his horse carried him up to her. "He'll be okay, I hope. Go!"

Kicking the mare with both heels, Ember wheeled around and headed for Deadstone Hills where Graynor was waiting at the last leg of the relay. She saw Duncan's sword lash out as he passed the sandworm and rode on a parallel path with hers, inching closer with each stride.

"You all right?" He nearly yelled when he came close enough to be heard over the sounds of the three horses' thundering hoofs. Silently praying that his killing of that sandworm didn't cause the creature behind them to stop its 'hunt'.

"Yes, thanks." She returned, glancing over her shoulder to see the most hideous creature imaginable bearing down on them. Ember almost panicked and screamed but something told her this was what they were after. That thing was Duncan's only chance to get into the Cavern, she prayed to all the Gods she knew that it would work.

Duncan kicked his horse when he heard her answer and breathed a sigh of relief just knowing he had been in time. He hated to have to leave them but he had to get to that Cavern before Graynor led that thing in among those Serpents. He knew his horse was tired but it did as he asked. Easily, it began out distancing the others. In a few minutes, he was waving at Graynor as he rode past, stopping at the bush he had tied his horse to earlier with Graynor's. He patted the lathered horse's neck, thanking him for his effort in getting there then hurried, quietly, back to where he could get into the Cavern when the time came. There he waited.

The wait wasn't long. He had no more than caught his breath when he heard the sound of a horse coming nearer. The Serpents stopped their dance and began listening while hissing at each other. Graynor came into sight, the creature was close behind. Too close, Duncan thought as he watched Graynor swing around in a semicircle and loosen the ropes on his saddle, dropping the dead animals near the hissing Serpents. Graynor's horse caught wind of the snakes and shot out of there a lot faster than he came in, Duncan was relieved he was out safely.

The Serpents' hissing grew as they spotted the other creature. Then it saw them, all bets were off as to whether anything got out of the area alive. The Serpents all attacked the worm-snake creature at the same time. It grabbed the closest and began slinging them back with holes where it's great mouth clamped down on them. But the Serpents didn't turn tail and leave, instead they charged again.

Duncan ran from rock to rock, hiding, watching, running, hiding as he moved closer to the opening. Almost there, he said to himself, steadying his shaking body, he started to run. Suddenly, dead in front of him, one of the smaller Serpents landed, blocking his path. I'm dead, he thought as the Serpent twisted over, straightening its body and turning back to the fight. He stood still as a rock as it passed by him without a second glance. Duncan ran as fast as his legs would go far back into the Cavern before stopping and looking around to make sure he was alone.

He was alone, so quickly he moved to the rear left side of the Cavern and proceeded down a little used tunnel that would eventually turn back and end at the same place as the main one. He pulled the black blade from his back and held it aloft as its soft violet-yellow glow lit his way as clearly as the sun would have. With the light, the tunnel looked less threatening and Duncan was soon nearly running. He didn't want to be here when the battle outside concluded, this wasn't the place to spend too much time.

He slowed to a walk as his internal map showed him he was coming upon the vicinity of where the jewel was hidden. Quietly, he stepped into a great chamber lit only by his sword and the red jewel he sought. On the far side, stood a large rock that took on all the similarities of one of the Serpent's heads, larger than even Duncan's nightmares would have created. Its mere presence sent chills down Duncan's back. The thing was unnatural and yet there it stood. Duncan wondered if the Serpents, generations ago, carved that hideous head or if by chance found it in their wanderings and that was the reason they made this Cavern their home.

A noise startled him from behind as he stood looking up at its two red eyes, one glowing red. Quickly, he moved to the rear of the idol, replaced the sword in its scabbard and held his breath as he listened to what could only be scales of a very big Serpent. His heart almost stopped as he heard it stop, come closer and stop again in front of the head. He imagined seeing the thing's huge head staring down at him. The wet, forked tongue flipping back and forth into its wide mouth, the large red eyes gleaming. The pounding heart felt like it was going to explode. He needed to breathe but was afraid it would hear him. Finally, he heard its scales slipping in the direction of the entrance. Slowly, he took several deep breaths before moving again.

Feeling in the dark behind the idol, his fingers touched the small wooden box his father had left there almost a lifetime ago. Slowly, without making a sound, he found and lifted the lid. Inside he felt and found the bag with the replacement stone and the two pieces of armor. He knew what they were and immediately strapped them around each of his lower legs then he picked up the bag with the stone and went to the front of the idol. Using its wide, open mouth for a step, he pulled himself up to the glowing eye, popped it out with his short knife and pushed the other jewel in its place.

Down on the ground, he pulled his sword and stuck it in the cavern floor. Taking the red jewel in his right hand, he snapped it into the sword's hilt. Duncan, the sword and the room were covered in red light as the jewel transferred what it contained to Duncan's mind. He would hear the spells and chants of a hundred thousand years of discovering and feel the timeless power of his father's goodness pouring into his being. The overwhelming power of its energy forced him to his knees before slowly fading, leaving him and the sword covered with a new color of light to go with the violet and yellow, red. He liked the feeling it gave him, warm and happy.

As he became more aware of his surroundings, he noticed of the sound of hissing and scales sliding toward him. Grabbing his sword, he ran back the way he had come in, stopping only as he neared the entrance.

Listening quietly, he could tell the fight was still going on. Good, he thought as he again moved to the battlefield, leaving his sword drawn. From rock to rock, he darted, seeking a way across to the other side where his horse would help carry him to safety. Duncan leaped a dead Serpent as he went for another rock then he glanced at the worm-snake. He felt a tinge of sadness, the Serpents had bit and torn away large pieces of it but they too had paid a high price as their bodies were littered all around. Many weren't dead and were trying to crawl back into the battle. They fought well, Duncan thought as he ran to the spot where he and Graynor had watched the Serpents dance.

Resting for only a second, Duncan watched the battle, thinking the worm-snake creature was close to winning. Then suddenly, from out of the Cavern, half a dozen more Serpents emerged, screaming loudly in a high whistle and hissing as they attacked the worm-snake. That battle cry caused renewed vigor in the weaker ones and they too, swarmed their foe. The creature was going to lose, Duncan thought as he hurried back to his horse. He wanted to be a long way from there when they decided the worm-snake wasn't the reason the glowing eye had stopped glowing, Duncan was.

The horse was where he left it, he thanked whatever stars that were watching over him. A few minutes of hard riding and he had rejoined the others. They were all smiles as Duncan told them, "I got it but we may have trouble following us as soon as they sort it all out. Let's get back to the tent and see about putting a few leagues behind us."

"What makes you think they'll come out into the Ghanty searching for you?" Graynor asked doubtfully.

"Simple, they worship an idol." Duncan was paying close attention to the way ahead as well as behind him, he wanted no more surprises. "That means they think. Thinking means they may be able to reason some things out, like why we brought that critter to their party? Why doesn't the idol's eye glow any longer? Why was I in there to begin with?"

"They saw you and you weren't killed?" Thomas quickly asked.

"I think one of them did but shortly after it went back to fighting, the worm-snake creature grabbed it and I guess it was more concerned about staying alive than it was concerned about a puny thing like me." Duncan thought back for a second and shuddered. "They know my scent." He thought of the Serpent that came near the idol when he was hidden behind it. He raised up in the saddle, turned and stared for a long time at the way they had come.

"Maybe they're all dead." Thomas offered.

"I don't think so." Duncan silently thanked the boy. "The last I saw of the battle, the Serpents were regrouping and were near winning. I guess I became scared and got out of there as fast as my legs and this horse would carry me."

"You've been through what most would have run from a long time ago!" Ember said. She wanted to reach out and hold him, to comfort him, to tell him how brave she thought he was but she didn't dare in front of the others. "You went into that snake hole and got what you went after, didn't you?"

"Yes." Was all Duncan answered. His mind was reaching out ahead, then behind, looking for things that weren't there.

"Duncan?" Graynor spoke, his voice carrying over the desert sand like a cool breeze.

"Yes." Duncan replied, he was back on his horse.

"You need a bit of instruction before leaving like that, again." Graynor informed him. "A man can forget where he's at and become lost for the rest of his natural life. I'll help you understand more when we get a few minutes."

Duncan nodded his head okay and watched the sands ahead. They needed to get out of the Ghanty Sands as fast as possible! He knew the Serpents were smarter than they had first thought. They would come after him if or when they had the chance. The tent was coming into view, still standing, that was a good sign.

"Ready your weapons." Duncan said as he drew his sword and dismounted, the sword giving off an eerie glow in the predawn light. Slowly, he eased himself to the tent door and untied its flap, Thomas raised his crossbow as Graynor and Ember backed him up with their ironwood spears. Duncan carefully lifted the flap, Thomas' crossbow twanged as he had loosed a bolt, pinning a small desert animal that resembled a long-fanged fox to the floor. Duncan slowly eased inside after looking back to the others with an all-clear signal. Nothing else except the now dead desert fox. Moving carefully to the inner door, Duncan alone peered inside, it appeared empty.

"Come on in but watch for little critters." Duncan open the inner door, stepped in and picked up a wineskin, drinking deeply before passing it to Ember.

"Thanks." She quickly turned the wineskin up and drank, thirstily.

"Good shot, Thomas." He told her brother as Ember handed him the wine. He smiled, happily, hungry for Duncan's praise.

"The mules are fine." Graynor reported as he entered and took the wine from Thomas.

"We need to pack up and see how far out of this desert we can get before the heat forces us to pitch this tent and rest." Duncan told them as they were eating. Seeing their surprised looks, he added. "I know you're tired, I am too, but the sands of time are running out as we speak. And I don't feel too safe with those Serpents running loose We need to put what distance we can between them and us."

"Okay, but we're stopping if it gets as hot as it was yesterday!" Ember told him sternly.

"Probably a long time before that." Duncan returned as he picked up one of the packs and carried it outside.

Long before noon, the tent was up again and they were all inside trying to cool off. Duncan had taken the third watch although the others wanted him to rest. It gave him a chance to try out his 'mental walking' skills as Graynor called them when he showed him how to safely perform it. Duncan's body was inside the tent, awake and aware, but parts of his thoughts and being was outside in the burning midday desert sun. Although, he wouldn't feel the heat, he could still sense everything that was going on around his being, it felt strange and good.

He did just as Graynor said, at first. He stayed close to the tent, only moving farther out when he felt better about what he was doing. Farther and farther he went until he could barely see the top of the tent.

He walked back the way they had ridden from by deciding to follow the horse's tracks when he lost sight of the tent. Oh, he was feeling braver now. Then he saw them, two Serpents, side by side and steadily moving along side the horse's tracks as he was.

He tried rubbing them out with his feet, that wasn't so smart he decided when the sand refused to move. 'The others!' He yelled to himself and turned to quickly find he was back in the tent, the others were still sleeping.

"Wake up!" He shook Graynor, the sound of his voice arousing Ember. "Hurry, they're coming."

At first, they thought he was dreaming. Finally Graynor realized what had happened. They, the Serpents were heading this way.

"Do we have time to take the tent?" Graynor asked Duncan.

"I don't think so." Duncan tried to remember how far he had walked in the desert. The sun was setting but that didn't help because he couldn't recall where it had been when he started walking back using the horse tracks. "Damn it, Graynor I can't remember!"

"We had better clear out then." He returned.

"Couldn't I just go back and look?" Duncan asked.

"Yes, go on." Graynor replied. "We'll start packing."

Duncan lay back against the side of the tent, trying and trying until at last his mind started walking, following the horses' tracks. Shortly after he passed the point of not being able to see the tent, he could see the two huge Serpents ahead. As fast as he could, he made it back to his body.

"No, we don't have time!" He ran out of the empty tent to find the horses waiting and the mules already loaded. "They're just beyond sight." He pointed. "And they're using the horse tracks to follow us. We need to get out of here and do something to throw them off our trail."

"Water is our only chance!" Graynor told them as he mounted. "Duncan, how far to the nearest river or large creek?"

"Over a day's ride east!" Duncan helped Ember onto her horse then mounted his own. "Let's ride, those things are too much to fight out here in the open but if I can find a forest..." He left it unfinished as he kicked his horse and took the lead east, hopefully out of the desert.

Chapter Eleven

The bright orange morning sun found them as it had left them the evening before, on horseback, tired, nearly exhausted and painfully aware of what life in the Ghanty Sands was like. It was not the life anyone of the four would have liked to have endured but would if it was required again. Providing they got away from the Serpents that were following Duncan and the red jewel.

"How far Duncan?" Ember asked, wearily. Eleven hours in the saddle without setting down had drained a little of her normal springiness and almost erased part of her smile but she was learning how to sleep there.

"We'll be there before noon, I think." He replied as if he had doubts but if there were any, his were the only ones. The others had come to the opinion that if he said north went to the center of the world, he was right. It was uncanny how he knew the way through land that he had never visited or even seen a map, unless you counted the one in his head.

"Do you know if they're still following you..us?" Ember shook her head as if trying to force something unwanted from it.

"Yeah, I do, Ember." Duncan said solemnly. "I think they were appointed to bring me back in pieces with the jewel."

"We're going to have to work on your sense of humor." Ember told him, hoping she didn't hurt his feelings. He was becoming the focal point of her life, she couldn't bare to see him torn to pieces, not ever! Thinking about it nearly brought tears to her over-dried eyes.

"Just an opinion! Sorry if I struck a tender spot, I didn't mean to." Duncan dropped his eyes from her face, hoping she understood and would accept his apology.

"I know." She said softly.

Graynor glanced at Thomas, who was riding along side of him and behind the two of them. He was smiling, shaking his head. Thomas looked over at Graynor and continued, like what he was hearing, he didn't believe. In love, he mouthed at Graynor. He nodded, yes and shrugged his shoulders holding up his hands and arms like they were helpless.

They were growing closer, he had decided as he listened to them talk about one thing or another all night. He was beginning to wish for Ember to doze a little longer so he could rest a bit more himself. They had worn him out. That beautiful sun would soon turn into a burning brand, by noon they would wish they had fought for the tent he thought to himself. Graynor was beginning to feel his age, at least the age he looked. It was hard to keep up with those youngsters, he prayed in the names of good for the strength to continue.

"We'll take a break in a little while." Duncan told them. "Up ahead there is an oasis with maybe a few trees that will provide us a small comfort of shade. I hope." He added.

And as was the case with most of his predictions about the land they were going to see, he was right again. Before the desert sun reached its peak, they could see several palmettoes standing above the horizon to the east.

"I see them!" Thomas said excitedly. He, like the others, was tiring fast while exposed to the moisture-drawing sun.

"Be ready for anything." Duncan drew his sword and took the lead.

"The water hole is dry." Ember pointed out the low ground that once might have been a pond surrounded by the tall palmettoes.

"We might find some water if we dig a deeper hole." Graynor said as he slipped off his horse and made for the nearest shade after seeing nothing that looked anymore threatening than a few small flycatchers in the palm's leaves.

"I believe we have more than enough to reach the Fretting River." Duncan said as he, too, moved to the shade with his horse and a waterbag. After watering his horse, he helped Ember water the mules then sat down and turned the waterbag up to fill his own parched mouth. "I wonder where all the critters are, this seems like a great spot to spend a quiet afternoon sleeping.?" He leaned back and closed his eyes.

The others were too tired to respond to his question so in the silence, they all drifted into a peaceful slumber except for Thomas who played the role of a self-appointed sentry. Duncan's sleep didn't last too long, neither did the others. As he slept, he went mind-walking again. The Serpents were still following them and at a steady pace. Duncan's walk was only a little over a league, he figured.

"Let's go!" He stood and woke the others as he drank deeply from the waterbag.

"What's wrong?" Thomas looked up from his cooling shade where sleep had finally overtaken him.

"They're still coming!" Duncan pointed back to the west where they had come from only a short time ago. "The same two, just crawling right on through the burning sands at a pace that will bring them here in less than an hour. We should move on, I would as soon face the searing heat as have to fight one of those things right now."

"I think you could beat them." Thomas voiced so Graynor and especially Ember could hear.

"Thanks for the support but it's too..open out here." Duncan held his arms apart and gestured toward the desert sands. "If we can beat them to the river, the water may help us in hiding our scent. Or if I can get them into the forest, their size will hinder them so that it might make a more even fight."

"If, we can outrun them!" Ember handed him his horse's reins. "Let's ride! I've had enough of desert life for many years to come."

"Me, too." Duncan mounted his horse and took the lead ropes of the mules. "Thomas, you lead. Keep your shadow in front of your horse."

"Duncan, I need some of those leaves." Graynor pointed to the palmetto. "I remember the Holi Islanders made large hats out of them. I believe I can do the same, so if you could manage?"

"What?" Duncan stared up at the long leaves. "All right." He positioned his horse under the palmetto nearest him, took out his sword and jumped, cutting almost half the limbs from the tree's canopy. "Is that enough?" He asked as he handed them to Graynor.

"I believe so." Graynor wrapped part of the limbs into a bundle and tied them to one of the mules. The rest he took to his horse, mounted and said. "Are we going to stand around all day?"

Thomas lead until the sun was beginning to lose part of its strong effect on them. Graynor had weaved

each of them a wide brimmed hat out of the palm leaves, starting with Ember. Duncan felt some relief from the searing heat the second he placed it on his head, telling Graynor he should have made them earlier.

In the distance, they could see a greener horizon. The Ghanty was coming to an end and not a moment too soon. Duncan moved back into the lead and slowly increased their pace, he wanted to be at the river long before dark.

The desert sand didn't give way to the shrubs and bushes as quickly as they wanted. For more than two leagues the sand had fought and won before it was finally turned back. The long green grasses that were sporadic at first, slowly took charge of the land until it became a continuous lush green carpet that shared only with the taller, more slender trees.

"This way!" Duncan yelled as his horse stopped at an embankment near the Fretting River. "We'll go in here and go downstream to the south, come out and turn north. Hopefully, we'll lose them in the water." Duncan again took the mules and kicked his horse, forcing him into the shallow river.

For more than a half hour, they splashed, rode and swam in the warm shallow waters. It felt good to be able to reach down, take a handful of water and wash their faces as they rode. They stopped once, filling their waterbags, allowing the horses to drink and at the same time allowing themselves a playful moment in the precious liquid before resuming their forced march.

"We should find a trail not far from here." Duncan told them as he lead the mules from the river and up the bank on the opposite side of the Ghanty. "Northeast from here on out."

"Where to, Duncan?" Graynor inquired, dreading the answer.

"The village of Fromfar! I know where it is but don't know much about it." Duncan replied, almost unconcerned. "Do you know of it?" He asked Graynor.

"It's a community of Gnomes, Duncan." Graynor shook his head in disbelief. "You do know what Gnomes are, don't you Duncan?"

"No, but I hope they aren't going to be trouble." He returned innocently.

"They are small men, dwarf and ugly. Uglier than your worst nightmares! And the most important thing of all about them, they hate humans!" Graynor couldn't believe the different dangers Ambrose was putting his son up to face. He was definitely going to rake him over the coals when he saw him again. "They hate humans more than Trolls like to eat humans and fawns!"

"Oh.." Duncan grunted. "Why do they hate humans?"

"Something to do with human greed and their wanting the treasure the Gnomes guarded." Graynor said as he thought of what Duncan's quest was about. "And I doubt they'll welcome us when you tell them you're after a piece of a jewel your father hid there years ago."

"We'll worry more about them when we get those Serpents off our backs." Duncan replied, looking ahead to the forest that was thickening as they rode into its heart. "This is where we..I'll wait on them. You three ride on ahead and that'll make sure that if I can't stop them, you'll have a chance to escape to seek help elsewhere."

"But..." Ember began.

"Don't." Duncan dismounted and hurried to her horse, looking up at her troubled eyes, he said. "I think I can beat them! Here, where their size will be a curse instead of a blessing. But I need to be able to concentrate on them and myself. You will only distract me if I have to worry about them getting to you, too. What do you say to a quick bite to eat, together? Then you and Thomas can go on ahead and find us a good camp site for the night."

Ember stepped down from the stirrup, turned to Duncan and said, "You can't go on playing the lone hero all your life! One of these days, you will be at peace with the world then I'm going to let you have it, with both fists!" She walked to the mules, took some dried up cheese and long ago hard dried meat then she tossed them to a dumfounded Duncan. Pulling out a waterbag, she tied the palm hat Graynor had made for her to the pack. "I hope that's not your last meal." She turned her back to the three of them and wiped a tear from her eye.

"Don't worry, you're right to send her away but you should allow Graynor and me to stay and help you." Thomas said in a low voice so his sister could not hear.

"Thank you, Thomas." Duncan replied in the same low voice. "Your bravery far outreaches your years. If I keep you here, who will protect your beautiful but helpless sister and old Graynor?"

"They could..." Thomas stuttered seeking an answer.

"They will be your responsibility, Thomas!" Duncan placed both his large hands on the youngster's shoulders and leaned forward, looking him straight in the eye. "I can depend on you, can't I?" He asked.

Thomas swallowed and answered, "Yes. Yes you can!"

"Good!" Duncan slapped his back. "Keep a close eye on her. She might try to sneak back here and get us both killed."

"I will." Thomas smiled.

"What are you two talking about?" Ember demanded.

"Ah..I was just giving him some last minute instructions before you left." Duncan answered as he turned to find she was standing with one hand on her hip directly behind him, face red and near the boiling point.

"You two had better not be talking about me! I don't like it when people discuss things about me and I'm not included in the conversation." Ember arched her eyebrows and it was plain to see she was looking for a reason to stay. Duncan could see an argument would prolong their leaving and was not about to allow that.

"I was just telling him what to do, just in case." Duncan told her.

She threw the waterbag at him, stomped to her horse, mounted and said, "I'll see you later." And rode off.

"Women." Duncan said, aloud. Then turned to Graynor and Thomas. "You two go on. There's a wide, open field not far down the trail, you can see to the other side. One of you watch from there after you've

found a suitable camp and left Ember there. If you see one of those Serpents come out into the open, ride to the others and go as fast and as far as you can. Two leagues north then go east, there's a city about four leagues farther between the mountains. You may be able to find help there."

"Good luck, Duncan!" Thomas gathered the mules' ropes and mounted his horse, following Ember.

"Graynor, I'll try to be along shortly." Duncan told the gold and silver haired old man that still sat on his horse. "Take care of them and this. I don't want him to be snake food." He handed him his horse's reins.

"I will. And do be careful, I don't have a replacement for you." He smiled, kicked his horse and rode off leaving Duncan alone with the meat and cheese.

Moving off the path, Duncan leaned up against a large ash, cut a piece of the cheese and ate lightly as he let his mind drift. Back down the path and up the Fretting River he went, going back the way they had come. There! Just now entering the water, the two large Serpents were still on his trail but now they seemed confused. One wanted to go upstream and the other down, so they parted. Duncan watched as the smaller one went upstream and the largest came at him. He ran, his thoughts were to run and he did, back to his body to prepare his ambush.

Duncan's mind and body became aware of the spine chilling danger that would be there in less than a half hour. He was nearly trembling as he looked for a place to surprise the deadly Serpent. There, he thought, in that wide oak standing next to the path. If it would pass underneath, he could leap off that low branch and hopefully kill it before it knew he was even around.

He ran to the tree and looked up, it seemed like a good plan. Taking the bread and cheese, he placed them on the path just a few feet beyond the tree, hoping to use it to distract the Serpent for a second or two. After a long drink from the waterbag, threw it as far as he could off to the side then climbed the huge old tree to a limb about ten feet from the ground and waited.

His heart was pounding in his head as he reached his perch and leaned back, keeping as close to the tree's trunk as possible. Slowly, his pulse eased off in his ears and he could again hear the sounds of the forest. Several times he imagined he could hear the Serpent sliding closer and closer but it didn't appear. He wanted to go mind-walking but was afraid of falling from the tree or waking too late to catch the creature as it passed.

The sun was going down, the shadows were growing longer minute by minute as they moved along the sides of the path. Then, there it was! If its tongue hadn't flickered from its mouth, Duncan may have moved and given his position away. But he didn't, he didn't breathe or even blink an eye.

Muscles rippled as the creature inched forward toward the cheese and bread, its forked tongue flicking out faster and faster as it searched the air for scents. Duncan leaped, his sword glowing brightly as he swung it at the Serpent's neck, trying to sever its head. It moved slightly as it saw what was happening but Duncan had chosen his attack position well, the Serpent's head could only move until it hit the tree next to it. As it realized its mistake, Duncan's blade sliced through scales, muscles and bone, hot blood sprayed the ground. As the neck was nearly severed from the Serpent's body, the body jerked, twisted and rolled, yanking the head the rest of the way off. The Serpent's tail caught Duncan as he raised from the ground off buckled knees, he was knocked through the air across the creature's head and landed staring into its eyes.

As he slowly got up and turned around to get away from that hideous head, he found himself staring face to face with the other smaller Serpent. Smaller, he thought to himself, two grown men couldn't reach around its neck. Its mouth was closed as it weaved back and forth in a rhythmic pattern that suddenly stopped and the huge head moved slowly toward Duncan. As it stopped moving about three feet from Duncan's face, his arm automatically shot out, driving the blade through the thing's mouth and nose, ripping a gash that separated to form a bloody V- shape.

With a loud hiss, it drew back its bleeding head with the now open mouth up toward the sky standing more than two men high on its pale belly. Duncan stepped back and sideways, putting a tree between them as the head dived forward. He swung the glowing sword back and forth as the Serpent's momentum carried it beyond the spot Duncan had been standing, chopping muscle and bone as fast as he could. He had hoped one of his blows would hit a vital organ like its heart but his luck wasn't so good. Although it was in a great deal of pain, thrashing about tearing saplings out by their roots and breaking others, it didn't turn and suddenly attack. It slowly seemed to shake off its pain as it coiled, readying itself for another strike.

Duncan knew he had made a mistake, his vicious swings with the sword had moved him out into the open, the nearest tree was six feet behind him. As he started to lift his foot to move back and closer to that tree, the Serpent opened its mouth even more and struck again. Diving forward and slightly away, he twisted and stretched his body out, flying flat with his belly turned up, the black blade pointing at the Serpent's head. The sword entered its scaly head and as Duncan and the Serpent almost met moving in opposite directions, the blade cutting a deep and long line down its neck and soft underside. As Duncan hit the ground, the squirming mid-section hit Duncan, his left arm snapped as it tried to push the weight from his body. The weight increased and Duncan felt something inside his chest give-way, the pain from the arm and chest became too much. The breath was forced from his lungs with an explosion of multiple colors of stars and light. Everything suddenly faded to black.

He cracked open his eyes very little as he regained consciousness, praying he wasn't dead or in the belly of that Serpent. The hard time he was having trying to breathe made him feel as if that thing was still lying on top of him. The sky was dark and filled with stars. He could see the flickering reflection of a campfire on tree leaves to his right, the fire snapped and cracked to his left. A shadowy figure leaned close as he attempted to raise up onto his elbows, intense pain shot throughout his chest, his left arm throbbed forcing a cry from his swollen and stinging lips.

"Duncan." Ember's spoke quietly, dabbing a wet cloth to his forehead. Instantly, Duncan relaxed, he was alive at least. "Don't try to move, you're hurt but you'll be fine." She turned her head, Duncan could see her beautiful profile in the firelight. "He's awake." She said.

Duncan could hear the sound of feet, quickly coming nearer. Graynor and Thomas came into view, looking down, the happiness plain to see in their smiling faces.

"I thought we had lost you!" Graynor said kneeling next to Duncan's right arm. "How do you feel?"

"I'm just a little sore." Duncan told him trying to raise up again only to find out he was too hurt and sore to move much. And a lot more tired than he realized.

"Don't, I told you!" Ember scolded him like a child. "You have a broken left arm, more than one broken rib and a lot of bruises to go with a half a dozen or so cuts scattered all over your body. It's a

wonder you aren't dead, facing up to those big ugly snakes all by yourself." She eased a bundle of something he didn't recognize underneath his aching head, elevating it slightly so he could see better and would stop struggling to sit.

"Are they dead?" He asked.

"Yes!" Thomas said excitedly. "Blood, guts and body parts lying all over the place! Yeah, they're dead. Must have been some battle!"

"Not much." Duncan replied, his side hurt bad when he spoke or even to breathe. "How'd I get here?"

"Ember wouldn't stay put like you told her!" Thomas volunteered. "She was here one minute, walking and wringing her hands. And the next, she jumped on that mare of hers' and rode off like her back was afire. Me and Graynor yelling for her to come back but she paid us no mind. We took off after her and it was a good thing she did go after you, you were nearly dead. That snake had you pinned under it, mashing the life out of you. But we managed to get you out."

"Thanks." Duncan murmured. "How long have I been here?"

"This is your second night." Ember answered him as she patted his brow with the damp cloth. "We brought you here, to where you said to set up camp. Graynor set your arm, it's the small bone and then he wrapped it. We tried to wrap your chest the best we could. It'll be sore for a few weeks so don't plan on fighting any sandworms or Serpents till then."

"Graynor," Duncan spoke softly, trying not to hurt his chest. "Do you know a spell or something to heal me? We don't have time to stay put while I get better."

"No, sorry but I don't." He stared down at Duncan then looked away as if he was fighting a battle inside his mind. Then suddenly, he said, "But I do know of some herbs and roots that will help when a special spell is said! Come with me, Thomas." He stood and walked out into the dark forest with Thomas following.

"How are they going to see?" Duncan groaned to himself.

"It'll be dawn in a little while." Ember informed him. "Would you like to try some of my quail soup? It's really quite good."

"I don't think I can."

"But it'll be good for you, help build your strength back up." Ember insisted and got up to get him a bowl.

Duncan wanted very much to get up and sit by the fire, eat her soup while enjoying her company. He felt more for her each day and wished this quest was over so he would tell her how he felt. His eyes watched as she dipped the soup, gracefully she walked back beside him and dropped gently to the ground. With each spoonful, he wondered if the pain of his battle wasn't worth this care and devotion she was showing him. Maybe the situation wasn't as bad as he had first thought, he said to himself as he drifted to sleep with Ember softly stroking his golden hair.

When Duncan's eyes opened again, it was light. The sun was past midday, warm and bright. He was quite comfortable on his pallet of leaves and his bedroll. Near the fire, he could hear the others talking then he heard Graynor chanting a healing spell. Footsteps then moved to where he lay.

"Good, you're awake!" Graynor dropped to one knee and lifted his head, touching a warm bowl to his lips then pouring the liquid it contained into his mouth. Duncan wanted to gag the instant he swallowed, it tasted like dead things smell but Graynor said. "Try to keep it down or I'll have to give you more!"

As he drifted back to sleep, he wondered again, is anything worth this?

The fourth day of Duncan's recovery began a lot better than the third. The sun rose a cherry red causing an already beautiful eastern sky to be filled by cinnamon and orange clouds that would later turn gray and black. Duncan stood this morning, walked slow and unsteadily to a nearby spring Thomas had found while hunting for small game with his crossbow. Sinking to his knees, he began to wash himself slowly and cautiously, trying hard to avoid opening any of his wounds or tearing the scabs loose. Several times he had wished he had told Ember, yes, I need your help but in his vanity he had thought of only his manhood and there was no way he would allow her to see anymore of his weaknesses than she had already.

Since drinking Graynor's stinking concoction, his chest and arm felt increasingly better with each passing hour. Talking was much easier now, so was sitting and just breathing. Today, he said to himself, we continue. Walking back to camp, he decided that he might even be able to slip his black sword and scabbard across his back, he felt naked without it's reassuring touch.

"I believe I can ride today." He told the others as he returned to the fire where they were sitting, acting like they were busy when in fact, all their eyes were glued to Duncan. Each one was ready to jump if he even bobbed like he was going to fall.

"No!" Was the answer from all three at the same time. Their faces showing very little surprise in his determination to be on the road.

"Yes, we need to go!" Duncan sat on a piece of wood that had been cut for the fire and accepted a piece of meat that looked sort of like it came from a lizard. Tastes okay, he thought. "We've been here too long already! Graynor, of the three of you, you should know how important it is that we get to where we need to be and retrieve the jewels. The scales are leaning toward Darkness, I can feel it in my bones!"

"For days now, we've not been visited by any of the Demons from the Pit, not since the one that Po and his friend send away at the Crystal City. Do you know why? Because someone or something's power is building! I can feel it growing, Graynor. I felt it at Damar but now it's like a shadow of poison spreading across these lands. The evil is here! And I can't sit around like an invalid and wait for it to consume me!"

Graynor nodded his head up and down. "I can feel it, too. But your life is too important to risk until you're well again. But I know you though, you're your father's son and you'll do what you must. Thomas, help me saddle the horses. I pray we're doing the right thing!"

"Duncan, I don't agree with you either." Ember's voice sung to him. "But I, too, will follow you into the Pit if need be, just don't push yourself harder than you can handle. When the time comes, you'll need to be the best a man can be! Be ready! Let's pack up."

Chapter Twelve

The afternoon sky turned out to be as bad as Duncan felt sitting atop his swaying, stumbling and bouncing horse. Cool rain fell from the dark gray sky, feeling good as it cooled him from the fever that had followed since he woke after his fight with the Serpents. As the day passed, the rain turned cold. That coldness didn't stop even after they found shelter for the night in an old barn that looked as if it might fall on top of them by morning. Although, they had gotten a fire going quickly, it was plain to see Duncan was worse. He had a bad case of chills.

Ember was as mad as she was worried, hovering over him like an old mother hen. She told him 'I told you so' a least a dozen times. Duncan expected to hear it in the afterlife, if he had one. "Drink this." She held more of the vile tasting soup Graynor had made for him to his mouth and forced him to drink.

Whether the bad dreams he had that night were because of that foul tasting liquid or just accompanied the fever, he couldn't say. The Serpents that followed them from the Ghanty Sands, had company in his dreams, not just the desert critters but trolls and what he assumed to be Gnomes. All of them fought to keep him from his mother, who was to be their sacrifice by knife point at the hands of the man Duncan thought to be Janax Nerbo.

Nerbo laughed at Duncan as he fought to win his way forward. Laughed as he stood with the long shining knife over Duncan's mother, who was helplessly bound by her slender wrists and ankles, spread eagle on a black and large well-worn flat table rock. Duncan could see her trying to scream through the gag that covered her mouth. He fought harder, standing atop of the dead to swing the beautiful glowing sword of death.

Serpent, Troll, Gnome, sandworm, sandsnake or human, it mattered little to the black sword, it chopped most of Duncan's opponents completely through with one stroke. Bodies piled up quickly building a wall that encircled Duncan and kept him from getting to Nerbo. For hours it seemed, he fought, pushing and shoving, trying to force his way through. Then as he finally broke their lines, Nerbo raised the knife high, laughing and drove the blade into Duncan's wide-eyed mother's chest.

Duncan was sitting on his bedroll, screaming when the others reached him, his face twisted from the terror and his entire body drenched with sweat.

"He killed her!" He told them over and over.

"Who killed who?" Graynor asked.

"Janax Nerbo! He killed my mother!" Duncan said, nearly in tears. Suddenly, he saw Graynor and the others then realized it had all been a dream but it had felt and looked so real. The blood, the bodies, his

mother he thought as he lay back pulling the bedroll up under his chin, shaking from fright.

"You're fine." Ember felt his head, checking his temperature and finding the fever was gone. "You just had a bad dream. You'll be okay."

"It was so real!" He said, thinking back, remembering the whole chain of events.

"The fever probably caused it." Ember said as she rubbed his wet hair through her fingers, hoping to speed its drying time and give him what little comfort she could.

"It's close to dawn, time to see if we can find something to eat, now that the rain has stopped." Thomas spoke up.

"How about another bowl of my wonderful Soup?" Graynor asked.

"No, that stuff is probably what caused my bad dreams and not because of a tiny fever." Duncan joked. He did feel better this morning. His head was still a little dizzy but he didn't feel the weakness in his muscles that he had yesterday. His chest and ribs had a tinge of pain but nothing like the throb of the past three days. He sat forward. Still okay, he said to himself, leaning forward and getting to his feet. "We should be able to cover a lot of leagues today."

"You're not serious, are you, Duncan?" Ember demanded, clearly upset.

"Yeah, I feel okay." He turned to her and stared at her glowing face in the dim firelight. "I'll tell you if I start to feel bad or get too tired but we have to go on."

"You're too hardheaded to see that you're taking a big chance of becoming sicker!" Ember raised her voice to make sure he understood she cared what happened to him.

"I know, but what has been set into motion, will not stop and wait until I feel better. It will run its course unless I'm there to stop it or at least change it's direction." He placed his hands gently on her shoulders. "Trust me." He asked of her.

"Do you trust yourself?" She returned.

Duncan couldn't answer that question. Knowing what was at stake and if he was forced to, he would forfeit his life if that was what was required to set the scales in balance again. He shrugged and stepped away, retrieving his sword from the mule, he slipped it across his back feeling dressed for the first time in days.

Following a rather small breakfast, they headed northeast, again. The winding trail took them through the tiny farming village of Larma which supplied them with some flour, dried meat, fresh cheese and several skins of really good wine in exchange for a couple pieces of gold no matter where it originated. Duncan was surprised that although they distrusted the travelers, they were still willing to tell them of the misfortunes that had befallen some of the towns and villages farther north.

Seems, first, their crops had faltered, yielding very little and in many cases nothing as they completely died. People and animal food had to be bought and brought in from other farms outside the area. Then the stored food and feed spoiled, what wasn't eaten by mice and rats. More food was sent for but by then a lot of the people were dying from some kind of disease instead of hunger. Duncan and the others were warned to avoid those towns and villages or they risk getting the same things as those people living there.

From the way their deaths were described, it sounded like a painful way to go.

After thanking the people for their kindness and generosity, they continued north toward Fromfar, grimly thinking of the Darkness that seemed to be sweeping through those towns ahead. Both, Graynor and Duncan were convinced that Nerbo and the forces of Darkness that he had committed his life to were behind it. They would do all they could to throw obstacles in Duncan's path but just how did they know where he would be going? He nor Graynor had a clue to that answer.

In the days that followed they met travelers heading south, fleeing the hunger, the disease and the craziness that accompanied the two. People that were hungry would do things that people normally didn't. People that feared sickness would also do crazy things to prevent that sickness from spreading to them or their families. The stronger usually won no matter what and that was enough to drive the sickness or disease out into lands that would have otherwise been safe.

As in every case of meeting strangers, Duncan's group kept their distance. The four had become leery of those that might have carried the diseases or those that came looking for a chance to steal what few possessions they could take by brute force.

From the amount of dead that littered the sides of the road, the dangers of traveling this road were becoming increasingly clearer. After what was their seventh day on the road since leaving Larma, Duncan told them that he believed that they should try another trail that might offer them more security. In agreement, they left the main road and proceeded through the forest and across open fields that were once fertile farmlands. Now nearly all the farmers were gone, either dead or having fled with their families in fear.

"Do you feel it?" Duncan asked Graynor quietly so that Ember and Thomas couldn't hear.

"Yes." He replied softly, looking around from saddle of his horse. Something from the Pit was definitely out there but it wasn't like the Demons that he or Duncan had encountered before. No, this one was filled with great Darkness.

Duncan had felt the evil presences a long time back. It was like the fringe area of a terrible storm. Sometimes, it was real strong and then a half a league away, it was like it had never been there. Now, though, it was like the pure Darkness of the Pit. Both, Duncan and Graynor sat up in their saddles, evermore alert.

"I believe we have found the cause of all the people around here's trouble." Graynor whispered as he leaned forward to pat his nervous horse. "I think something else has discovered us, Duncan."

With a simple flick of his hand to his horse, Duncan signaled for Thomas and Ember to move closer and be alert. Duncan's arm was still sore but healing quicker than one normally heals, thanks to Graynor's 'soup' and the power held in the jewels. His chest and ribs were completely healed and felt as good as before his encounter with the Serpents. He relished the thought of a little exercise with his sword.

Movement in the bushes to their right was followed by the sound of footsteps running farther north. Thomas readied his crossbow at Duncan's nod, Ember shifted her ironwood spear into a defensive posture, watching their sides and to the rear very carefully.

"Come out of there, now!" Duncan demanded. He slid the sword from his back.

A thin half starved young woman slowly stood and timidly inched to the front of the bushes, looking like a scared animal that didn't know whether to run or to stand its ground. She was tall, with long brown hair that was matted with dirt and leaves. Her face, arms and hands were covered with scratches, both old and new. She was definitely running from someone or something.

"I'm sorry," Duncan told her. "We thought you were bandits waiting to ambush us. Is there anything we can do for you?"

"Food!" She answered, quickly. "If you have some food, you can spare."

"I think we might find you something." Duncan said sliding down from his horse as he returned the sword to the scabbard. "I'll have a look. Ember, you want to help me?"

"Ah..Sure thing." She dismounted and joined Duncan at one of the mules.

"Don't touch her or allow her to touch you. We don't know what disease she's may have or be carrying." Duncan said, in a low voice so the girl couldn't hear. "Try to get her to talk. Find out what's chasing her or what she's running away from, if you can."

"Okay." She took some dried meat, cheese and bread to the girl. "Here." She carefully handed her the food. Watching how fast she ate, Ember decided the girl hadn't had a bite in days. "Where are you headed to?" She asked, causally.

"As far away from Roth as I can get." Biting hard into the meat, tearing it off like a wild animal.

"Roth." Ember said. "Is that where you're from?"

Yes, she nodded, watching the others for any sign of a threatening move.

"Is that onto the north?" Ember continued to question her gently.

"No." She pointed. "Toward the sun in the mornings."

Ember nodded. "You have family there?"

"Yes..NO! They're all dead, now." Her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"They died from the disease?"

"Yes, and murdered!"

"People do funny things when they're scared." Ember tried to comfort her.

"They were sacrificed by the priests of Darkness because they wouldn't worship to the Lord of the Pit. His Demon and followers rule Roth now in his name." She looked around nervously. "They're after me!"

"You're safe now." Ember tried to calm her fears. "No one's going to hurt you."

"But they're like hounds on the hunt! They stay on the trail until they catch you and then bring you back to be sacrificed on the rock."

The rock! Duncan was just listening till then, now chills and beads of sweat broke out all over him. He remembered the rock where his mother was tied and killed in his dreams.

"Why don't the people fight?" Ember wondered aloud.

"They did, at first. Then slowly, they were killed or put under some kind of spell and are now minions of the Dark Lords." Her eyes grew suddenly large as if she had seen something she feared a lot. Several arrows flew past her. She turned pale as a bolt from a crossbow passed through her neck and fell to the ground several yards beyond, blood gushed from her tiny mouth and nose. Eyes open, she slumped at Duncan's feet.

"Take cover!" Ember yelled at Thomas and Graynor, who had seen the girl fall and were rushing to see about her. Duncan had joined her as she found cover behind a large tree.

"See anything?" He asked, holding his sword tightly in his gloved hand.

"No, I didn't even see where those arrows came from." Ember replied looking carefully around the tree. "Did you?"

"I thought I heard something as it hit but I'm not sure. You stay here, I'm going to sneak around and try to surprise them." Duncan belly-crawled away from the tree.

"Try to leave one alive to questioning" She whispered after him.

Slowly, Duncan made his way beyond what he thought was crossbow range and began making his way back to where he had started. He discovered where the arrow had come from but not the shooter nor any friends he might have had. They were either long gone or hiding out deeper in the dense woods.

"Let's go!" Duncan said as he joined the others.

"What about burying her?" Ember asked, surprised at his sudden coldness and disrespect for the dead girl.

"And who'll bury you or us if they come back?" Duncan took his horse's rein. "I'm sorry, Ember but we can't although I would like to!" He climbed into his saddle and rode off slowly waiting for the others to catch up.

"Who do you think they were?" Thomas asked, breaking the long silence.

"Those 'followers' of the Dark Lord would be my guess." Graynor answered. "It would be wise to avoid the city of Roth."

"Yes, for now." Duncan said, solemnly.

"Duncan, it would take an army to go into to a city that the Dark Lord has given unto one of his Demons. You're not strong enough to go up against that kind of power." Graynor told him quite sternly.

"Not yet!" Was Duncan's soft reply. He knew he could beat the Demon but to get to it, he would probably have to fight hundreds of people that were under the influence of the Darkness, innocent people that were being forced to do the Dark Lord's bidding. Just let him get at that Demon without his slaves to back him, the Darkness would welcome the Pit after that meeting!

No one or nothing else approached them the next five days of their journey. The feel of the Darkness diminished as they circled well beyond Roth and the Demon that Duncan not only wanted to punish but

to send into the Pit so deep that time would end before it could see anything but the darkness that it wallowed in.

On their sixth day, the trees thinned to reveal the deep yellow waters of Amber Lake. It was as breathtaking as the stories that had told for centuries and as deadly as any known poison.

"On the northern side, we'll find Fromfar." Duncan looked at the deadly waters that splashed the yellow beaches. "We'll stay in sight of the lake but this is as near as you want to get to it."

"Yes, I've heard its water, sand and even the plants that grow as far as you can see, are poison!" Graynor interjected. "I wasn't in the mood for a bath or a swim, anyway." He turned his horse away from the lake and looked around.

Duncan moved his horse next to Graynor, stopped and said, "There's one group to our south and another west. They've been there since before we stopped."

"You know, you re getting pretty good at that! I only felt the ones to the west." Graynor smiled at Duncan, proud like a father for a maturing son. "They must be Gnomes. There's that hint of magic about them."

"Think they'll attack?" Thomas asked from behind them.

"They don't like humans but I don't think they'll show themselves until we get closer to Fromfar." Graynor pushed the gold and gray streaked windblown hair back from his aged face. "Then they may kill us all to keep us away from their village or for fun."

"Let's go and get it over with then!" Duncan told them as he once again assumed the role as leader.

Not once during the day as they skirted Amber Lake, did they see so much as a hint that they were being watched by many eyes most of the time. The Gnomes were being very careful not to show themselves and Duncan, too, was careful not to lead the others close enough to provoke any particular group into attacking.

As dusk slowly made its move to replace the sun, many long slender trails of smoke stringing skyward began to become visible in the distance.

"We had better stop for the night." Graynor told Duncan and the others. "It'll be a few hours longer before we can reach their village if that's where that smoke is rising from and I for one, have no desire to go riding in there after dark."

"We'll move deeper into the forest, away from the lake's poison." Duncan replied, turning his horse west and into the denser vegetation. Instantly, he felt the sudden movement of many Gnomes coming toward them. "That may have been a bad move, they're coming nearer."

"Probably so they can see us better in these trees." Graynor shifted his spear to his right side then saw Duncan was watching him. "Just in case I'm wrong." He added.

"This small clearing is probably about the best place we'll find." Duncan looked around then slipped down from his horse and walked the perimeter with his hands on his tired aching back, trying to walk the stiffness out. "I'll help you with that." He told Ember when he saw her beginning to unload the mules.

He picked up his horse's reins, walked to the small group of trees near the center of the clearing and tied his horse where Ember had tied her own with the mules. Quickly, he helped her unpack and feed while Thomas and Graynor started a fire.

Duncan nor the others saw more than an occasional limb or a couple of leaves shake as the stars and moon took the sun's place in the now midnight black sky. Nor did they hear anymore noise than the usual background sounds in the woods at night. The Gnomes were very good at spying on the humans. Those without Duncan's or Graynor's abilities would never in a thousand years have known they were being watched from all sides.

After supper, watch was divided between Duncan and Graynor, they both thought it would be better if they knew the movements that were going on around them. Duncan took the first half of the night, Graynor would get the latter. The night was quiet for the most part, the Gnomes made very little in the way of movement then just before dawn, Graynor shook Duncan's shoulder.

"They've surrounding us completely." Graynor spoke barely above a whisper. "I'll wake Thomas and his sister, you keep watch." And he crawled off.

Duncan wondered what he ever did to deserve this as he slipped from beneath his warm bedroll out into the foggy and chilly predawn air. Crawling over to a large maple tree for cover, he eased up against it and let his mind reach out but before he could look past the clearing, Graynor broke his concentration and the silence.

"Here they come!" He said, loud enough that only the three of them heard.

Duncan's instant reaction was to jerk the black sword from its case across his back. The scraping of the blade slipping free of the scabbard must have been heard by every Gnome in the forest. A cry sounded that would have curdled the blood of the bravest warrior. Duncan and the others wanted to run but there was no place to go.

Slowly, the Gnomes moved closer, the circle was shrinking with each passing moment. One by one, they began showing themselves as they stepped nearer and nearer. Thomas and Ember stood back to back, twisting, not knowing which one to face first. Graynor joined them, hoping to add to their strength. Duncan stepped into the clearing, if they wanted to fight when he would oblige them but he first needed room to maneuver his deadly blade.

At a distance, the Gnomes looked like chunky little men but as they moved closer, Duncan and the others could see their features more clearly. Their heads were large when compared to the rest of their, maybe three feet high, bodies. Their skin was rough-looking like tree-bark with deep lines from their thick dark hair to their short turned-up noses. Their short thick legs were bowed at the knees and covered by short leather britches. Duncan nearly laughed watching them walk. Their arms were definitely a match for their legs, short and muscular with stubby fat fingers that were rough and dark.

As Duncan shifted his stance, one of the older looking stepped forward, notched a tiny arrow in a bow made of black wood, took aim at Duncan's chest and said,

"This land belongs to the people that have lived here and protected it for thousands of moons, you are to leave! Humans abuse what the Mother gives forth, you are not welcome here with your Darkness."

"We oppose the Darkness!" Duncan answered unafraid in a voice that was strong and loud. "We seek

only that which will help send the Evil back to the dark place it belongs. The people of Fromfar have that which we seek, give it to us and we will finish our quest and the battle for peace!"

"You seek the treasure that we, the Asiur has been entrusted to watch over. Death to any that will try to take that treasure!" He loosened the arrow at Duncan's chest.

Being caught by surprise, Duncan could offer no real defense in the way of deflection of the arrow except to twist sideways, hoping to dodge it. As he turned, the arrow grazed the breastplate and bounced harmlessly away. More prepared, he lifted the black sword, the clearing blazed with colors as Duncan's sword deflected more than fifty arrows the Gnomes had fired at him. Ember's scream caused Duncan to turn to help protect her, Graynor and Thomas were pushing bodies back with their long wooden spears. Duncan watched as one Gnomes trotted forward, grabbed Ember and flipped her to the ground then placed a knife to her throat, his intentions very clear.

"NO!" Duncan yelled. The fighting stopped as all the Gnomes, Thomas, Graynor and Ember looked at him. "If you harm her, I swear that I will lay waste every one of your blood, from the old to the young. I will end your service to the Mother of All! By the name of my father, Ambrose, this I swear!" Duncan raised his sword to the sky and the air filled with the colors that radiated from it and Duncan.

Suddenly, every Gnome there turned and ran, screaming names and making runes on their chests with their short fingers as they left the clearing. He was astonished. Did they take that threat that serious, he asked himself, although he had meant every word.

"You should never curse anyone in your father's name!" Graynor reprimanded Duncan, his face red with anger. "Just where did you learn his name?" He demanded.

"I don't know, it just came to me when I said it!" Duncan put his sword into the scabbard.

"Don't you ever use it like that again, even if we are all about to die! His name demands respect, not the idle threats of a boy!" His anger plain to see.

Duncan suddenly stepped in front of him, looked him straight in the eyes, his eyes like ice and his jaw muscles quivering. "Those were not idle threats! I meant every word I said, their history would have ended if they had harmed Ember, or Thomas or you! That I know as the truth! I would have destroyed them, the choice was theirs! I'm relieved they chose to run. It would not help to balance the scales if they had chosen otherwise." Duncan turned, went to his horse and began saddling it.

As the sun peeked over the horizon, they rode out of the forest and toward the Gnomes' village of Fromfar. Duncan was still very quiet. Ember was happy he had saved her life, again, but she was sad that Graynor was so upset with Duncan and had spoken so harshly with him. She knew Duncan respected him and cared as much for him as he would have his own father.

When Graynor moved in beside him as they left the forest and tried to say something, Duncan angrily said, "I do not make idle threats!" Then kicked his horse hard in his flanks and was suddenly in the lead, way out beyond the others.

Chapter Thirteen

Why did I get so angry at Graynor, Duncan asked himself as he rode ahead of the others on their way to the village of Fromfar. But.. Thoughts filled his head but he still couldn't figure it. The only thing he could say, he was afraid for Ember. His affection had clearly grown since they had first met. He wished for a safe place to leave her but then considered nowhere as safe as with him and Graynor. He knew the old man liked her too. Also he knew Graynor would help protect her and Thomas. He was sorry he had spoken harshly to him, he would tell him so.

"They're waiting." Thomas pointed at the Gnomes standing around nervously watching as they entered the village. "Indeed they are." Graynor spoke to Duncan for the first time since leaving the clearing. "This should prove to be most interesting."

Allowing the others to catch up by slowing his horse, Duncan said to Graynor, "I'm sorry. Heat of the moment, I guess."

Graynor shrugged his cloaked shoulders and replied. "Let's hope the moment is past."

"Any idea what's in store ahead?" Duncan inquired, standing in his stirrups to relieve his tired and aching body.

"Some kind of discussion." Graynor informed him. "Gnomes have the reputation of becoming overexcited at times. Watch your back."

As they rode closer and started through in between the Gnomes, Duncan noted they were moving in behind the horses, closing off their retreat. An older Gnome, much like the one that talked to Duncan earlier, stepped out in front of the horses. Duncan noticed the wolf fur complete with head the Gnome used to cover his own head, it was ragged from age. The Gnome's chest was covered with beads of bone, rock and stone, Duncan thought a few of those charms looked much like human teeth.

"I am Towaka, elder and leader. I ask you to join me at the Forever Flame although my children say you will come even if I do not. The tribe will listen to what you say. What we decide will be law." He waited for Duncan and the others to dismount and turned, expecting them to follow.

The other Gnomes kept their distance, staying a dozen or so yards back from Duncan and his companions, their distrust and fear clearly shown. 'Tribe?' Duncan found himself asking, no, more like a troop of soldiers. Each Gnome was armed with some kind of weapon, from short knives to long spears and everyone looked as if they owned a tiny black bow. Duncan knew that they had more arrows than anything or anyone could fight, even his sword.

Towaka lead them down a trail deeper into the woods. A trail that was clean and well kept from frequent use it seemed. After a little more than a half hour of walking, the trees gave way to a large flat clearing with a huge round wooden house standing in the center. Wisps of white smoke slowly drifted skyward from a hole in the roof. Towaka pushed open the two large doors and walked on in. Duncan and

the others found it necessary to tuck their heads and duck down or bang them to enter.

Inside, they watched Towaka climb three steps up to a small dais and take the single bone chair that sat there facing the center of the house. A circular pit glowed and flamed from the center of the room like nothing they had ever seen. The rest of the room was filled with large flat stones that circled the fire, leaving open the area from the dais to the fire. Duncan and the others walked to that clear area because from Towaka's expression, that was what he expected.

Silently, Duncan waited until the other Gnomes, mostly the older and strongest looking, filed in quietly and took their places, each standing next to one of the flat stones. Towaka nodded and they sat down, all looking like they wanted to speak but kept their silence then he stood.

"Why have you come to our village, man-child with golden hair?" He demanded of Duncan.

"I come for that which my father left here in your care many seasons ago, the green jewel that holds the power to aid in putting the Darkness again where it belongs." Duncan told him plainly, hoping the truth was the best plan.

An immediate loud murmur of opposition arose from the on-looking Gnomes but with one upheld hand from old Towaka, they were silent. "You want us, the Keepers of the Treasures, to give you a piece of the treasure we would die to protect? You, man-child, the same one that threatened to curse my people and hunt them down, killing even the mates and offspring of Towaka?" Towaka asked, his wrinkled face red as fire with anger.

"I spoke out of fear! Fear for the one that one day may become my mate and bear my offspring. I ask that you understand that I would fight and die to protect her as you would your mates." Duncan glanced at Ember, her mouth was dropped open. Clearly she was surprised then he looked back to Towaka, who nodded for him to continue.

"I seek one piece of a larger jewel my father set aside to walk as mortal man. The forces of Darkness are growing stronger each day! Soon they will have the strength to squish us like ants under their feet and we will be no more! With the green jewel mated to its sisters, the side of Light has a chance to keep the scales balanced! Even with the jewels, I may fail and lose the battle but without it, all things will surely fall to the Dark forces!"

"Man-child," Towaka said sternly. "We have been the scorn of humans for hundreds of hundreds of seasons. They have hunted us, killed our mates and offspring just for what you call, sport. That is why we live here next to the Lake of Death. This is where humans will not come and build homes nor hunt the game for fear of dying. Why do you think we will help you or your kind?"

"A week's ride, seven days, to the south of here," He spoke in a voice was so loud that even the Gnomes outside had no trouble hearing him. "In a village the humans call Roth, a Demon from the very Pit of Darkness, sits like you do, in a great chair he calls a throne and he rules over all the humans there in the name of his Dark Lord. Go there!" Duncan shouted causing the Gnomes and Towaka to shy back from the crazy human. "If you have the power to feel the change in the Mother and you will come to fear that place and the evil that dwell there. You will feel the Mother's sorrow for the part of Her that is lost to the Darkness. You will know that the evil will not stop with the destruction of the humans and the Mother's land nor will it stop after you, too, are gone! It will only stop after it controls everything, every piece of Mother's land! All of it including that those lands my people live upon and that which your

people live upon!"

"No!" Towaka screamed.

"Yes!" Duncan screamed louder. "Unless I can take the stone and beat the Evil back into the Darkness from which it came!" Duncan looked around the room at the fear he had placed in a mostly peaceful people that wanted only to be left to themselves. For this he was not proud but he knew no other way. "We will wait outside for your answer, I will honor your decision but remember what is at stake here. Your future and the fate of all the world is in your hands, consider wisely." Duncan turned and walked outside, the others followed.

At the edge of the clearing, Duncan leaned against a tall poplar and slowly scooted down to the moss-covered ground as if he was exhausted. Inside the meeting house of the Forever Fire, voices cried out, some in opposition, other in alliance.

"You were superb, Duncan!" Graynor patted his back and joined him on the ground, Thomas next to him and Ember straight across from Duncan. Her face showed she had a lot to say but not here, not this place, not at this time but soon. "Your father would have been proud."

"What do you think they'll decide?" Young Thomas asked.

"I don't know but from what Duncan told them, I see they have little choice but to hand over the jewel." Graynor answered. "I hope." Long before sunset, Towaka, followed by more than two dozen Gnomes, some angry, others nearly smiling, exited the building and walked over to where Duncan and the others sat leaned back against the tree almost asleep. Duncan was the first to his feet.

"We have reached an agreement!" Towaka spoke as if he didn't like the taste of his words. "We agree that the Dark Lord is a threat to us, too. And that we are not strong enough to beat him in battle. We would be pleased if you beat him but we cannot give you what you ask."

Duncan's heart fell with disappointment. "I do not understand but as I said, we will respect your decision, we will go."

"Are you all crazy?" Ember shouted. "We've come too far to just give up!" She sat back down, buried her head in her arm-covered knees and sobbed.

"No!" Towaka said. "I did not mean you cannot have the green jewel! We will not get it for you. We have agreed that if the Mother says yes and wants you to have the jewel then you can but on your own. Alone!"

"Oh..Thank you,." Duncan was at a loss for words.

"You may be sorry if you agree to go after it." Towaka told him.

"No, not as long as it's not in the Poison Lake." Duncan returned, his heart happy again.

"No, it's deep inside the Mother with one of her daughters." Towaka replied, happy that Duncan was brave enough and dedicated enough to go after the jewel. The rest of his people would be pleased, too. "When you are ready, I will show you, alone, the entrance.

"Will it take long to get to where the jewel is hidden?" Duncan wanted to know so he could rest if it

was to be a long trek.

"Sunrise until sun is high above head." Towaka smiled. "Maybe not that long with your big legs."

"I'll eat first and then go, if that is all right with you?" Duncan could have set out at that moment but he hadn't eaten a bite of anything since last night and he didn't feel it would be safe to eat as he made his way to the green jewel.

"We will go back to the village and get some of the food we have in the packs." Graynor said as he stood. "I understand that we are to wait for Duncan's return?"

"Yes, he said the task is his alone and we will not allow any aid from you or the others." Towaka informed him as they walked back to the village together. "It was agreed that the Mother may see to allow success if there are more of you with him, and that would not be the test of true fate."

After eating the same dried rations they had been eating since Larma, Duncan and Towaka set out on a different trail, one that was known only to Towaka and one other member of the village. No one else could find it, that was for sure, Duncan told himself after weaving in and out, up and over trees, vines, briars and bushes for at least an hour. The way there was used very little from its looks. Duncan knew they could not have kept the cave's entrance a secret if the way there was marked by a clean path.

"This is the way in!" Towaka said as he pulled back sticks, leaves and moss to reveal a small entrance that went back as far as he could see into the side of a bank next to a small tree-covered hill. "There are many ways but only one is true, the others may lead to only death. The daughter that guards the treasure is not the only living thing in the tunnels, all can kill."

"How can I stop the Daughter without ending her life?" Duncan asked as he stared into the dark, moist hole.

"It is said that she can tell good and evil, I hope for your sake they are right. I know of no way to harm her." Towaka sat down and crossed his legs. "I will wait until morning before going back to the village. You will be back or dead."

"I'll be back." Duncan crawled in through the tiny opening.

Inside, the tunnel was enough room overhead he could stand if he bent over slightly. Within a couple of minutes, he was at the first intersection, both his options were as dark as pitch but he had brought his own torch. Slipping the sword from its scabbard, the tunnel instantly was filled with light from the sword and Duncan. He held the glowing sword out in front of himself, swinging it to the left then the right. The sword chose the left tunnel, Duncan walked quickly to its end and at the next intersection, let the sword choose again.

As he continued, he found himself in the dark several times as he crossed over to the other side by using hand-holes that he felt for in the dark with his memory as his only help. Other times, he continued with his back to the wall, slipping one foot then the other along ledges that a mouse would have had trouble with. More than once he had to swim, or wade through an underground river across to the other side, praying all the time nothing lived in the clear ice cold waters.

Finally, the tunnel opened up into a large room draped in huge dust filled cobwebs. On the far side, Duncan could see the small wooden box like the ones he had found containing the other jewels. It was

nestled among gold, silver and more jewels, gold and trinkets than he could have counted in weeks.

Not very well guarded if you ask me, he said to himself as he started to cross the room. I wonder, where is that thing they call the Daughter? Looking slowly around the room, he found her! Two pale red eyes were watching his every move from next to the roof of the room.

Damn! He cried to himself as he leaped back toward the opening he had just come through. That's the biggest spider I every dreamed of seeing! He stood there in the opening, looking up, just watching.

"How am I ever going to get to that box with you watching my every move?" Duncan sat near the opening and thought. Maybe I can use one of its webs as a rope. I could throw it over the box and carefully pull it to me.

"Too sticky." He said aloud touching the web material. "That will never work, why didn't I bring a rope?"

"What about.." He walked back into the tunnel to where the spider could never possibly reach and sat down, thinking hard. In a minute, his mind was walking across the dark room to the box, he was hoping to use the mind-walking ability to bring the box to his body's side of the room. The spider watched him as he slowly walked to the large pile of riches heaped high with the little box next to the stone wall. It can see me, he noticed. Quickly it lowered itself through the tattered web. As its legs hit the ground, it pounced on Duncan's mind-walking form. Duncan, surprised, ran with unbelievable speed to the tunnel entrance and watched as the spider, surprised too by the Duncan's disappearance, landed empty-legged in the pile of treasure.

Nearly laughing, he watched as the disappointed spider lifted itself back up to its lofty perch where it waited. Duncan slowly mind-walked to the pile of treasure again. The spider again leaped to where Duncan's form was standing, Duncan was at the entrance by the time it hit the ground.

Several more times, Duncan went through the same routine, the spider was slowing with each ascension till finally it sat there in the air and watched. Duncan walked a few more trips back and forth trying to get it to come after his form then he went back to his body and rested.

Walking to the entrance in his body, Duncan raised the sword and saw the box had rolled a little closer. As he started across the floor, something said, not yet, it's waiting. He went back into the tunnel and mind-walked again to the treasure, the giant spider leaped. As the spider hit the spot where his mind-walking form had just been, he was again standing and watching from the entrance. He was glad he had listened to the voice.

In his physical form, he walked back into the room, the spider was still climbing. Quickly, he walked to where the little wooden box lay, bent over, picked it up and moved carefully back to the entrance, watching the spider all the way. "Thank you, Daughter of the Mother." He said passing the point where it could reach him before stopping to open the box.

Kneeling, he lifted the lid. Inside, he found another piece of his father's armor. The pauldron, he somehow knew its name and use. It will protect my shoulders, he thought, placing it around his massive shoulders. Taking the only thing else in the box, the cloth wrapped jewel, Duncan opened it and snapped it into place in the sword's hilt. The tunnel filled with the most beautiful green light Duncan had ever seen as the jewel and sword throbbed with the green glow. His mind was overcome with the information

that flowed like a flooded river from the jewel and the pauldron. Duncan fell backward holding the sword letting it all flow into him.

Slowly, the green light dimmed to the same intensity as it's three sister pieces, the colors were beautiful but the knowledge was even more so. Two more and I can face Janax Nerbo and then the Dark Lord himself, Duncan thought as he stood. Holding the sword out in front of him, he began the long walk back out. He had a lot to do before he could retrieve the fifth piece.

"So, the Mother and her Daughter have smiled upon you today." Towaka said as Duncan emerged from the dirt-covered tunnel. "That is a good sign. It will show that the Mother trusts you and so may my people."

"Yes, I have no ill will toward any of the village." Duncan responded hoping to use this to his advantage. "The one I oppose is a destroyer of peace and those that want good, just ways for their people."

"That one is my enemy, too!" Towaka announced.

"Yes, he is." Duncan agreed. "He is an enemy to all of your people and all of my people. Him and his minions, I will fight until he is no more or I, myself am no more."

"Towaka and his people will also fight." Towaka told him proudly.

"The quest of the jewels is my responsibility alone." Duncan explained. "It is mine because I am my father's son. I am the only one who can wield the sword with the knowledge it takes to defeat the Dark Lord. But I can use your help if you and your people are willing."

"If you would have us." Towaka agreed to assist him rather quickly Duncan thought.

"I will explain as we make our way back to the village, and if you and your people agree then we will take a great step forward in putting the Darkness back where it belongs."

"Agreed!" Towaka set off back toward the village with Duncan talking quickly as they went.

"I see you were successful!" Graynor clasped Duncan's forearm and patted his back. "Two more pieces of armor and two more jewels then you'll be ready!"

"Yes," Duncan smiled, happy that two-thirds of his Quest was over. "But we have a small detour to make before we go after the fifth jewel."

"You're not thinking.." Graynor's eyes wide, half-filled with dread.

"We're going to Roth and send one Demon back to the dark reaches of the Pit!" Duncan stated firmly. He felt he owed that girl and her dead friends that much at least.

"We can't fight our way through the humans that the Demon has turned into servants and blind followers of the Dark Lord!" Graynor said, knowing to attempt so could be suicide.

"Towaka is going to ask his people to go with us, that is if you three are willing to go with me?" Duncan looked at his three comrades hoping they would confirm the commitment they had shown him for the past month.

"I'll go!" Thomas said, proudly. Although he was still but a youth, his courage was far beyond his years.

"And I." Ember spoke softly. Even though she wasn't the soldier type, Duncan was pleased with her bravery. It was far above some men he had known. He prayed he could protect her the way he thought he could.

"I, too, will accompany you, fight and if necessary, die to protect you but I don't see why we should go to Roth instead of directly for the other two jewels." Graynor made it unanimous but also made his opposition known to the others. "And what happens if the Dark Lord shows up while we're there?"

"We'll assume he's already been there from the ways the Demon's has power over the town's people. Just pray he doesn't show up until after we've freed the people, sent the Demon back to the Pit and put a lot of leagues between us and Roth!"

"Come, you will be guests of Gumpas! He is next eldest and also next wisest in village. You will rest in his home until after village decides go or not." Towaka lead them to a small wooden hut almost at the edge of the village. "Stay inside until after we decide, no harm will come to you if you go out but some in village not happy that Mother smiled upon you and may tempt her hand to spite.

"We understand." Duncan said, allowing the others to go inside first. "Thank you." He told Towaka and ducked inside himself.

Seeing the fire burning in the center of the tiny hut, Ember said, "We should have brought the food and the cooking pot, I could sure use a hot meal."

"Me, too." Graynor answered as he took a cross-legged position before the fire, holding his hands out to relieve a bit of the chill the three of them received as they waited with their 'guards', the Gnomes.

"I'll go..." Thomas started to volunteer.

"No! You heard what Towaka said." Duncan told them. "I'm wanting to taste some of Ember's good food, too, but I wouldn't chance breaking the thin peace we've managed since this morning. When the meeting is over, we'll cook."

"Yes," Graynor agreed. "An arrow in the back is not the price I'm willing to pay for something hot." He removed the bag he almost always carried beneath his cloak and handed each of them a piece of dried meat. "This'll keep your stomach from your backbones and ribs, for a while."

Taking a piece and sitting down in a circle around the fire, they all chewed slowly and quietly, thinking about what they would be facing in Roth.

"It is agreed!" Towaka opened the door to the hut. "Tonight we will dance and eat good. Tomorrow we go with you humans and fight the Darkness that dwells in the village to the south! With Mother's help, we will drive it far from our lands! Darkness will know the Asiurs will not be pushed from our lands. That we are to be as the Mother allows, free!"

"All right!" Duncan stood and walked over to where he stood. "Together, Darkness will dread our names!"

And the party began.

Chapter Fourteen

The next day began with the moans of Gnomes starting to stir as the predawn light seeped through the cracks in the wooden hut where Duncan and the others had fallen asleep after half a night of eating and drinking crocks of Tersa. Duncan became suddenly aware that he was still breathing. His head ached and throbbed with each beat of his heart. The Tersa had intoxicated him beyond anything he could remember. It tasted a lot like a fermented grain drink he had known as 'homebrew' but it should have been poured out and not given to the living for consumption. One drink of Tersa and they sure didn't know when to stop. If they had not ran out of the stuff, Duncan honestly believed they would still be drinking. Maybe that's why the Gnomes only made so much at a time.

Struggling to sit, he kicked both, Graynor and Thomas then nearly stepped on Ember, who he noticed was lying at his side as he stood. He couldn't for the life of him remember why or how she came to be sleeping at his side? Stumbling over to the smoking coals that had been last night's fire for heat, he sat on the earthen floor again and began trying to pull on his boots. The smoke made him remember last night when he was feeling like he could go for days and not sleep. Oh, my head, he thought, watching as the others woke feeling just as bad as he did.

"Dying a slow, painful death could probably feel better." Graynor grunted as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"You know, maybe we are dead!" Thomas told him. "I don't ever remember feeling this bad when I was alive."

"And I hope I never do again!" Ember sat up looking around the hut. "Who put me here?"

"I did, I think." Graynor told her. "You were talking about going back to your father's house and killing the woman that lived there. I think you were sitting under your horse hollering 'gitty- up' to the top of your lungs."

Duncan and Thomas laughed, Duncan grabbed his head, even his eyeballs were sore. Still, Ember's adventure was funny.

"Don't you laugh." Graynor glanced at Thomas as he lay back down on his bedroll. "You, I believe, were making googly eyes at some of the female Gnomes. Made quite a stir among them as I remember!"

"Well," Duncan squinted at Graynor. "What did I do? Must of been something good, I sure can't remember."

"I believe you were right in the middle of an outlandish tale about giant snakes, large enough to eat a

horse then you just fell over and started snoring." Graynor informed him. "I don't know what they laughed at more, your unbelievable stories or your snoring! Gnomes don't snore you know? Something to do with the size of their nose holes, I would say."

"It's a wonder I'm not still snoring, I should be." Duncan stood up and staggered out of the hut looking for a spot to relieve himself. He wasn't the only one headed out to the woods in the predawn light. The Gnomes were also, though they didn't seem to have the same aches and pains as their human counterparts. They were probably use to it, Duncan thought as he made his way back to the hut of Gumpas.

Something didn't feel right, something other than the throbbing head, the sore eyes and aching muscles. Something that he hadn't felt for days was back. Something inside of his thoughts touched the Darkness, the evil was spreading, coming this way!

"Let's get packed!" Duncan said as he hurriedly poked his head into the hut where his three suffering companions were passing a wineskin around. "Does that help?"

"I believe it does, somewhat." Graynor tossed the wine to him.

"It's heading this way!" Duncan said then squeezed the wineskin with his head tilted back.

"What's coming?" Ember asked.

"This sure feels like the very way to lose your balance and fall flat on your back." He offered them the wine back. "The Darkness that rules Roth."

"I was hoping that feeling was due to the Tersa." Graynor said. "Looks like we'll be forced to fight or make a big detour around Roth, if that's the way we were heading."

"Around the other side this time then into the city!" Duncan replied, hoping he felt better by the time the fighting started. "Let's go pack, I have the feeling we'll have to fight our way there."

"What about something to eat?" Ember asked.

"You go ahead, if you can. That's not what I feel like doing right now." Duncan turned, walking to where the horses and mules were tied. He was feeling a little green just thinking about food.

By the time he had his horse saddled and had helped with the pack animals, the entire village was bustling with Gnomes preparing to leave. Duncan had wondered what, if anything, they would ride? Then he saw, wolves! The largest and blackest wolves that Duncan had ever seen and the Gnomes sat astraddle of them looking like soldiers that you might have seen in your dreams, or your worse nightmares.

Across their backs they carried their tiny ebony warbows, a quiver full of arrows and what Duncan guessed was a lumpy bedroll that was probably filled with food. Duncan tried to imagine what it would be like to ride a wild wolf, without a bridle or saddle, able to run like the wind.

"Duncan." Ember was touching his bare arm sending chills all over his aching body.

"Yes?" He turned and met her sparkling eyes.

"They're ready, aren't they?" She asked wondering where his thoughts had been. Wondering if she was

in those thoughts.

"Ah..Yeah, let's mount up." He answered and pulled himself up into the large horse's saddle. Oh, he thought, this isn't going to be a good day for riding. I'd feel better if I'd just go ahead and puke, then die.

"I have two riders out looking for trouble that may come to us or that may hide and wait for us to come!" Towaka raised his voice from about ten yards away.

"Scouts!" Duncan told him. "Your people ready?" Duncan appreciated the knowledge that Towaka showed of horse fears by keeping his wolf away. His horse was still a bundle of nerves, worse than when the Serpents were trailing them.

Yes, he nodded.

"Let's go then." He kicked the horse's flank and rode southeast once again, Towaka at his side. Behind them was Thomas, Graynor, Ember and close to two hundred Gnome warriors riding their wolves. Those wolves alone would have struck fear in the hearts of most but the 'followers' of Darkness were not the general public.

When the sun set, they were still riding and the sick and evil feeling of the Darkness was getting stronger. The sun rose the next morning through the gray clouds to find them stopping for a short break to rest the horses and mules. Wolves, they learned, could go for days before stopping for anything other than food. Tonight, they agreed to rest for a while then ride until just before dawn, that would put them only a short ride from Roth.

Through Ember's insistence the Gnomes agreed to use only blunt arrows to knockout the humans they were discovering on the roads instead of the razor sharp flesh piercing ones they normally used for hunting. After tying them securely, they left them under trees and brush or whatever cover was available, the Gnomes promised to come back and release them once the Demon of Roth was banished.

The closer they got to Roth, the stronger the evil felt and the more they encountered the demonic crazed 'followers' of the Dark Lord. Several battles resulted in the loss of quite a few lives by the 'followers' of Darkness, most of those were by Duncan's blade. Graynor and Duncan feared those souls would be delivered up to the Dark Lord and then he would know something was amiss on the outskirts of Roth.

Duncan though was looking forward to sending the Demon back to the Pit and freeing the humans of their bonds. What he wasn't looking forward to was an unwelcome fight with Janax Nerbo or maybe the Dark Lord himself. He saw the Demon as only a small problem but he didn't believe he was quite ready to go hand to hand with Nerbo and for sure not his Dark Master! Even with five pieces of the jewel, he knew he couldn't take the Dark Lord but Nerbo could be easily be destroyed. He shook his head, trying to shake off the thoughts of anything but casting out the Demon.

"We'll rest till dawn in the low gully ahead." Towaka jarred him back to reality. "The 'scouts' say it is big enough to hide all of us."

"Great!" Duncan responded, wondering if someone would have to pry him from the saddle he had been sitting in all day and nearly all night or if he would just fall to the ground as soon as his aching feet and legs tried to carry him.

The scouts had a few small fires burning as Duncan and the others rode down into the gully. Duncan tied his horse to a treeline and removed the bedroll. He silently helped Ember feed the mules and his own horse then unrolled the bedroll beneath a large pine and fell asleep as soon as he closed his eyes to rest.

"Duncan." Thomas was shaking him by his shoulder.

Go away! He wanted to shout. Come back tomorrow or the next day!

"Duncan, wake up." He insisted, shaking Duncan harder.

Duncan cracked one eye. "I'm awake, okay? Now, let me go back to sleep."

"They're waiting on you." Thomas told him, patiently. "They caught a 'follower' close-by and they're waiting on you before asking him about the city."

"Why didn't you say so?" Duncan teased the young boy as he tossed his covers aside. "Let's go." He saw Ember had been lying only inches away from him, still asleep after his and Thomas' voices cut the crisp morning air. She is beautiful, he thought as he added his bedroll to hers' then nodded his head for Thomas to lead.

The 'follower' was sitting cross-legged beside a large fire that burned near the center of camp. Both of the man's hands held by rope that coiled around his upper torso then played out as it wrapped around his feet. Except for the ropes, he was covered in black, his shirt, britches, cloak and boots, much like a priest or assistant priest of the Darkness. Duncan stopped and studied the man glazing into the fire with black, inhuman eyes that showed no emotions at all. He didn't even acknowledge Graynor's presences as he asked one question after another.

"He's not very talkative." Duncan said to Graynor as he stepped across from the man, placing the fire between them.

"Seems to have no will of his own." Graynor returned. "I think a cup of soup should loosen him tongue."

Duncan nodded, touching the hilt of his sword. The glow that surrounded Graynor almost blinded him, the intensity seemed to grow as the number of jewels in the hilt grew. Turning his eyes to the other man, he could see only a faint glow.

"He's not all bad, Graynor." Duncan informed his friend. "I'll try asking him a few questions while you prepare your 'soup', if that's all right?"

"Go ahead." He stood and dusted himself. "My soup leaves you feeling worse than Torsa and for a week or longer."

"Hey!" Duncan raised his voice to the stranger, he didn't even blink. Duncan drew his sword, the sword began glowing, the colored lights spread all over him. The man looked up from the fire, the fear of death in his eyes. He heard the murmur and fear of the Gnomes who were close by watching.

"What's your name?" He asked the man.

"Tudo." He answered with a look of fear.

"Do you live around here?" Duncan didn't know what to ask.

"In Roth." The man told him.

"Do you have a family?"

"Yes, I do now." He said it like he was proud but his face didn't change expressions.

"How many is there in your family?" Duncan hoped he was doing it right.

"Over three hundred."

"That is a big family." Duncan was at a lost. Ask what, he wondered. "How long you been in the family?"

"About two weeks." He said.

"Who leads the family?" Duncan thought that was a good question.

"The one that is at the Dark Lord's side, the Faceless One. And sometimes another but I don't know his name only that he is the Dark Lord's right hand."

"If I say for you his name, could you remember if that is it?" Duncan asked hoping to say, Janax Nerbo.

"No, I have not heard it."

"Where does the Faceless One rule from?"

"The Great Room of the castle."

"Is he always there?" Duncan hoped to learn where the Demon stayed, day and night.

"No, only on nights of the Bloodflow." The man answered slowly and with dread filled words.

"What is Bloodflow?" Duncan asked.

"When a maiden gives her life blood to the Dark Lord." The man squirmed.

"When is the next Bloodflow?" Duncan wanted that Demon really bad.

"Tonight, one hundred and sixty-nine maidens will join in the ceremony with the Faceless One."

"Why that number?" Graynor finally spoke.

The man didn't answer.

"Why that number?" Duncan asked for him.

"That is thirteen times thirteen, the Dark Lord's number. With that many Bloodflow maidens, this land will become his forever!"

"Just what is a Bloodflow?" Duncan turned to Graynor, fearing the answer.

"Sacrifice." Graynor said grimly. "Living, human sacrifice." Graynor turned and stalked angrily away.

"How many guards are on the walls?" Duncan continued, nearly sick at his stomach.

"None." He answered.

"Are there any guards in Roth at all?"

"Yes, in the Great Room when the right hand comes."

"And that's all." Duncan asked.

"Yes."

"Take him out of my sight." Duncan removed his hand from the sword after sliding it into its scabbard. "Before I let his blood flow."

"What are we going to do?" Towaka asked as his warriors lead the stranger, Tudo to the end of the gully.

"We wait until dark, go into the city and send one Demon back to the deepest part of the Pits of Darkness before he gives this land over unto Darkness, forever." Duncan went to find Ember.

How they remained in that small gully the rest of the day unnoticed, Duncan had no idea. More than once, pairs and groups of wide-eyed men roamed through the area but failed to discover the humans and Gnomes hiding there. Shortly before dusk, they mounted their horses and wolves then rode hard toward Roth.

When they encountered armed patrols, Duncan wondered if the information they had gained from the stranger was accurate. Something deep inside told him the sword would cause the truth to be revealed but he couldn't be absolutely sure.

"That's the gate where we're going to enter." Duncan pointed to the open heavy wooden gate set in the gray hand-hewed stonewall that was dimly lit by flickering torches. "I'll go first, followed by Graynor and his group of warriors. Thomas next with his group, then Towaka and his warriors and last, Ember and our rear guards. Wait until you see the signal before advancing and stay in the shadows as best you can. Any questions?"

Towaka, Thomas, Ember nor Graynor said a word, each one was ready. They had attacked the walled city all day using rocks and twigs for buildings that Duncan had taken from his 'memories'. They knew their jobs as well as Duncan.

"Good luck!" Duncan said, his face blackened from ashes giving him an eerie and frightening appearance to others. "And be careful." He nodded to the five Gnomes who were accompanying him and rode slowly toward the gates.

The stranger had not lied about the guards at the gate or on the walls, there were none. Duncan stopped next to the torch, removed and tossed it to the ground where one of the Gnomes quickly extinguished the flames as Duncan did the same to the other one.

Looking down the main street, Duncan nor the Gnomes could see anything except lit torches scattered far apart. Duncan watched as Graynor and the tiny Gnome warriors with him made their way across the open field to the huge gates. Still nothing moved inside or atop the city's walls.

When the last warrior and wolf were safely to the wall, Duncan took the leader's role again. Pointing

left and right, he positioned his warriors on each side of him, next to the houses and building. They inched forward as Duncan did the same in the center of the street, the only difference was, they were more concealed. With the firing of the first warbow, Duncan knew they weren't alone. There were guards the stranger didn't reveal by choice or he just didn't know about.

Hiding though, did the 'followers' of Darkness little good except for slowing Duncan and the others down, the Gnome warriors were deadly foes in the inky night. Duncan remembered how easily they had managed to stay out of his and Graynor's sight only a few nights ago. What a difference a short time makes, he told himself.

Behind a large building that was once an inn, he and the Gnomes dismounted and went through the next two streets on foot. The guards were nonexistence as they closed in on their goal, the former Great Room of the Mayor's fancy castle. Two black cloaked followers stood one on each side of the double doors holding pikes and guarding the entrance.

At Duncan's signal, both doubled over without a sound, the Gnome warriors quickly caught the pikes before they hit the cobblestone walkaway. Duncan and the others rushed over to help in dragging the two dead men away to a concealed area behind some shrubs then waited to see if they had given themselves away.

Spotting Graynor and Thomas on the other side of the street, Duncan took a long deep breath and rushed to the doors. Counting with his fingers held out for the warriors to see, he pushed the doors open on three. Five Gnome warriors rushed past him as he ran into the room to discover he was to meet his worst nightmares head-on. His mind kept switching back and forth, from here to his sweaty nightmares of fighting Demons and other terrors to get to his mother before she was sacrificed as she lay helplessly bound upon the flat stone.

This place was different, yet the same, an evil place for killing in the name of Darkness. Mother? He thought, seeing the young woman lying on the flat stone, her chest bare and exposed to the 'follower's knife looming over her as he was about to drive it into her heart.

Torches set in wall niches and candles held by many-fingered sconces illuminated the Great Room like it was outside in the bright sunlight. Duncan saw the women, skimpily clad in black and bound by ropes, encircling a large flat stone striped in crimson stains. Their faces showing only a druglike stupor. Behind them stood more than a hundred black robed 'followers', their hoods up so their faces weren't visible.

On the white marble dais in the far back of the huge room, like a usurper ruler that had replaced a real king, sat a true Demon of the Pit. Duncan could feel the power, an evil power that radiated from the hideous creature. This one was not like the ones he and Graynor had banished in the Good King's forest. No, this was a being to be reckoned with, much like the one the Ice People banished. And beside it, another 'follower', dressed in the same jet color hooded cloak that covered the other 'followers' from head to foot except this one was of a finer, richer material. He almost looked out of place with the other's shabby clothes.

The Demon rose from the pale wood and bone throne, pointed it's twisted frog-like fingers at Duncan then spoke, "Your life is now mine, human half-god!" Its voice cracked from the strain of centuries with little use. At that same moment the Gnome warriors loosened their bows. The would-be assassin screamed as three tiny arrows pinned the hood of the black cloak to the sides of his head, he slumped backwards near the intended victim's feet.

"No! It is your reign of terror and madness that is over!" Duncan spoke the chants of an ancient tongue and drew runes in the air that blazed like beautiful multicolored layers of fire. The Demon screamed and danced, drawing runes of his own as the 'followers' ran forward in an attempt to take Duncan's life.

Duncan's fingers quickly drew more runes, brighter and larger as he chanted then pulled the black sword from its scabbard. The burning runes grew a hundredfold as the sword glowed to life. Quickly, he cut down several of the closest 'followers' slowing the others long enough for the Gnome warriors to step in allowing him to continue with his spells.

Drawing a large flaming wheel, Duncan cast it at the Demon. It landed over his head, completely engulfing his deformed body. He screamed, wanting to run but instead he tried to counter Duncan's spell with another of his own. Duncan threw more of the burning runes as he watched Thomas and Towaka fighting off the half-crazed 'followers' to his left when Ember and Graynor came into view on his right. His tongue spoke the binding spell so fast, the Demon had very little chance except for what he tried, throwing a death spell at Ember and the other two humans, Graynor and Thomas. Duncan grabbed a 'follower' and literally tossed him in front of the spell, he fell to the floor screaming and quickly died. Angered, Duncan threw rune after rune at the now screaming Demon. The trapped evil being fell to the floor trying to flee the room from Duncan till finally it winked out in one last ear-piercing scream and nearly blinding explosion of light. It would find itself released in the darkest region of the Pit, someday.

With the disappearance of the Demon, his power over the 'followers' diminished and most others ceased fighting immediately. A few stubborn 'followers' lasted only a couple minutes longer either dead or knocked out. Duncan looked around for his friends, all were alive and uninjured.

"Graynor." Duncan said as the fighting ceased. "Are those women going to be all right?"

"They'll be fine as soon as the drugs they've been given wear off." He returned. "This place still has an evil air about it, don't you think?"

"Yeah, it does." Duncan pointed to one of the followers. "You, where is your leaders?"

"D..Dead." He stammered. "I think."

"Get some men together then get these women to a safe place." Duncan told him as he walked around and looked at the sad state of disarray the place was in. "You others, clean this city up!"

"Give me that sword!" One of the followers shouted from behind Duncan.

Turning, Duncan was shocked to find the well-dressed 'follower' was holding Ember around the waist and had a knife blade pressed against her neck. He looked poised to kill her if Duncan refused his command.

"Nerbo!" Graynor shouted. "Let her go and you might live another day."

"Janax Nerbo?" Duncan asked, shocked twice now.

"One and the same!" The man answered. "Now, give me that sword!"

"It's not complete if that's what you think." Graynor told him.

"No!" He shouted in disbelief. "You're lying!"

"No. He's telling the truth." Duncan circled him slowly, around trying to create an opportunity for Towaka's warriors to get a shot at Janax Nerbo. "It's only two thirds complete. See." He pulled the black sword free and held it carefully by the blade, turning the jeweled hilt around slowly.

"Tell the little uglies to move back. One of those tiny arrows might hit this woman." Nerbo moved her between him and the warriors.

Duncan jerked his head to the side. "I'm the only one who knows where the rest of the jewels are and the sword is required to retrieve them. But if you let her go then I'll give it to you."

"No!" Ember squirmed.

"Hold still or I'll cut you open this second!" Nerbo pressed the knife more firmly against her skin.

"I agree with her, Duncan." Graynor said. "Kill him and most of the world's troubles will die too. You're quicker! You can take him before he can move a muscle."

"Stop!" Nerbo pressed the blade firmly into her neck, again. "I'll kill her, that's a fact! Let's make a deal. You go get the rest of the jewels, give the sword to me and then I'll release the girl. What do you say?"

"You'll let us go free after you have the sword?" Duncan asked.

"No, he won't!" Graynor turned to Duncan. "He's not to be trusted!"

"But I will!" Nerbo said, smiling. "I've always been a man of my word, Graynor, old friend. You know that to be true. And yes, you and her can go free after you give me the sword. I swear!"

"Duncan, his word's..."

"Shut up, you son of a Demon!" Nerbo demanded. "This is between the boy and me. You can stop trying to interfere like you're always trying to do in things that are none of your concern, you half-Demon!"

Graynor turned red faced and stated to say something else when Duncan held up his hand. "This is between the two of us, old man." Duncan said, Graynor stomped to the back of the room. Now's your chance, Graynor, Duncan said to himself. "You have my father prisoner at your palace?" Duncan inquired.

"Yes, how did you know?" He was stunned to think his biggest secret wasn't a secret after all.

"I can feel his presences on you." Duncan lied. "I want him, too!"

"No!" Nerbo said.

"Both, him and her, or nothing."

"Then nothing."

"So be it." Duncan turned and said, "On three, fill them full of arrows!"

"Wait!" Nerbo cried. "You can have both of them but I will take the sword, now."

"NO!"

"Then no deal." Nerbo said.

"Fine." Duncan said, "One, tw..".

"All right!" Nerbo shouted. "You bring the sword with all the stones to my palace on the Fourth Continent in sixty days from tomorrow."

"No! First, you release the girl." Duncan said. "Then I'll agree to do so."

"Do you take me for a fool?" Nerbo's head rolled back as he laughed. "The second I release her, Graynor will cast that spell of binding at me and the little ones will fill me full of tiny poison arrows. No, you can have her when you bring me the sword in sixty days. Or on the sixty- first day, she gets to go on the altar to my Lord!"

"Let's.." Duncan started.

Nerbo threw the knife at Thomas, who was standing next to Duncan. As Duncan flipped the sword sideways and deflected the knife, Nerbo and Ember disappeared in a cloud of smoke before anyone could make a move to stop them.

Chapter Fifteen

"Ember!" Thomas and Duncan yelled, both rushing to where Ember and Janax Nerbo had been standing only a second earlier. All that was there now was a tear producing smoke.

"Surround this place!" Duncan shouted. Immediately, Towaka ordered his tiny warriors out around the building's walls. Duncan and the others began searching the rooms for hidden doors they could have passed through when the smoke bellowed up. Much to their dismay, there were none.

"I can't believe he's gained that kind of knowledge by himself." Graynor sat down on the edge of the ice cold dais, sad and stunned by the loss of Ember.

"What kind of knowledge?" Duncan paused from his third trip through the huge room with no clues to how Nerbo had gotten out with Ember. He felt sick at his stomach, helpless.

"It's sort of like mind-walking except it requires enormous concentration and practice, plus it requires energy that a normal man can't draw from his own being. The Dark Lord must have given him that power and knowledge though I don't believe he was able to go very far with Ember, not without help."

"What kind of help?" Duncan looked around the sat down.

"Someone waiting not far from here, say a league or so away. Probably that person or persons, are now traveling as hard and fast as possible to get Nerbo and Ember to a predetermined safe place." Graynor explained. "When morals travel like they did, you're too weak to even stand for days."

"How did he do it?" Duncan wanted the details, he would go after them.

"I can't teach you, Duncan if that's what you mean!" Graynor said firmly. "And I wouldn't allow you to go after them if I could. I told you, you're so weak you can't even walk without help so how would you manage to do little more than put your own self in mortal danger and believe me, that's going to come soon enough."

"Mortal danger?" Duncan laughed and closed his eyes then jumped to his feet. "What do you call what we've been doing, just playing around?"

"No, I didn't mean it like that." Graynor knew Duncan felt helpless and inadequate but short of striking out with his sword at Nerbo and taking a chance on killing both of them, there had been very little he could have done. "You have two more pieces of the jewel to retrieve! When you get them, we'll go after Ember. We'll go even if we don't get the jewels, somehow!"

"It not getting the jewels that concerns me but the time thing." Duncan told him. "I seriously doubt we can get them and cross over to the Fourth Continent in sixty days!"

"If it's necessary, we'll take turns leading the horses while the other two rides tied in their saddles!" Graynor nearly shouted. "But we will beat that time limit!"

"Let's get at it then, I don't see any reason to stick around here any longer." Duncan walked out of the room and to his horse. "Mount up, Thomas, if you're going."

"Why wouldn't I be going?" The angry young man asked.

"I don't know!" Duncan felt bad for that remark. Damn, he's her brother and his love has had years to grow. "I'm sorry, I just.."

"I know, I miss her, too. And I'm worried!" Thomas swung up into the saddle, the mule's lead ropes with Ember's mare tied to them in his hands.

He's sure grown since we met, Duncan thought to himself.

"Towaka!" Duncan called out to the little man as he stood listening to the night sounds. "We have to go. I must go after the man who has Ember, he is the right hand of the Dark Lord. He's one of the evils I am destined to do battle with even before he took that which will never belong to him. I can only thank you for what you and your brave warriors have done. May many songs remember you and them when our bones are dust."

"The evil that was here, is no more! Your magic and favor of the Mother has driven it from this land. You have kept your word! It is rare when a human does that with my people." Towaka spoke proudly, like a king to another destined to be a great king, an equal. "You, Thomas, Graynor and your woman, Ember, when you find her, will always be welcome in our village! May the Mother watch over you and favor you until the cold takes you and you are received into her arms."

"And may she favor and watch over you and your people, always!" Duncan pulled himself up into his saddle. "Farewell, friends!" He kicked the horse's ribs and rode out into the night, wondering if he should wait on the old man. No, he thought, he'll catch up.

It was over an hour before Duncan heard the beating hoof sounds of a horse behind them coming closer with each passing minute. Duncan held up his hand, Thomas slowed to a stop beside him and turned in his saddle to watch Graynor ride up to them.

"What took you so long?" Duncan casually asked.

"I had an errand to run." Graynor replied, breathing nearly as hard as his horse.

"Just what was that important?" Duncan asked his friend.

"The Roth Treasury had to be opened to pay our fee for putting the kingdom back in the hands of the right people." Graynor pointed to the two fat purses tied to his saddle. "This plus our overhead was all that I took."

"Overhead?" Duncan cried out. "What overhead?"

"The Gnomes needed a little bit to place back in their own treasury, to make up for parting with the jewel." Graynor smiled, "I gave each of them a bag of gold and jewels to carry home. You talk about your happy Gnomes! They'll probably come looking to go on another raid of a fallen kingdom."

"You're joking?" Thomas uttered.

"Yes." Graynor told the youngster. "But they did ask to continue their aid."

"That speaks highly of them." Duncan was a little pleased that he had helped the Gnomes gain a little trust for some humans again.

"Well?" Graynor said, waiting for an answer.

"Well what?" Duncan didn't understand the question.

"Well, where are we headed to this time? To the bottom of the Sea of Storms?"

"No, my guess is that's next." Duncan kicked his horse's ribs and wondered if the old man was becoming clairvoyant or if that was just a lucky guess. Deep inside his head, the last jewel was reaching out to him from a watery bed. The Sea of Storms kept popping up in his 'memories', the last stone was close to there he guessed.

"You're kidding?" Graynor replied surprised as his horse cantered along side Thomas and Duncan.

"Good guess, I think!"

"A...Why, thank you."

"Like I said before, I know where the next one is but not the last one! But I will assume when I retrieve the next one, I will also learn where the last piece is 'guarded'. And by what! Right this moment, we are heading to the Swamps of Myastor." Duncan informed them both.

"Great! Just great!" Graynor was at the point of swearing in disbelief when he added. "Duncan remind

me to yell, rant and rave after we set your father free. I believe that I'll owe him that much at least!"

"Why? You'll have to explain about the swamps, I seem to have bit of missing information that's not in the jewels, yet." Duncan told him, thinking a swamp couldn't be all that bad but then again his father had not left any of the jewels out where they would be easily accessible.

"First, it's wet! There's not a piece of dry ground anywhere, even up a tree the muggy damp climate keeps you wet. Hot in the day time, hot at night."

"Hot like the desert?" Thomas asked, dreading heat like that again.

"No, Thomas, not like the heat in the desert." Graynor loved talking about things that he knew about. "It's moist heat, the kind that sweating doesn't cool you off . Bugs are next, all of them bite or sting then come the snakes. Snakes I hate. I think Duncan sort of likes them though."

"Like to see them going one way and me the other." Duncan quickly informed him.

"As I was saying, snakes are everywhere. They're on the ground, in the water and even in the trees. The crockarocks are the deadliest thing that lives there. They're giant lizards that can bite a man in two with one slam of their powerful jaws that are filled with rows of flint-like teeth.

"Sounds like one of the nicest places we've visited yet." Duncan said sarcastically.

"Oh, I'm not to the good part either." Graynor returned before continuing. "There are places where the ground will swallow you like a rock in the mud, you just sink out of sight. No swimming out! And lastly, there are the Warthogs."

"What's that, a hog that gives you warts?" Thomas laughed thinking that was pretty funny. Ember would have loved that one, he was suddenly quiet again.

"No, it's a clan of half-man sized beings with hog faces and large tusks growing upward from their lower jaw." Graynor told them. "They run around half-naked and eat anything that's not been dead for more than the time it takes for the creepers to start working in its flesh. Yes sir, looked like another really fun time!"

"Hush, old man!" Duncan smiled. "All this was your idea to begin with, so to speak."

"No, not mine." Graynor declined the credit. "My idea of a good time is a warm friendly lady and a soft bed to sleep on." And that silenced everyone.

A week later, they found their way into the city of Ramel, a small city that had a comfortable inn with friendly but overly nosy owners who knew only of the bad things that had befallen the northerners. They did show much happiness that life in the north would soon be back to normal. Duncan learned later that a great many of the refugees stopped at the inn on their way through seeking refuge from the evils back home.

After a good supper, the best they had eaten since Ember disappeared and a great night's sleep, they bought provisions with the gold 'reward' Graynor had liberated from the usurped mayor and set off again.

As they rode, they noticed the daytime temperature and humidity rising with each passing league. That heat forced them into stopping for water more frequent for themselves and animals. Thicker vegetation

also forced them from their direct straight-line of traveling to the well-used roads with other travelers and bandits. Travelers and bandits were usually in groups and that fact alone caused a lot more caution, making travel much slower for Duncan and his overly tired friends.

On their fifth day out of Ramel, they entered the well-known city of Myastor, last refuge on anyone's trek north around the Ghanty Desert many leagues to the northeast. The people were very likable and very eager to be of assistance, once the sun started down and the shade came over. Here was where their trip into the Swamps of Myastor would begin.

Graynor found an inn that would provide them with a fairly safe place to eat and sleep plus a livery stable to its list of many options available for only a small fee. There, they could leave their horses and mules until they returned from the Swamp.

He also arranged to rent two small flat-bottom boats complete with push poles and a guide that had been trapping and fishing in the Swamp since he was eight years old. The guide promised both a safe and enjoyable time. fishing, hunting and the likes since Duncan had explained to him about his want to go in and see just what the swamp had to offer in the form of relaxation.

"You're sure not going to relax in there!" Graynor told him. "But it is a good way to keep people from learning about our real reasons for going into that critter-infested place. I've arranged transportation to Esosia from Acoasta by ship in two weeks. It sails at midnight in twelve days, whether we are there or not and we may not find another for weeks."

"How did you book passage on a ship that is nearly four days ride from here?" Duncan could barely believe their good fortune.

"The ship's captain is here in Myastor on a buying trip." Graynor said smugly.

"If we didn't have to leave in the morning, I'd like to meet him." Duncan wondered if this meeting was planned by fate or just a coincident?

"You'll meet him soon enough, I hope." Graynor returned as he lay back against the soft pillow. Thinking as he watched Thomas as he sat beside the window and stared out as the last rays of the sun faded past the western horizon.

"Looks no different from any of the other places we've ridden into." Thomas spoke to no one in particular. He missed Ember, badly. Deep in his thoughts couldn't remember a time in his life when she wasn't there. They needed to get to where she was as fast possible and kill that man, that Janax Nerbo. She needed be free, to be here with them to enjoy things like that beautiful sunset.

"It's all soft and innocent on the surface, Thomas. The dangers in there are more than those the Ghanty Desert hid from us." Graynor closed his eyes remembering what the swamp was really like.

He remembered the beautiful young woman that had demanded so much of his time and the small things that made her laugh and smile. The gleam in a child's eye, the flight of a butterfly, the song of a bird, the sweet smell or beauty of a flower, the touch of her lips to his. Graynor fondly remembered her radiant face, the intoxicating fragrance of her jet black hair as it brushed his face. He reminisced of the short boat ride, sightseeing the flowers and birds of the swamp. The snake that fell from the red maple's foliage, biting her neck before he grabbed it and popped its head from its long scaly body. He remembered the look of fear and astonishment on her face as she realized that she was passing from this

world to the next. The uncertainty of what was there, if there were birds, flowers and butterflies? And if he would be able to join her there in the future?

Graynor remembered wanting to join her that very moment. Had it not been for Ambrose swearing him to an oath many years before he would have went easily! His honor and duty would come before his happiness ever could. He wiped a tear from his eye as he remembered how beautiful she was lying at the top of that funeral pyre. She was still waiting, somewhere.

"I'll take the first watch." He surprised the other two who said little as they too were engulfed in sorrow from their own lost, Ember.

Staring out the open window, he could see the trees flashing with the soft green-yellow glow of hundreds of fireflies. Stars winked at each other as the constellations slowly allowed themselves to be seen in the darkening sky. Through it all, he could see her blue eyes looking back at him, still smiling, still waiting. I've come full circle, he thought, she's still waiting here for me to join her forever..

Tomorrow, four will go into the swamp and only three will come out again, he said silently. Tomorrow, my love, maybe.

"Wake up." Thomas shook Duncan and Graynor as the morning sun's first rays struck the heavy dark clouds over the city, giving it a red glow that was to some an omen of bad things to come.

Dressing quickly, they met their guide in the inn's tavern for a good breakfast and a chance to see if Graynor thought the man was capable of the journey or not. After a few words of greets, he quickly answered the questions Graynor threw his way. They left the tavern and walked the street to the west where a boggy area lay at the edge of town. There, they carefully climbed into a small flat-bottomed boat with a wet floor and poled out into the stagnated water, gently pulling a smaller boat behind them.

The quiet was anything but that, Duncan realized quickly. This was a place that was alive everywhere. Frogs of all kinds watched from the water's edge, on the banks and in the trees loudly announcing the coming of strangers into their homes. He hoped they would be welcome. It looked like a place that was void of dangers but after Graynor's lecture, he knew that was a jest.

A foggy mist covered everything so their vision was limited by distance and there were lots of sounds they would have like to see the critters they belonged to instead of taking their guide, Simon's word for it. Things splashed, sometimes thrashing and churning the waters as they passed by the edge of the tiny boat. A couple of times they thought they saw a tail, rough and dark on one side, the other side white and slick.

"Crockarock, a small one," Simon told them. "Probably getting his breakfast."

"Let's hope he sticks to the littler creatures!" Duncan moved his hands from the edges where he had been holding to the side of the boat. "No use to tempt them." He told Graynor who seemed to be the only one who noticed him.

"You're probably right." Graynor also moved to a different handhold. "You know which way is the right one?"

No, Duncan shook his head. "It's not the same as my 'memory', it must keep changing as time passes. I get a powerful headache just trying to 'remember'."

"How are we going to know which way is the right one?" Thomas asked quietly so only Duncan heard him.

"I know where it's at, just not how to get there!" Duncan softly returned, slapping what had to be the hundredth bug to bite him this morning and it was no where near noon.

Late in the afternoon, they stopped at a small log hut built about ten feet from the ground on stilts. Simon explained the reason was that the things to fear the most at night are the creatures that hunt for other creatures that are asleep, hunting or can't see well in the dark. Those creatures that hunt are not good climbers so other than for a few biting bugs, they should be fairly safe tonight.

Even though they had been assured that very little could even climb into the hut, they kept their usual watch with Thomas being first, followed by Duncan then Graynor. And just like Simon said, bugs and spiders were the only thing that choose them as food.

The next day was a copy of the previous one for the first half then a crockarock as long as the boat tried to crawl in with them. Only Duncan's quick reactions and the sharp sword saved the boat from tipping over and assuring all of them a most messy death. As it was, the boat only rocked gently as the headless crockarock was devoured by his friends that quickly forgot about wanting to spill the humans from their tiny floating island.

Thomas and Duncan amused themselves the remainder of the afternoon by flipping the swimming snakes that came close enough to the boat into the area of an awaiting crockarock that usually clamped down on the confused serpent like an unforgiving steel trap. Twice, they flipped them out of the boat when they had dropped from overhead branches. Neither time was the snake poisonous but the same fear was in Thomas and Duncan, especially Duncan. Graynor's only thoughts were of happier times.

"Tonight, we will sleep the same as last night but we must set the traps and signals or tomorrow the sun may not rise for some." Simon said with fear in his eyes.

"How much gold are you paying him, Graynor?" Duncan asked as he reached their food up to Thomas who put it inside the hut.

"Nearly half a bag." Graynor pushed the sack to the side. "That is if we get back alive."

"What's to keep him from cutting our throats and taking all the gold while we're asleep?" Thomas inquired quietly.

"Me." Was all the answer Duncan gave him.

After the traps and signals were set up, they ate and called it a night. Thomas again had the first uneventful watch followed by Graynor who had only minutes before woke Duncan for his turn when he heard the signal chime as something passed by it. Duncan slid the black blade from its scabbard so quietly that even Graynor could barely hear the hiss.

Just over the sound of his own heart beat, Duncan could hear the grass, twigs and leaves being squished under the slow, stealthy footsteps moving in a straight line before coming to a stop directly beneath the hut's single door set in the middle of the floor. Both, Duncan and the sword were awash with the light from the glowing stones, Duncan concentrated hard to dim them both. He pointed at the door to Graynor, motioned him to be ready to jerk it open as he waited to swing the deadly sword.

Duncan listened, trying to imagine what or who was under the hut and what was it or they were doing. Climbing something, he wondered to himself? Yes, definitely climbing.

Slowly, the floor-door began to lift. One inch, two inches, three inches and he nodded at Graynor. Graynor pulled the door hard and moved back as Duncan swung the flat edge of the blade down hard on the ugly head that was too surprised to move. Quickly, the head fell from the opening followed by the sound of more than a dozen small feet running in fear and surprise then suddenly they stopped. Just like they had run into a wall, they stopped to regroup.

"Wake the others and follow me!" Duncan said then leaped through the open door before Graynor could stop him.

Hitting the soft wet ground, Duncan took a second to look around the area. Warthogs, he said to himself as he found the creature lying on the ground beside him, white tusks gleaming from Duncan's and the sword's glow. About forty feet out stood eight more discussing what they should do. Duncan's sudden appearance put an abrupt end to that, they attacked.

Yelling and grunting, they ran at Duncan with clubs and pointed sticks they used like spears. With the first swing of the glowing blade, Duncan cut three of the leading edges in half while dodging their clubs and spear thrusts. On his back stroke, two more went down but still the others wouldn't leave, they charged again. Left with little choice, Duncan killed the three that remained before they could stick him with their tiny but deadly spears.

"Why?" He asked as he surveyed the dead. Why did he and the sword have dealt out such drastic measures to creatures that until a short time ago, he didn't even know existed. Just why was he suddenly their enemy? He had no quarrel with these little beings, why did they attack him and his friends? He couldn't understand it.

"You all right, Duncan?" Thomas asked as he jumped from the hut and stumbled over one of the fallen Warthogs.

"Fine." Duncan answered as he reached out a hand and stopped Thomas from falling to the wet ground.

"You sure don't sound fine." Thomas said worried. "They didn't injure you, did they?"

"No. It's just that sometimes I don't understand why things happen the way they do, you know what I mean?" Duncan bent to check on the Warthog that he hit with the side of his blade.

"Yeah, like mom being killed by that Troll, Or dad dying, Ember being taken or these poor dead and ugly fellows thinking they could best you." Thomas returned in a voice that spoke with sadness from the heart though little of it was remorse for the dead warthogs.

"Let's get this one tied and those bodies out of here before he comes to or something comes looking for a few bites to eat and we're right in the way." Duncan said as Graynor clambered down with Simon, telling him about all the work Duncan left for the others to cleanup. Duncan smiled as he walked to the boats at the water's edge and washed the blood from the sword and his arms.

"He's waking up!" Thomas ran over to him a few minutes later. "The Warthog, he's waking up!"

"Almost scary, isn't he?" Duncan asked as he walked over to the hut and climbed back inside to where the Warthog was being held.

"He speaks a little." Graynor told him as he knelled in front of the four-foot tall tusked and ugly creature resembling a man. He had been tied by his hands, arms and feet then placed against the pole-sized logs of the little hut's outer wall.

"You have a name." Duncan asked slowly.

"Brees." He grunted then snorted, his tiny dark eyes narrowed at Duncan. "Brees. You man of sky?"

"I don't understand," Duncan was at a lost. "What you mean by man of sky?"

"Evil say man of sky with gold head come to home. We kill or Evil kill clan." The Warthog said barely above a grunt.

"Evil? What do you mean evil." Duncan inquired of the inhuman looking captive.

"Dark thing smells evil." The Warthog didn't know the words to say what it was.

"Demon!" Graynor interjected.

"How would a Demon know we were coming here?" Duncan asked him. "We've told no one."

"No! But we have probably made the one being mad that would unleash all the Demons from the Pit to have his revenge if possible."

"The Dark Lord?" Duncan half-asked knowing he was right.

"Yes." Graynor told him.

"And the man from the sky thing?"

"The answer to that will come after you take possession of the sixth jewel! Then a lot of answers will be yours." Graynor cryptically replied.

"We are not your enemies." Duncan told the Warthog. "We seek only what is rightfully mine, nothing more. You go tell your clan that we will leave your home when we find it. And if they leave us alone, I will not kill them. You tell that Demon I will send him back to the bottom of the Pit if he stays here." As Duncan grabbed his sword it glowed to life. In a flash of light he cut the ropes that held the frightened Warthog. "You go and don't bother me or my friends again! Ever!"

The terrified Warthog leaped down to the ground through the open door and was quickly out of sight.

Chapter Sixteen

"Why did you let him go?" Thomas asked, following Duncan to the boat with a pack on each arm.

"If I had killed him then the others of the clan would have been after us before we're a quarter league from here." Duncan explained to the young man. "If we had kept him as a prisoner, he would have waited until the right moment and possibly killed one or all of us."

"Tied up?" Thomas said, almost as if he had a lot of doubt about that.

"A prisoner out here is like tying one of your own hands behind your back!" Duncan helped push the two boats into the green slime-covered water. "He could have gotten loose or have even capsized the boat when we were near a group of crockarocks. Setting him loose was the best choice we had!"

"Maybe." Thomas held the small boat steady for Graynor.

"He's right." Graynor said. "This place is dangerous enough without anything additional that is capable of tipping the balance."

"I guess so." Thomas stepped into the boat and Simon pushed them off toward the northwest.

"We should be there long before noon." Duncan said as he looked at his mental maps. "Maybe with a little good luck, we'll be on our way past here and can stay in another hut closer to Myastor. Then we would be out of here by tomorrow night."

"We can hope." Graynor said as he watched a frog disappear beneath a violent splash.

The same mist that lay low clinging to everything yesterday and the day before held true to form, their clothes felt like they had stood outside in a rainstorm. The swamp kept the same deadly beauty, only the opportunities of nature's killer forces changed with the scenery. Those opportunities were much too frequent for Duncan and Thomas. Graynor though was almost happy knowing this would be where it ended for him.

For the next three hours or more, they all seemed unusually quiet. Even their guide Simon no longer pointed out the flora or fauna native only to the swamp lands. Something evil was on the move and it was coming toward them. Both, Duncan and Graynor could feel it and both were worried, that mood reflected onto Thomas and Simon.

"You think he's bringing his friends, the Warthogs?" Duncan wondered out loud.

"Who's coming?" Thomas asked, alarmed by Duncan's question.

"Just thinking a bit loud." Duncan told him then decided to say more so Thomas and Simon would have a little warning as to what was about to happen. "The Demon that Brees told us was forcing the clan out to look for and to kill us, is coming our way. He's moving slow, probably driving the Warthogs in front of him. You agree?" He looked to Graynor for support.

"Yes." He nodded his head. "It probably thinks that makes the odds better in its favor. I've been thinking, Duncan."

"That's good, old man." Duncan joked. "Good that you can at your age!"

"Janax Nerbo said we had sixty days, that's close to your birthday and the day you become of age." Graynor went on not taking the bait although Simon and Thomas did smile but quickly hid their faces.

"Really?" Duncan was surprised.

Yes, Graynor nodded. "And he, I don't think, would have sent a Demon after you. I believe he's not as trusted as he thinks he is. The Dark Lord wants those jewels and the knowledge they contain. And he wants them before the time is up and you reach manhood."

"Why?" Duncan asked.

"That will require more thinking." Graynor lied, staring out into the swamp as if seeking an answer in the swirling mist that drifted everywhere.

"Let me off over there." Duncan pointed at a clearing between two moss filled cypress trees with roots sprawling out in every direction.

Carefully, Simon poled the boat across the roots and gently bumped the rush-covered bank as he watched the trees for snakes and the shoreline for sunning crockarocks. Frankly, the absence of wildlife here scared him more than if those animals were in plain view. This place had an air of fear and death or dying that emanated far beyond just today.

"I think one of you should wait here with Simon, to sort of protect each other's back." Duncan said as he slipped a coil of rope over his shoulder and took a long pull from the waterbag. "Thomas, since Graynor knows how to defend himself against Demons, you're with me. Bring your crossbow and ironwood staff."

"Is it far?" Thomas asked strapping the crossbow over his back.

"No." Duncan looked back at Simon. "If the Warthogs get here before we get back, you and Graynor take the boats out past arrow range and hide. Watch for us to get here and hurry in, we'll keep them off of you. I hope!"

"Be careful!" Graynor said as he watched them trek away until the mist engulfed them completely.

"Do you get the feeling that something has scared off all the animals in this part of the swamp?" Thomas asked as he kept within two footsteps of Duncan's own.

"Yeah, almost like they know not to come here." Duncan returned. "I don't see any bones anywhere, though, do you?"

"No, and that's strange too." Thomas stated. "Everywhere we've been in this place, you see bones! Not a lot but a enough to show there's animals around that eat other animals. Why aren't there any here?"

"I hope you're not going to expect me to go out and find you your answer." Duncan teased as he cut the branches in their way with his sword. He hoped that in case a speedy retreat was called for, his cuttings would allow him and Thomas a clear path in which to run.

Walking along, Duncan noticed the rubbed marks on the trees. Some trees were leaning sideways, away from the marks as if pushed by a storm or something living, something very powerful. He wondered what could be that strong and live in this swamp?

"What made them funny looking holes?" Thomas pointed to impressions that paralleled the marks.

"Something that eats everything and pushes huge tree aside at will! Something I pray we don't meet!" Duncan hurried on toward the jewel's hiding place.

Less than fifteen minutes later, they both spotted the object of their search. In the middle of a clearing, bare of even leaves or grass, stood what had to be the largest and tallest maple in the world. As Duncan looked skyward, he knew this was where the blue jewel was to be found.

Looking slowly around for any unseen dangers, he said. "You watch behind us and keep close to me."

Half running, they quickly made their way to the gigantic maple and began seeking handholds. Thomas followed, sometimes with help from Duncan in the way of a pull or sometimes, giving Duncan a boost to reach the next limb. Those limbs were often as large as any other tree in the swamp. Out of breath, they stopped at more than seventy feet above the ground. Soon, they would be higher than any of the trees that surrounded the clearing.

"I wish we had brought a skin of water!" Thomas said wiping the beads of sweat from his red face with the back of his wet arm.

"Yeah, me too!" Duncan leaned against the tree's trunk. "Have you noticed there are no birds in this tree?"

"Nor anywhere around it." Thomas stated staring out over the vast swamp.

"Strange." Duncan looked up. "More than fifty more feet to go. You going to be able to make it?"

"Lead." He returned and helped Duncan reach the next limb.

Minutes later, they were standing on a large limb more than a hundred and fifty feet from the ground. They were above everything in the swamp, even the mist, and could see for leagues. It was nearly breathtaking. Duncan spotted where Graynor and Simon were waiting. Thomas still too breathless to speak, pointed at movement coming their way.

"Warthogs!" Duncan exclaimed, seeing Graynor and Simon were directly in the way of their approaching path. "I'll get the jewel! You tie this rope off and we'll slide back to the ground in a few seconds." He slipped the rope off his shoulder and passed it to Thomas then looked for a way across to the limb beside them.

He knew the box was in a hole in the tree trunk a little above the next limb over. He leaped nearly falling, landing belly down and knocking the breath from his chest he was finding little in the way of handholds. Slowly he managed to halt his movement by digging his finger tips into what cracks he could feel. Carefully, he lifted his body upward high enough to swing one leg over the log-size limb and regain his balance. After a few seconds, he thought he might be able to stand.

With a little effort, he stood and backed up, looking to the location of the hole. It had grown over except for a very small woodpecker size opening. How am I going to get anything out of that, he asked

himself. Then quickly slipped the black sword from his back and began chopping.

"I hope that noise doesn't call any attention to us." Thomas said as he finished with the rope and slowly lowered the end to the ground.

"It's all we have!" Duncan told him and continued enlarging the hole with each powerful stroke of the glowing blade.

Stopping long enough to look inside, Duncan smiled when he saw the same style wooden box as the others resting in the dark cavity. After a few deep breaths, he chopped several more chunks of wood out and stopped again. With the hole large enough, he removed the box, turned around and sat down with his back to the ancient maple. Sticking the sword into the limb, he opened the box.

Inside he found a silver studded leather tass. Quickly, he wrapped it around his waist as if he had done it everyday of his life. It felt as if it had been there all his life. Taking the soft silk-like sack from the box, he untied the golden string and dropped the contents into his palm. The sunlight caused the blue jewel that lay there to change the maple leaves to a beautiful aqua-blue. Duncan carefully snapped it into the sword's hilt and was instantly covered by an icy blue fire. The knowledge flow almost overcame his consciousness. He was unaware of grabbing the sword's hilt to keep from falling. Slowly, the glow dropped to that of it's sisters and Duncan again slipped the sword back into the scabbard.

He had learned much but now was not the time to sort through his new 'memories', Graynor and Simon were in danger. And without the boat, neither Duncan nor Thomas could possibly survive the walk out of this deadly place.

"You ready?" He leaped to the limb Thomas was sitting on.

"Yeah, I guess." Thomas looked down. "Want me to go first?"

"No, you follow and wait until I get a little head start." Duncan slipped over the huge limb and quickly disappeared, Thomas followed. Something in the back of his head told him to stop on the bottom limb, not to go all the way to the ground. He stopped and held the rope to where Thomas too would land on the same limb then quietly watched.

"What is it?" Thomas asked as he softly stopped next to Duncan.

"I don't know." Duncan whispered. "Be still and wait. Don't be surprised by what you may see."

At first, it sounded like something dragging a log, something big and heavy. They could hear the sounds of it's feet hitting the ground, thump, scrape, thump, scrape. Then they saw it, a crockarock! The mother of all crockarocks of the world, more than thirty-five feet long and close to six feet across its rocky shoulders.

It's large feet thumped the ground with each step. The force jarred the old maple so hard it nearly shook Duncan and Thomas from their perch. Its massive tail swung back and forth with each alternating step, scraping the ground clear of all debris and covering it with fresh earth. Slowly, it circled the gigantic old tree, searching.

"You think we can outrun it?" Thomas asked as soon as its head was pass them.

"I sure hope so!" Duncan answered. "I'll go down first! You quietly join me then when I nod! We'll

run for the trail back to the boat. If that thing starts to catch up, I'll stop long enough to try to slow it down. You go on and don't look back!"

"Okay, let's wait until it goes past again." Thomas told him, hoping his legs would move when they hit the ground, they felt like jelly.

Duncan nodded his golden head and watched as the big crockarock slowly came back into view. After more than a minute, its head and front legs disappeared again. Duncan quickly dropped to the ground and started to signal for Thomas to come down when a small spear landed in the tree next to his shoulder.

"What the..." He jerked his head around and looked to the edge of the clearing where a Warthog stood waiting for several more of his noisy friends. Duncan first thought was to go back up into the tree but that was the last place he wanted to stand and fight. "Hurry!" He told Thomas, wanting to draw his sword but afraid the light would attract the crockarock's attention as well as more Warthogs.

"Around this way!" Duncan pulled Thomas as soon as his feet touched the dirt, the same direction the crockarock was going. Slowly, they placed the huge maple between them and the Warthogs then ran as hard and fast as their legs would carry them.

Behind them, the Warthogs realized their quarry was escaping and ran toward the tree, straight into the awaiting crockarock. Duncan turned at the edge of the woods and saw none of the Warthogs were following. He did see several of their limp bodies go flying through the air to land lifelessly across the clearing. The crockarock will slow them, he thought to himself.

Quickly, Duncan led Thomas through and under the bushes at the clearing's edge then in a semicircle to the path he had marked earlier by the cut branches. Looking toward the old maple, Duncan saw the Warthogs, the few that were left were fighting a losing battle. He wondered, as he and Thomas ran toward where the boat was waiting, if they would fight until the last one was killed by that monster.

Even though they were out of breath, they ran on, afraid that beast would soon come after them, too. As they neared the area where the boat was waiting, Duncan felt the cold darkness that was filled with a grow level of evil. No, he thought as he ran off leaving Thomas in a sudden burst of energy, it has Graynor! Emerging from the low foliage, Duncan spotted the Demon slowly circling the boat next to the bank. Graynor was drawing runes and casting as fast as humanly possible but the Demon countered each of them as easily as swatting a gnat, Graynor was weakening quickly. Duncan saw Simon had been injured or had passed-out from fear in the shallow boat's bottom. As Graynor faltered and fell to his knees, the Demon drew a rune of yellow flames and began casting the spell.

"NO!" Duncan screamed shattering the silence that blanketed this area of the swamp. Drawing his own fiery rune, he quickly cast the spell at the Demon, binding him long enough to counter the rune that the Demon had intended for Graynor.

The Demon screamed as he turned his attention toward Duncan. "For that I will end your life and that of your friends in the most pain I can cause." He drew several runes and cast them at Duncan.

Duncan caught them in one hand and threw them back. "You'll have to do better than that!" He said as the Demon screamed in pain from his own spells.

"The Master said I can kill you so I will put an end to your life." The Demon said as he began a rune that would kill everything living for a distance of almost half a league around the swamp.

"No you don't!" Duncan pulled the sword from his back. Instantly, it glowed to life, the power pulsing through it and Duncan's armor. Weaving a huge multicolored rune, Duncan cast the spell, wrapping the flaming spectrum tightly around the surprised Demon.

"I will be back! You cannot stop me from returning for the third and final time." The Demon told Duncan as it fell to its knees. "Your days are numbered, near-mortal."

"We'll see about that!" Duncan raised the glowing sword high and with both hands, thick red, yellow, green, blue and violet flames shot toward the heavens then Duncan brought the sword down quickly and pointed it at the Demon. The same colors seemed to drop from the sky into Duncan and out again through the burning sword, engulfing the Demon in a deep and pulsing aura. He opened his mouth to say something and exploded into darkness.

"Where did you send him?" Thomas asked as he caught up with Duncan and hurried on to the boat to see about Graynor and Simon.

"Not where he was expecting to go, I'm afraid." Duncan said as he stepped gingerly into the boat. "You okay, old man?" He lifted Graynor's head and held him gently in his arms.

"I think so." Graynor answered. "See about Simon, he bumped his head hard when he fainted."

"See if you can wake him, Thomas." Duncan looked toward their prone guide.

"You didn't send him to the Pit." Graynor spoke slowly, he was weak. "Why?"

"The Dark Lord would have him doing his bidding in a few days so I just sent it to the Dark Lord, bound of course." Duncan almost snickered. "He won't be able to release him for a year or so and until then, he'll just be around."

"Very annoying, I would imagine." Graynor smiled, he was weak but nothing that a few days of rest wouldn't cure. "You got the jewel I see."

"Yes and that reminds me." He looked around as he half expected to see something else coming for them. "The Grand Crockerock of All is out there keeping the Warthogs amused at this time. We should be getting back to Myastor before it wants to play with us."

"See if Simon's all right, I can manage for myself." Graynor sat up.

"Okay, if you say so." Duncan moved over beside Thomas, who was wrapping Simon's head with a cloth from his shirt. "How is he?"

"He hit his head and cut it open, luckily the blood stayed in the boat. I think he'll be all right." Thomas tied the cloth and lay Simon's head on one of the packs.

He was interrupted by the crash of a large tree not far down the path that he and Duncan had just traveled. Both of them knew immediately what caused the noise, the crockerock was coming their way and trees would not impede its progress.

"Let's get these boats away from here as fast as we can push!" Thomas grabbed the pushing pole and moved to the back of the boat.

"You pole them east." Duncan grabbed Thomas' ironwood spear and leaped from the boat. "I'll try to keep it at bay long enough for you to get to safety."

"But.." Thomas started to tell him to come on in the boat and they could just float down the channels and hide.

"I'll catch you! Go!" Duncan moved toward the path just as a long cypress came crashing down to reveal the big crockarock behind it and heading for Duncan. As it neared him, he could see cuts all over its body as well as several Warthogs still clinging to its back, stabbing and trying to chop through its thick hide. A couple jumped off when they saw Duncan in front of the crockarock, he was more important to kill than the crockarock. Now the crockarock and Warthogs were no longer enemies but allies.

Seeing the Warthogs leap from the creature's back Duncan hoped they would help him fight it but when he saw them start stalking him, he knew the danger had increased. Suddenly, the crockarock took care of the Warthog problem. With one flick of its tree size tail it sent both Warthogs through the air and disappearing into the bushes.

Running forward at the crockarock's head, Duncan swung the glowing black sword up and down, slicing huge chunks of its nose off and thought he was doing well until it's leaped at him. If its size hadn't slowed it some, Duncan would have been crushed but somehow he flipped backward and avoided the earth shaking crash. He was at a loss. He had no idea how to kill the creature and he had no desire to do so but what else could he do?

He wanted to jump on its back and stab his sword into its brain, hoping that would kill it. But he had seen the way the small crockarocks wiggled back and forth, twisting and turning. NO, a man on its back would be crushed. There had to be a way, he jumped to dodge a falling tree. If they kept falling, his movement would become so restricted that the beast would easily trap him. He used the ironwood spear to vault over several of the downed trees.

The ironwood spear, he thought as he slipped the sword into its scabbard. He waited until the crockarock was moving his way, as its leg touched the ground, now, he told himself. He ran as close as he dared, took the ironwood spear with both of his strong hands, jabbed it into the crockarock's eye. It popped and a jelly-like fluid ran down its scaly dark green face. Screaming out an angry warning it turned toward Duncan but it was too late. He had pulled the spear out and ran as fast as he could, vaulting another large tree that was in his path.

Landing on the other side awkwardly, Duncan held onto the spear and rolled to his feet. Turning, quickly he saw the crockarock knock over half a dozen trees as it twisted its one-eyed head to locate him again. Seeing him, it came as fast as it could move. Duncan knew this was the end, he couldn't keep outmaneuvering the beast over these trees. They were just too large and slowed him too much.

As he bounced across two trees that crossed his path, he searched for a place to hide for a few minutes of rest. There, he spotted a tree so large he didn't think the crockarock could push it over, at least he hoped not. Quickly, he ran to it and watched from behind it as the beast uprooted trees like a hog trying to find him.

Come this way and I'll take a poke at your other eye, Duncan silently asked. Or leave here and I'll go, too. But it came toward the tree. No, I don't want to make you a helpless and defenseless creature,

Duncan cried out silently but it paid him no mind and continued toward the tree. He quietly reached down and picked up a heavy piece of fallen treebark and tossed it to his left then waited. He pressed himself as close to the big tree as possible with the spear point held straight up and its other end between his feet.

The huge beast heard the chunk of treebark hit the ground and moved slowly toward it. Duncan watched the creature's nose ease into view, his muscles tense with anticipation but a split second before he could see the eye, its mouth opened suddenly. It swung that gaping mouth full of stump-sized teeth at Duncan, barely missing him as he dropped to the ground. As it moved forward, he jumped up, stabbed the good eye and ran as fast as he could in the opposite direction. The now blinded creature started twisting and thrashing the ground.

Suddenly, a loud crash followed by the sound of wood breaking, Duncan turned his head to see the huge treetop gaining on him. Diving across one of the trees the crockarock had knocked over earlier, Duncan rolled next to it for cover as the tree came crashing on top of him and the other tree. At first, he thought he had been killed but slowly as he regained his breath, he realized the small limbs and his landing had only knocked the air from his lungs. Like a snake, he wiggled and kicked until he was free. He got to his feet and ran to where he hoped the boat would be, not looking back at the still thrashing crockarock.

Less than ten minutes later, he saw Thomas poling the boat and yelled. Smiling with relief, Thomas waved and pushed the boat to where Duncan was waiting.

"Good to see you made it!" He said as Duncan stepped into the boat with assistance from Graynor.

"We heard all that crashing! It sounded like the trees were being torn from the earth." Graynor said. "I was..." Thump. He didn't finish, his eyes opened wide as blood gushed from the sides of his mouth and he fell into Duncan's arms.

"What the..Graynor!" Duncan raised his voice then saw the arrow fletched with feathers of swamp birds. "He's been shot with an arrow!" He shouted and turned to Thomas.

Thomas was aiming his crossbow when Duncan turned his head. The arrow flew out into the wooded area Duncan had just come through. As he turned and looked that way, he saw Thomas' crossbow bolt sticking in a bared chest of a Warthog as it toppled over. He followed me, Duncan told himself.

"How is he?" Thomas asked, cocking the bow again.

"Ah... " Duncan felt for his pulse, suddenly, his eyes began to fill with tears. "D..dead!" He cried. "He's dead!"

Chapter Seventeen

The trip out of Myastor Swamp was probably one of the saddest times in Duncan's life. He took Graynor's death as hard as he would have his very own father's. He had become friends with Graynor and had slowly grown fonder of him each day, his father he didn't know at all. Graynor had cared what happened to not only him but the world. Duncan hoped to use that as an example to live his own life by.

Simon had awakened not long after the sun had set that day, he was surprised to find they were still on the water. He, too, was saddened and shocked by Graynor's death but not surprised. He explained what he and the good-hearted old man had talked about while they remained with the boat. As the moonlight reflected off the water, he told them of Graynor's life in Myastor years ago, long before Duncan was born. He related Graynor's story of the romantic boat ride with the young woman he had decided he would spend his life loving then the tragic snake bite that ended her life. Of how helpless Graynor felt as he watched the funeral pyre destroy all that remained of her except his memories, his love and his pain.

"Full circle', he said." Simon repeated as he wondered about fate. "He said he had come full circle and she was waiting. Somehow, he knew he was going to die in the swamp."

"He was full of wisdom." Duncan brushed back a tear and wondered what they would do without their old friend to help guide them?

"And other things, too!" Thomas added, tears streaming down his tired face. "He had a lot of love to give but was afraid of the pain it might cause. Sometimes though it slipped out anyway, as with you and Ember."

Until that moment, Duncan had not realized it but Thomas was right. The old fellow did show his love but not as Duncan had expected. He realized, too that these short weeks together were not nearly long enough. He still had so many questions, so many things to say that would now have to remain unsaid. It was totally unfair! This was really the first death of anyone that he cared about for as long as he could remember, he didn't want another experience in his lifetime.

With all three taking turns poling the boat, they reached Myastor in the early afternoon the following day. Duncan helped chop the pines that became logs to be used for the pyre. A few of Simons friends and family helped in the stacking but most of the onlookers were just watching Duncan. With the black sword swinging long arcs that glowed brightly with near rainbow colors, the fury and anger that Duncan released with each stroke was truly an awesome sight. A few thought he was scary. Still others thought he was like an angry peacock and just as beautiful.

Duncan had sent Thomas into the city to seek out the captain Graynor had mentioned before their journey into the swamp. Even though Graynor was dead, Duncan's quest hadn't ended and Ember was still waiting, no, depending on him and he had to have fast transportation to succeed. It had been sixteen days since leaving Roth, her time and that of the world's was running out. He hoped the boy hurried, he would need a friend when the torch touched those logs.

As the sun was replaced by the twinkling stars on a dark velvet background, Duncan saw Thomas

come into view accompanied by several others. Duncan knew Thomas had been successful from the half-smile on his sad face. He always tried hard to please Duncan, a sort-of hero worship Duncan had stopped trying to discourage a long time ago it seemed.

"This is Duncan." Thomas told the oldest looking member of the group. "Duncan, this is Captain Roc. He's the one that Graynor arranged passage with to Esosia."

"Sorry to hear about Graynor! He'll be missed by all who have known him. He was a fine, fine man!" Captain Roc offered him his rough hands.

"Yes, he will!" Duncan gladly shook his hand. "I know I'll miss that face."

"We were friends for a long time." The captain told him. "Nearly all my life."

"I, regrettably didn't know him that long, not that I remember. Although he said he knew me all my life. I don't know how to say it other than I don't remember anything about my childhood except for the last few years." Duncan said sadly. He liked the captain! There was something about him that projected a feeling that said he could trust him with anything.

"Yes, I know you were somehow separated from Ambrose." The captain informed him. "I knew your father, too. You favor him as I recall."

"Really?" Duncan asked, totally surprised.

"Yeah, that was long ago, before you were born. He and Graynor would go everywhere just to meet the people and see the world. Ah, the two of them, they truly loved to enjoy life. You know I hadn't seen Graynor in over twenty-five years or more until the other day. That brought back some really good memories of simpler days in an age when times were probably better." The captain's eyes were distant as if looking back in time to those fond memories with his friends.

"We're ready." Simon interrupted.

"We're coming." Duncan told him. "Thomas, did you bring the skins I asked for?"

"Yeah, here." He retrieved several wineskins from another of the captain's friends and handed them to Duncan.

"Gentlemen, this way if you please." He turned, walked to the pyre built of alternating pine logs half again as high as a man's head. Duncan picked up Graynor's cloak and the pack that the old man was never far from then climbed to the top where Graynor's body lay as if asleep. He carefully covered the gray and golden haired old man with the long black cloak then opened the pack. From inside, he removed the two golden rings he had discovered there earlier then lifted Graynor's left hand and slipped them both over his third finger.

Taking one of the wineskins and popping the plug, he stuck the end into Graynor's mouth and squeezed then lay it under Graynor's right hand. Taking another, he unplugged it and took a long draw then tossed it to Thomas. Tears were clearly visible in the torchlights of the other helping Duncan or just standing around watching.

"This man would want no mourners even though we have a void in our hearts that only his presence could fill, that's not his way. He believed that loved-ones will be together forever after they die, I hope

he's right! If faith will make it so, then it will be so for him. I come here only to say goodbye and I'll see you when it's my time. Good journey, old friend!" Duncan took out his sword, lifted it to the sky and covered them both in a beautiful glow then jumped to the ground.

At Simon's nod, the torches touched the tinder at the bottom of the log pyre. Small flames grew slowly as Duncan drank from another skin and passed it to the Captain then sat on the grass covered ground. He felt as if he halfway knew how the old man felt after losing his woman, Duncan's heart was nearly ripped apart as the flames consumed his friend's body. The growing heat drove Duncan farther back. He felt as if he was on fire, too. The wine and flames burned deep as he watched the shadows dance all around from the purifying flames. More wine helped to cool the heat but still Duncan wanted to leap to the top and rescue his friend. That feeling grew in intensity until at last he passed-out.

The next morning he woke with the same emptiness and the added pain of a pounding head from too much wine. He slowly rose from his bed at the same Inn they had shared Graynor's companionship before entering the swamp, that fact alone made Duncan even sadder. Feeling like his heart had been yanked from his body just knowing the old man wasn't there, he was sickened with grief.

"So, you decided to wake up after all!" Thomas' voice thundered inside his aching head. "I thought we were going to miss the ship!"

"What time is it?" Duncan placed both hands to his head, trying to keep it from flying off like an arrow.

"Close to noon."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"I've tried, quite a few times!"

"How'd I get here, anyhow?"

"We each took a leg or arm." Thomas stared out the window at the busy street, wondering how they managed the heat all the time. "You're heavy, too."

"My head's killing me!" Duncan walked to the window. "Thanks for bringing me here."

"That mug over there's for you." Thomas pointed to the wooden shelf next to the door. "The innkeeper said it would help your sore head."

"Tastes like peppered wine mixed with horse piss!" Duncan said after drinking the entire contents without turning the stone mug down.

"Yeah, that's what he said." Thomas joked as Duncan turned a paler green. "Think you can ride? Captain Roc said he would sail as soon as we arrived in Acoasta. He holds his wine a lot better than you do, he didn't fall down but once!"

"I don't remember falling down." Duncan said as he washed his face.

"Well, you did but only once!"

"That don't sound like he can hold his wine any better." Duncan protested gingerly.

"He got back up, you didn't." Thomas looked around the room to see if they were leaving anything while Duncan pulled on his boots. "Ready?" He asked.

Duncan nodded and followed him to the stables. Four days after leaving Myastor to the north, they rode into the busy cobblestone streets of Acoasta. Thomas thought the moist heat in Myastor was uncomfortable, it didn't come close to the steam bath of the delta area. To Duncan, the people seemed friendlier than any they had encountered anywhere in their travels. He thought it would have been nice stay a while if time had not been running out.

Selling the mules and Graynor's horse in Myastor had been painful for them both but the two of them required little that wasn't on their path and it would make it a lot easier and faster. They had debated including Ember's mare but decided either would want to ride double with her very far. Each knew the other was lying but they couldn't bare to part with the only thing they had to remind them of her.

They found four ships tied off to a long dock where it looked like for the rest of the world it was business as usual. Dock workers and sailors were hard at work, unloading and loading the ship that had just moments before arrived there. Duncan nor Thomas had seen anything to compare, both nearly stopped in the middle of the dock, in the way, and watched.

"Yo, mates!" A small boy of perhaps eleven years old greeted them from a shadow beside a stack of crates.

Duncan stepped down from his horse and lead it to where the boy was standing. "I'm looking for Captain Roc's ship the 'Wayward Traveler'. You know which one it is?"

"She." He returned. "She's over there! The captain sent me to watch for you. I'm called Leo. Follow me." He lead them to a large two-masted well-kept ship.

Captain Roc yelled from the deck. "Stow your horses and come aboard."

Duncan nodded and looked to the boy.

"You lead them through into the lower hold there." He showed them the gangplank and lead the way. Duncan could feel his stomach churning as the ship bobbed slowly in the water. He knew right then the sea would never be his home.

The crew was casting off as Duncan and Thomas followed Leo through the passages to the deck where Captain Roc was shouting one order after another at the more than fifteen men who were busy lifting sails and trimming lines as the ship moved quickly out of the harbor and into the open sea. Duncan's legs were slowly learning to shift with the roll of the schooner.

"Welcome aboard the Wayward Traveler." The Captain shook Duncan's hand then Thomas'. "This lady has been my home for more years than I care to remember! What do you think of her?"

Duncan searched for something appropriate to say. "Sound," He said shaking his head. "She looks sound, like a fine looking lady."

"Oh, that she is, lad." The Captain smiled, happy Duncan thought well of his ship. "She's been places that few men have even dreamed, all of the known continents and a few now discovered islands."

"You've been to Ell and Ara?" Thomas asked.

"Aye, that I have!" He told them. "Not much in the way of good land there. Those are sorry excuses for continents but Amar is a totally different story. Yes, that was the place I wanted to retire from my life on the seas."

"You've been to the Fourth Continent, too." Duncan inquired.

"Yes, alone and with Graynor and your father, Ambrose." Captain Roc said, shocking Duncan.

"Yes, you did say you knew my father!" Duncan asked, he had forgotten the Captain told him that when they first met in Myastor.

"Graynor didn't tell you anything about me, did he?" The Captain asked, watching as both Duncan and Thomas shook their heads, no. "We were all friends, Ambrose, Graynor and I. They sailed on this ship with me and my father, he was the Captain of her then! We were his crew or part of it. They worked in return for their passage across the Seas of Malevolence while I worked to become her captain. If you'll join me for supper, I'll tell you all about it, m'lads."

"Great!" Was all Duncan could manage. He was dying to listen to anything about his father. He knew so little and although Graynor knew much, he had been very reluctant to tell him barely anything.

"In my cabin, say at eight bells." Captain Roc told then saw the puzzled look on their faces. "Eight o'clock! Leo will show you to your cabin and tell you about the watchbells. I'll see you at supper, gentlemen." He turned and yelled a course change to the helmsman.

"Lead on." Duncan said as Leo took them below deck and down a narrow hallway to a tiny door that opened into a small room containing a table with three drawers, two swinging hammocks, a lantern and a little porthole.

"Fresh water is in the barrel beneath the stairs, replace the lid and don't waste. The bell rings every half hour, one to eight times and starts over every four hours. Any questions, ask me or the first mate or the Captain. The crew likes to pull pranks on the guests. I've got work to do. Oh, the horses feeding and bedding fall to you as your work, see you later." He closed the door.

"What do you make of him?" Thomas asked as the door closed.

"I have no idea!" Duncan laid his pack beside the table. "Which one do you want?"

"The lower one, it's closer to the floor." Thomas pulled out the drawers and looked inside one at a time. "A wash pan and water pitcher in the top one." He dropped his pack into the lowest drawer and put Duncan's in the middle.

"These things are sure hard to get in." Duncan said as he landed hard on his feet the other side of the hammock, nearly slamming the wall headfirst.

"Maybe you had better take the bottom." Thomas teased.

"No, I'll get it in a minute." Duncan straddled the hammock like a horse, lay back slowly and closed his eyes. "See?"

"Yeah, you stay there and I'll get us a pitcher of water to wash with." Thomas took the tin pitcher and left the room.

For the first time, since getting the last jewel, Duncan felt good enough to look inside the jewels 'memories'. He looked at the Fourth Continent, he liked what it once was but was appalled at by what the darkness that transformed it into as it had spread over the once beautiful land. That darkness had forced people to flee their homes in fear of being devoured by the evil behind it.

He searched for 'memories' of his mother and father, much to his disappointment, there were none. He looked at the place the last jewel was hidden and wondered if a man could every touch it again? It lay more than twenty-five fathoms below the water in the Sea of Storms and he could barely swim. How would he ever dive that deep and return alive?

"Duncan, wake up!" Thomas was shaking him. "You're having a nightmare. Duncan!"

"I'm all right." Duncan quickly opened his eyes to find he was still in the hammock. Last thing he remembered was thinking about the jewel then he didn't know where he had been. Asleep, maybe?

"Seven bells rang a little while ago, you want to wash up a bit before supper?" Thomas said, wondering what was causing Duncan to act like he didn't know what was happening around him. He passed it off as being tired because that was the only thing he could think to do. After all they had been through, he had a right to be tired.

"Yeah, thanks." Duncan said as he nearly fell getting down from the hammock, still wondering if he had been asleep or not.

The Captain's cabin was at the schooner's stern, all the way across the stern. He explained the reason for all the room. This was his home, his only home and everything that a man required of a landlubber's home was the same high standards in which he had incorporated into his. He proudly showed Duncan and Thomas a few of his prize souvenirs, along with a brief story about how each came into his possession.

After a great tasting supper, he told Duncan a few things he wanted to know.

"Like I said before, I first met your father, Ambrose and Graynor when I was a youngster a wee bit older than Leo. And like him, I was a cabin boy learning all that I could to make the Captain proud of me but in my case, the Captain was my father. We were anchored in Ajac, a small town with a nice bay and a short dock when your father and Graynor approached the Cap and asked about working to earn their passage to wherever we were heading. It takes a lot of hands to sail a schooner and do it right, you know? We happened to be a little short on crew so the Cap took them on."

"They learned quickly and were soon salt-dogs the likes of which pleased my father and believe me, he was a tough old shark. Their passage work turned into a paying job although I don't recall that money meant much to either of them. They had a passion to see places and learn the legends and myths of those places. Sometimes, they would go off visiting the old places where tales started. Why, I remember once, we left them at Red Sky, up not far from the volcanoes and they hiked up there just to look."

Thomas and Duncan glanced at each other but didn't interrupt the story.

"It was probably over two years and a half that the two of them stowed their gear aboard this fine lady and called her home. Then one day when we dropped anchor at the Bay of White Sands and they said goodbye."

"Was that the last time you saw them?" Duncan asked.

"Together, it was." The Captain scratched his chin and thought back. "A few years later, we sailed with your father as a passenger, dropped him off in Esosia come to think of it. Talk about your coincidences, that's where you two are headed!"

"The end of a long scavenger hunt that has no more objects to find but the game will go on and the sands continue to run. My father was a...special man and he hid certain objects for me to find if I had the courage, skill and knowledge of how to acquire them plus some luck. My last piece is about five days from Esosia and more than a hundred and fifty feet below the surface of the Sea of Storms. Any ideas as to how I can get it without drowning?" Duncan asked.

"Not many can dive that deep, and none that I know near Esosia." The Captain said.

"How would you go about it?" Duncan was determined to find a way.

"Probably tie a rope to myself, toss a weight overboard then hold on until the bottom. You might have a couple seconds to look around, you won't see much at that depth though. And pray you can hold your breath till you break the surface again." He stared at Duncan a couple of seconds. "You need to practice holding your breath every day, hundreds of times before you go down. Maybe, just maybe you'll have a chance."

"If the world is to have a chance, you mean." Thomas injected into the conversation unconsciously.

"Would you care to explain that statement so that an old man won't have too many sleepless nights." The Captain asked as he was taken back a bit.

"He's just overly dramatic." Duncan answered hoping that would be the end of it.

"He strikes me as an honest young man that speaks only when he has something that should be said." Captain Roc nodded for Duncan to explain.

"It's really a long story so I'll give you the shortened version. The Dark Lord, which most believe to be a myth, is real and is trying to dominate the world by unleashing all kinds of evil that will destroy mankind in little over a month unless I can defeat him." Duncan said, hoping the Captain wouldn't think that he was crazy and toss him overboard.

"You're serious, aren't you?" The Captain saw the solemn look on not only Duncan's face but also on Thomas'. "That's a bitter wine to swallow, m'lad."

"But never-the-less the truth." Duncan smiled. "I would like you to keep that to yourself. Information of the kind could cause panic, widespread bloodshed and just plain chaos for the living."

"I'm not sure I would even attempt to repeat that! People might think I was becoming old and senile, if you know what I mean." The Captain stared at Duncan. "You look a lot like your father. You have that same look that I had forgotten was his. Ambrose seemed to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. I remember that he would go out of his way to talk to people when they were down on their luck or just feeling bad. He hated to see anyone unhappy. It would seem to spill over to him, tearing at his soul. He was special, wasn't he?"

"I'm not sure what you mean" Duncan stuttered, not really wanting that question out in the open.

"You know!" Captain Roc leaned forward and looked Duncan in the eyes. "He was not just a mere man, that much I know but just what was he?"

"He was a member of a special group." Duncan answered reluctantly after a long pause in the conversation. "All I am allowed to say is, he helped keep the balance between good and evil through a position he was born into long ago. He gave that power away when he met my mother and decided he wanted a son. Now that power is again required to keep the balance and order of things! So I, being his sole heir, have a birthright that makes me the only one responsible or in line for those duties. It is not a task that I willingly took but after the proper persuasion, I saw fit to do as fate required."

"Is there anything I or my crew can do to help?" The Captain felt afraid and sorry for Duncan. Sorry that any young man might be forced against his will to do anything.

"Yes, if I am successful in retrieving the last piece of the stones, we'll need to get to the Fourth Continent as fast as possible. Could you and your ship take us there or maybe arrange passage by another fast ship?"

"Most crews would mutiny before sailing there after the evil that has caused men to flee its shores in the masses." The Captain said softly. "I doubt you can find another ship's Captain willing to go but I will. Just don't say anything about it to anyone, I don't want to find myself in chains and legirons in the morn. Do you?"

"No." Duncan answered. "We have a bag of gold that we're willing to compensate you with although.."

"From what I understand this night, if I don't help you then the evil will rule the world including the seas and they're tough enough already." The Captain poured himself more rum and offered Duncan and Thomas more, they both declined. "I'll help you out and if things aren't as you say, I'll make you a crew member until you've worked off your debt." He laughed as he drank the rum.

In the middle of the night five days later, Duncan was awoken from a deep sleep by the tainted evil feeling that he knew only too well. Quickly, he dropped from the hammock, knocking Thomas upside-down and ran to the deck. The voices of the watch crew yelling at one another as they pointed to the glowing mass off the port side, a minor Demon from the Pit floated toward them.

"What is that thing?" Captain Roc asked as he too was now awake and on deck.

"Just a minor Demon." Duncan said, sounding like it demanded no more attention or respect than a shadow. "Tell your men to move back! Some will attack and kill!"

The Captain had his crew to pull back as Duncan stepped to the side-railing in front of the advancing form. "What do you want here?" Duncan questioned.

"To know where you are!" It screamed back in a voice that would have broken glass.

"You tell the Demons of the Pit that the binding spell I use is forever! That they will never leave the Pit again unless I permit it and that will not happen for those that serve the Darkness!" Duncan drew a fiery rune and cast the spell, the Demon screamed as it vanished into nothingness. Duncan turned and started back down the steps.

"I don't think we'll have a hard time in getting the crew to go along with you, not after word of what

you have done tonight gets around." The Captain looked out across to water. "Though I don't know which is more frightening. Thinking you were just crazy and making up that story of good verses evil, or now knowing that you were not. Be assured that my nights will be long indeed from here on."

"Be thankful that you have those nights because if the Darkness wins, your nights will belong to the evil that will rule the dark and the light." Duncan told him then continued back to his cabin where he knew the nightmare caused from touching a Demon, even through a spell, was waiting.

Chapter Eighteen

Five days after the Demon incident, the Wayward Traveler sailed into the docks at Esosia. Both, Thomas and Duncan stood on deck watching like young children. They reminded the Captain so much of two others that stood there many years ago, Ambrose and Graynor.

"We'll be ready to sail as soon as you return." The Captain told them then yelled orders to his crew as they took down the sails and brought the ship in gently against the wooden dock.

"We should be back in a week or eight days, all depends on how fast the horses want to go." Duncan joked as he nodded to Thomas. "Ready?" He asked him.

"Yeah. I may have to stop and kiss the dirt just as soon as I find some." Thomas told them.

"But I thought you loved the life of sailors?" The Captain asked.

"I do but it's not the one I want everyday." Thomas returned. "I like the feel of something solid beneath my feet besides the wooden plank of a deck-floor. It was enjoyable though."

The Captain laughed. "That why not all men are sailors, m'lad. I wish you good luck and a safe journey."

Duncan and Thomas shook his hand then made their way down to the hold where the horses were waiting, saddled and ready to go. Within minutes, they were out into the streets of the city that Graynor had told them so much about.

The people were just as Graynor had said, friendly faces that knew no strangers and smiled when asked to do any task, no matter how degrading. Even the houses looked friendly and warm, it was like they welcomed you, even invited you to live there. It was no wonder Graynor had choose this fair city as his home. The enraptured way he had spoke of it, Duncan would have thought the streets were paved with gold and the houses built of pearls. Still, he was sad that the old man wasn't here to show them the city he loved so much.

After buying some supplies, they rode out of Esosia and steadily southeast along the sea coast until sunset when they made camp next to the cliffs that grew higher with each league from the city. White rock columns rose high above the crashing waves of the sea, up to the grassy soil at the cliff's edge. They were majestic in color, size and beauty. Duncan thought this countryside was most beautiful and peaceful of all the places they had seen.

On their fourth day out on Esosia, they arrived at the place where the last jewel was hidden. Duncan tied his horse a couple hundred yards from the cliff after deciding the trees offered a better camp than the open grassy areas. He walked to the edge and looked at the blue water as he might have an enemy, a foe he had to conquer before it destroyed him. There the box that encased the jewel lay, four hundred feet below this cliff and more than a hundred and fifty feet beneath those salty waves. Tomorrow, when the tides were at their lowest, he would go down after it.

For the rest of the day, Duncan and Thomas cut, trimmed and dragged dry deadwood to the cliff's edge. One by one, they lowered each piece to the jagged boulder beach below that had been formed by the falling white stone columns. Thomas worked the horse, tying a log to a long rope and using the horse to lower it while Duncan moved them away from the water's edge. It wasn't hard work, just a long and slow process. Duncan was happy when he tied the rope to his waist and allowed Thomas' horse to pull him to the top of the cliff for the last time that evening.

As Duncan lay in his bedroll watching the stars twinkle and the moon make its way across the black sky, he wondered what Ember was doing at this moment. He wondered if she was being treated good by Janax Nerbo. Listening to the insects sing, the fire snapping and crackling, he wondered if they.. he would be in time to save her? Captain Roc said it could possibly take twenty-four days to reach the Bay that lead to the castle that Nerbo called his own. If he recovered the jewel tomorrow and they were back in four days, that made twenty-eight, too many! That left no time to travel from the Bay to the castle, close to three days would be required for that. Today made thirty-four days since Ember had been taken, they had twenty-six left.

Duncan thoughts flew back and forth trying to figure a way to cut their travel time or lengthen the time Janax Nerbo had allowed them. He couldn't think of anyway. They had done the best they could do. They weren't gods and shouldn't be required to perform as such, he told himself. Slowly, he drifted off to sleep sometime after midnight.

The small songbirds chirping woke Duncan as the sun was already shining bright the next morning. Thomas had fixed a small breakfast of cheese and hard bread, the usual. Duncan was angry with himself for sleeping so late until he tossed his bedroll back and felt the cold morning's moist air.

"Here." Thomas handed him the bread and cheese. "You'll probably need a bit of the Captain's rum to knock the chill off this morning." He stared into the fire as he talked, poking it with a stick.

"Sure hope it warms this morning!" Duncan said to himself, out loud.

"Me, too." Thomas answered, without looking up.

"We'll know soon." Duncan said as he chewed the chunk of Esosian cheese and walked to the edge of the cliff to see the fog that drifted across the water. The broken white boulders went about fifty feet farther out with today's lower tide than yesterday evening. "Going to be hard walking on those!" He ate the last of the bread.

"Do we need anything more than these ropes?" Thomas asked, dropping four coils of rope near the edge of the cliff.

"A water skin probably wouldn't hurt." Duncan said as he picked up the longest coil and tied the end securely around a small tree growing about twenty feet from the edge then tossed the rest of the rope over the edge. "I'll go on and get started! You tie that rope we used yesterday to that tree over there then join me." He took the rope he had tossed over the cliff and slipped it around his waist then disappeared over the edge.

All the way down, he wished he had asked someone in Esosia for some instructions on climbing, the rope rubbed his waist raw before he touched the bottom. Thomas landed beside him with several loops of another rope around his waist, the ends both double-half-hitched and some other knot Duncan didn't recognize that slowed his descent when he let go.

"I wish you had showed that to me!" Duncan lifted his jerkin to reveal a red mark that encircled his waist.

"I would have if you hadn't leaped over the cliff while I was busy tying that rope." Thomas said, adding. "I'll show you next time."

Quietly, the two of them carried the logs to the water's edge and lashed them together to make a crude raft. Duncan silently wished for a small boat but short of carrying one from Esosia and lowering it like the logs, there was none to be had. There were no cities or towns closer than Esosia and the Great Reef stopped any ships from coming in here. That was probably why Ambrose had chosen it's location.

"Well, it floats!" Duncan said after they cast the raft off the rocks.

"But for how long?" Thomas returned as he tossed the coils of rope onto the tiny bobbing raft.

"For long enough, I hope." Duncan picked out two rocks and placed them aboard. "Let's go." He jumped onto the lashed logs and shook his head.

After paddling out about three hundred feet into the warm waters by hand, Duncan could feel the jewel below him. "Here! This is it." He tied a long coil of rope to his sore waist.

"Aren't you going to leave the leather armor and those gloves here?" Thomas inquired

"No, they're part of the..magic!" Duncan searched for the right words.

"Good luck, then" Thomas said.

"You know what to do." Duncan picked up the smallest rock, took several deep and slow breaths then one last that he held before jumping over the side.

The salt stung his eyes but he forced them to remain open as the warm crystal clear water quickly grew darker and colder with each foot down that the stone pulled him. The murky rock and coral-covered bottom was closer than he realized as he barely managed to let go of the rock before it struck some of the razor sharp coral solidly. It was a beautiful place, he marveled as he searched for the jewel. He had landed close to twenty feet away. Knowing he would not be able to swim the distance and reach the surface alive, he tugged the rope and mentally marked the spot.

As Thomas watched the rope carefully uncoil, he readied the other stone by standing it on an edge. When the rope tied to Duncan's waist stopped playing out, he quickly tied it securely to the stone and waited. Less than ten seconds later, he felt Duncan's tug on the rope, that was his signal. Thomas pushed the rock off the raft on the side opposite to where Duncan dived in and watched as the rock sunk quickly out of sight, pulling the rope with it. Moving to the other side, he waited.

Duncan held onto the rope as it suddenly pulled taut yanking his already buoyant body rapidly toward the surface. Duncan felt like he was going to be crushed, his ears ached and when they popped going up, he almost lost his breath. Although his lungs ached and screamed for air, he managed to wait until his throbbing head broke the surface. Thomas pulled him onto the raft where he lay for a long time gasping air.

"You okay?" Thomas asked looking down worried. Duncan was feeling his ice cold skin with his hands as rubbed his arms, trying to warm himself.

"Yyyeesss." Duncan answered realizing that his body was shaking like he had been out in the winter weather up north too long. "It sure is cold.. down there!"

Thomas untied the rope from Duncan's waist and tugged at the rock the other end was tied, slowing pulling it back up and onto the raft. Paddling with his hands, he guided the tiny raft back to the rocky beach. By then, Duncan was sitting up, watching as the small waves broke, creating a white foam against the almost square white stones that made-up the beach.

"Let's find a comfortable spot to sit while you warmup a bit." Thomas told.

"No, we don't have the time." Duncan explained. "Get me another small stone, a little larger than the last and we'll try again."

"But you should rest a little while!" Thomas protested fearing for his friend's life.

"The water will only get deeper as the tide comes in and I don't think I can go any farther down without turning to a block of ice. I know I can't take any more pressure, feels that the water is trying to force its way in no matter how hard you shut your mouth!" Duncan told him as they both splashed the warm shallow water to get the raft away from the beach and back to the jewel for another dive.

After stopping for a short breather, Duncan again tied the rope to his waist. Touching the black sword with his strong gloved right hand, he concentrated on the jewel's location. He was sure this was the best spot. He breathed deeply as he watched Thomas re-tie the rock from the other end of the rope tied to his waist, the same one that pulled him up before. Thomas neatly coiled the rope and waited.

"See you in a minute or so." Duncan lifted the small stone, breathed deeply and dived in, again.

As the water grew colder, Duncan knew he was going down faster this time and every second would help. His ears popped making a sound frighteningly loud as he plunged deeper into the cold darkness. Turning the stone loose, he was happy to see he was only a few feet from the opening where the jewel was hidden.

Using the cracks and other holes for handholds, Duncan quickly pulled himself to the opening. Looking inside, he saw the box but as his right hand removed it, something snakelike, shot out of a crack next to his left hand, clamped its mouthful of sharp teeth onto Duncan's wrist and tried to pull it back into

the crack. Duncan was so startled by the quickness and the ferocity that the creature was showing, he nearly gasped. Water trickled down his throat as bile rose in his stomach, the fear from the attack by the unknown creature was nearly sickening.

Jerking the black blade from his back, he yanked hard with both feet planted firmly against the rocky wall to pull it from the hole then completely severed the head from its wiggling snakelike body. The head refused to let go, he struggled but it was locked solid and his air was running out. He wanted to breathe. Grabbing the box, he yanked to rope and held it along with the sword and the box.

The rope lifted him toward the top. Quicker, he thought, watching the shadows and lights dance and laugh at him dying far below the surface. His lungs burned although his body was so cold he doubted he would be able to breathe when he reached the top. Spots of yellow and black swirled in front of his eyes, his lungs demanding to be allowed to breathe! He fought the urge by kicking hard toward the surface. The yellow swirls faded as the black ones grew into one giant red explosion and everything went black, coolness flowed into his chest.

Thomas saw him coming up. He had held his own breath as Duncan went over, since then he had lost it twice. Duncan was in trouble, he was sure and he was also sure he didn't know how to help him. The long black blade shot out first, nearly hitting Thomas' face as he was knelling on the edge waiting, he grabbed it and laid it behind him. Then he grabbed the box from Duncan, his arms held it firmly like a death grip. Lastly, he pulled Duncan onto the raft.

The ell's head gave Thomas a little scare when he first saw it. Quickly though, he used the sword to cut its still locked jaws apart. He discarded the head and gently rolled Duncan to his belly trying to get the water from his lungs. Nothing! He pressed his bony long hands into the back of his unconscious friend trying to force the water out. Nothing, harder he pressed and again harder until he was almost putting all his weight down. Suddenly the salt water rushed out. He did it again and again until Duncan gasped for a breath, wheezing and rasping, coughing and vomiting water and pieces of food. Thomas sat back, relieved, and waited.

At first, he thought he was in the afterlife but the sudden urge to breathe as fast as possible told him that somehow, he had survived. When his eyes focused, he knew the raft he and Thomas had built. It was still bobbing in the water. A shadow moved in the corner of his vision, Thomas, he recognized his shape and rolled to his side. His wrist was tender and sore, his lungs burned like too much sun and his body was chilled past the shakes.

"You're going to be fine." Thomas said, trying to comfort him. "Let me look at that wrist."

"Did I get the box?" Duncan asked, alarmed that he didn't see it.

"Yes," Thomas pulled at the glove. "Hold still. There. It's bruised bad, goin' to be really sore but not one cut or scratch like I thought there would be. That's one tough glove."

"Gauntlet." Duncan said as he sat up and looked at his wrist. "It's a gauntlet, not a glove."

"Whatever." Thomas returned as he untied the rope from Duncan's waist and let it drop over the side. "You want to go ashore or open that box here?"

"Here would be nice but I'm too weak to swim if I fall in." Duncan joked as the shaking set in.

"You try to get warm." Thomas moved across Duncan. "Here, I know not having this with you makes you feel naked." He laid the black sword across Duncan. And paddled with his hands toward the shore, wondering why he felt as if he had done this before?

Gingerly, Duncan walked across the white stones to the base of the cliff. The shakes from the chilling cold were ending but he still felt cold. Hot flashes were shooting all over his body, he knew fever was likely to follow. Thomas helped him, carrying the box and allowing Duncan to lean on him as he was still a little dizzy.

After sitting down where the ropes hung from the camp above, Duncan watched Thomas place the box in front him and step away. Drawing the black sword, Duncan shoved the point into the ground and opened the still wet box. Inside, the lining was dry he noticed as he lifted out his father's helmet that matched the sword's metal and color. He admired its fine craftsmanship then positioned it on his head. Much to his surprise, it fit as if it was made with his head as the pattern.

From the corner of the box, he removed the black sack that held the last jewel. Slowly, he untied the golden string that held the sack closed and dropped the orange jewel into his palm. The sun struck the jewel causing it to reflect rays of orange light nearly blinding them both before Duncan covered it with his hand. Carefully, he placed the stone against the sword's hilt and snapped it into place. The sword, Duncan and the jewels blazed to life.

Thomas moved back as the colors expanded. Yellow, blue, green, violet, red and orange lights danced outward from Duncan. He was their center, the point from which they emanated. In oscillating waves, they extended farther and farther, twisting, turning and combining to create other shades and colors that was truly the most beautiful thing Thomas or Duncan had seen in their lives.

Each time the lights pulsed out, Duncan's mind was overcome by the vast amounts of knowledge that each stone held. It had been there all the time only he couldn't reach it because the orange jewel linked all the pieces, the jewels, the armor and Duncan, together. Now, as the rainbow of colors danced all around, only now did he realize that it needed a center to work and in all the universe there was but one piece that filled the void, he himself. With the sword held high, a rainbow shot upward and seemed to go past the very sun in the sky then it fell back to the ground again, along with Duncan.

"Duncan!" Thomas rushed to his side. He was still breathing, Thomas was happy to discover. "Duncan! Wake up! The tide'll be coming in a little while." He slapped his face. "Damn!" Thomas uttered as he slid the glowing sword into its scabbard and tied a couple of ropes to Duncan's waist, legs and shoulders then he attached the ropes to the two ends that hang from the cliff overhead. Wishing for another way, he began climbing the ropes toward the top.

Staring at the sunny sky, Thomas lay at the top of the cliff breathing heavily after the near four hundred feet of climbing with no place to rest. He allowed himself only a few minutes before getting to his feet again and walking to the horses. He wasn't strong enough to pull Duncan up there but they were. Tying one rope to his horse and the other to Duncan's, he slowly walked them to a tree that he thought was about three hundred feet away before swinging them around the tree and heading back. Slowly, ever so slowly, he went as Duncan neared the top until he spotted his head. Tying the horse's reins to a rock, he ran to pull Duncan the last few feet, afraid the horse would hurt him as they pulled him over the edge.

Quickly, he untied the ropes from Duncan and dragged him to his bedroll. Removing the helmet, he touched his forehead. Fever, he told himself as he wished Ember or Graynor, one, was here, they knew

just what to do for such things. He found a clean shirt among their things, soaked it with water and gently lay it across Duncan's forehead then went to take care of the horses.

Seeing no change in Duncan when he returned, Thomas took his crossbow, a couple of bolts and went in search of a grouse or any kind of bird to make a broth as he had seen his sister and Graynor do. Pleased with both his luck and skill when he arrived back at the camp with a quail and a squirrel. He was soon disappointed by the fact that his friend was no better. His fever had risen and he was shaking worse than anytime earlier today. Thomas added his own bedroll to Duncan's cover and wet the cloth again before starting a fire to fix their supper.

Thomas ate part of the squirrel, chunks of cheese and a piece of the hard bread as he watched over Duncan much as his sister had after the sandworm slime and the serpent battle nearly that took the life from his body. He remembered back to when he and Ember had attacked Duncan and Graynor seeking only food but finding instead two people whose lives became so deeply intertwined with their own. That seemed like a thousand years ago. Checking Duncan's head, he was pleased to find the fever was gone and so was the shaking. He lifted Duncan's head and slowly poured the broth into his mouth, a little at a time so not to choke him, continuing until all the soup was gone.

Resting with his back to a tree, he waited and watched as Duncan's breathing became more regular. The black sword's hilt slowly glowed brighter until it was more brilliant than the huge fire Thomas had going. Minutes later, it dimmed and Duncan spoke.

"Thomas?"

"Yes, Duncan?" He quickly moved to his side.

"What am I doing here?" He asked weakly.

"You passed out and had a fever.."

"I mean, how did I get here?"

"I brought you up." He said, happy that his friend was finally awake.

"But how? Alone?"

"Oh, no. The horses helped, a great deal in fact." Thomas answered. "Do you feel better?"

"My throat hurts a little but I think I'm okay." He replied. "What time is it?"

"Close to dawn."

"You've been awake all night?"

"Someone had to keep watch." Thomas joked. "You wouldn't wake up and take your turn."

"Thanks." Duncan slowly sat up.

"Anytime. That was sure some light show." He remarked.

"Yeah, I learned a lot." Duncan rubbed his eyes and ran his fingers through his golden hair. "And as Nerbo said, time is running out. Are you too tired to ride?"

"But you.."

"You can tie me across my saddle if I can't ride." Duncan stood slow and wobbly then looked south. "We have to go! We can rest aboard the ship when we're sailing southward."

"All right but I'm telling Ember how you've been acting!" Thomas joked, trying to hide his fear.

"Please don't." Duncan said softly, wishing she was here.

"I'll saddle the horses." Thomas handed him a piece of the roasted squirrel. "Eat some."

In the dark of the night three days later, they lead their horses aboard the Wayward Traveler. The crew weighed anchor minutes later and quietly they drifted south in search on a strong wind.

Chapter Nineteen

"If you're going to keep the sword on your back, you'll need to cover those glowing stones." Thomas told Duncan as he started to the helm of the ship.

"I'll wrap it with a strip of leather, maybe it won't shine through that." He pulled the sword from its scabbard.

"The way this ship is bouncing around, I don't know if I'll ever be able to eat anything." Thomas watched the waves rise and fall through the tiny porthole, a lot of water splashed over the side of the schooner.

"I knew that the Bay of Storms had to mean something besides smooth sailing!" Duncan said as he wrapped the jewels and the sword's hilt. "There! What do you think?" Pleased with the way it looked.

"It'll do although it is a shame to have to hide those stones. They are pretty!" Thomas broke his eyes away from the churning sea long enough to glance at the sword. "Are we going to have to ride through this all the way to Amar?"

"No, the captain says it gets worse!" Duncan smiled at the boy who was fast becoming a man. He was changing more each day, by leaps it seemed since Ember had been kidnaped. "There's a few things we have to go over before getting to the snake-pit that Janax Nerbo calls home."

Thomas left the porthole and sat down on the lower hammock waiting for Duncan to continue.

"We can't rush in there and expect to come out alive." Duncan began. "I need to teach you a few things that will protect you, somewhat. First, I want your word you'll never teach anyone else what I teach you nor will you try to learn more by any means other than me. You swear on our friendship and the honor

you owe Graynor and yourself."

"I swear!" Thomas promised.

"What I'm about to teach you will bind Demons so you can get away. You won't ever be able to send them to the Pit but you can bind them for about one full day and they'll be helpless during that time. The spell works on all Demons, major or minor. I want you to practice drawing the runes and saying the chants but not together. Practice everyday until we get to Amar. Okay?"

Thomas nodded, yes. And Duncan showed him how to draw the runes that burned like blue fire and say the chants that rhymed with words older than the sea waters that carried them closer to Amar. Over and over, Duncan helped him speak the words until they were as easily spoken as his own name.

The storm eased the third day out of Esosia and finally died out on the fourth. The sun burned brightly and Duncan was hopeful it would stay that way. The Captain told him that was just a little storm! Once they crossed over into the Sea of Malevolence, they would think that every creature in the Pit was trying to sink the ship.

Sure enough, after five days of smooth seas the winds began blowing harder and harder, the dark clouds and lightning chased the swift schooner nearly all day. When the storm caught her, they discovered the Captain was right. It was all hands on deck with lifelines secured close to keep them from being washed overboard and being lost. Thomas and Duncan had watched for awhile dressed in heavy oil-cloaks and wide hats but the powerful wind driving welt-raising rain and hail forced them down below for a long and near sleepless night.

Each day they woke after a rough night of swinging wildly in their hammocks and wondered if it would end today or not? And each day the rains beat down, the winds howled and the misery continued.

By the eighth day, Thomas and Duncan were like caged wild animals, they were desperately looking for things to do. So when the Captain said the men were getting tired, they quickly volunteered to work in some of the lighter duties that they might be easily instructed to do. They worked harder than they could have ever believed, fighting the pitching ship and wind driven rain while attempting to complete their assigned tasks. At nightfall, they swallowed a few bites of food for supper and went to bed. That night they slept all night long without once being woke by the wind, rain or lightning.

They laughed to find the storm still raging when they woke the next morning. Again, they wanted to help the crew and again Captain Roc allowed them, but nothing dangerous, he said.

Duncan helped pull the heavy water-soaked canvases up and down while Thomas ran errands and helped when more weight was needed raising and lowering the sails. Around noon, when everyone was tiring, Thomas and another sailor slipped on the wet deck as they lowered one of the smaller sails. The wind had chosen that very moment to gust. Two of the sailors and Duncan were slowly lifted off the deck, the two more experienced sailors let go at near three feet from the deck, Duncan however did not. Quickly, the sail jerked him skyward as the pitch of the ship swung him out over the ten-foot high plus waves on the starboard side then flipped him to the port side where the wind left the sails. Duncan almost lost his grip on the line as it let go when snapped taut, leaving his feet dragging in the water for a second before he was yanked out again.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on ends. No, he cried to himself, this is not the right time.

Looking to the ship, he saw some of the crew pulling at the sail slowly lifting him up level with the deck again then behind them he saw it. A minor Demon floating toward the ship. Floating in a straight line for him and at that moment, he had both hands gripping the line and was struggling not to turn loose to defend himself. Thomas saw it crossing the deck ignoring him and the crew. He immediately drew the runes Duncan had taught him. As he cast them around the Demon, he saw a smile on Duncan's face and the look of surprise from the Demon's as it remained frozen while the ship sailed off and left it floating there.

"Thanks." Duncan said as the wide-eyed crew members pulled him back aboard. "I believe I'll rest a second." He walked below weak-kneed as he thanked the stars Thomas was a good learner or he would probably have been fish-food right then.

Later, that afternoon, everyone was smiling. The storm was breaking up and off to the starboard side they could see Amar. A cheer went up from the crew as the sun broke through the dark clouds even though it only lasted a few minutes before setting.

"Late tomorrow evening before dark, we should reach the Bay of Flowers as it was once called." Captain Roc showed them his old chart of the continent. "Before morning, we can lower our anchor, here. Your horses can swim behind a rowboat the short distance it will be to shore. That's the best I can do! I'm sure the dock at the Bay of Moonbows will be guarded."

"You just get us to the land and we'll manage the rest, right Thomas?" Duncan was worried about taking him into the danger especially after losing his friend, Graynor. But with Ember being held hostage, he knew there was no way short of physical restraints to keep him from coming.

"Yeah, it's probably not nearly as bad as some of the places we've been." Thomas replied, remembering the Ghanty Sands, the unbelievable hot days and near frigid nights.

"How long can you wait around for our return?" Duncan asked, half afraid this land was about to become their permanent home because of the vast distance back to civilization.

"That depends on the weather, mostly." The Captain answered as he pointed to the chart. "We'll sail over to this cove and wait. How long do you think you'll need?"

"Eight days if you can wait that long."

"If I can, I will. If not, I'll be back within sight of the cove everyday at.. say noon. That okay with you?"

"Yeah, and if we're not there in two weeks, we'll not be coming." Duncan stared out past the coast and looked inland.

"Would you like a few of the crew to come ashore and find you?"

"No! If we're not back by the end of two weeks, you and the crew get away as fast as possible to a safe port and prepare yourself for the end of mankind." Duncan said solemnly then disappeared down the stairs to check on the horses.

True to his prediction, the Captain sailed the Wayward Traveler into the small and shallow cove in the early morning hours of the next day. Duncan was tense and worried as he helped get his horse out of the

lower hold and into the icy water. He was afraid of all the things that might go wrong, of causing one or all of their deaths and in his active mind, there were hundreds.

"Well, they didn't drown." Duncan removed his saddle from the boat and gently tossed it and a blanket across the big roan's back.

"I wasn't worried, were you?" Thomas lied as he followed Duncan's example. He knew without the horses, Ember would be doomed with the rest of the world.

"When their heads went under after that wave hit, I'll admit that I was a little concerned." Duncan moved over and helped with Ember's mare. "You got your bows and the spears?" Duncan asked.

"Yes, that's the fourth time you've asked." Thomas jerked the cinch tight and mounted his horse.

"Just checking." He, too mounted and listened as the ship's crew lifted her anchor and prepared to sail out of the cove. "Let's go then." He kicked his nervous horse and rode east as fast as he dared in the near pitch-black night. Thomas leading Ember's mare, stayed at his side.

Dawn showed them a dead and dying land. This was the consequences of draining all life forces by the need for power of those that were evil, Janax Nerbo for one. The land was nearly void of plants and animals except for the few hideous and wildly deformed creatures that roamed blindly in search of food or other things. Several times during the night, the horses had shied away from the most odorous of them and some that couldn't be avoided, those Duncan and Thomas had stopped in their tracks, permanently. All the critters they encountered were living and were probably at one time running wild and harmless. They were far from that now.

Although, they didn't see any Demons, both Duncan and Thomas could feel them all around but for some reason they couldn't explain, the Demons kept their distance. That worried them both, especially Duncan. None of the ones he had sent back to the Pit before seemed reluctant to approach within striking distance. That night, they each took two hour turns at watch in a fireless camp near a single twisted and dying tree. Both were thankful when morning arrived and nothing had approached in the darkness.

On the third night, they spotted a large walled castle high on a knoll straight ahead. It looked dead and deserted in the darkness as they dismounted a good ways from it.

"There's a light in the belltower." Thomas said as he chewed a bite of dried fish.

"And another on the wall next to the drawbridge." Duncan looked behind him to see if he could see what felt like a Demon breathing on his neck.

"I feel like a thousand eyes are watching me!" Thomas, too, turned and scanned the horizon. "Sort of like they're pushing me on."

"That's it!" Duncan said. "They know we're here! And they're driving us like animals into the corral. Damn!"

"What?" Thomas asked, worried now. "What is it?"

"They want us there, tonight." Duncan smiled. "Before I become of age. Yes, that's what they're worried about. Dammit, old man! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Duncan!" Thomas asked, again. "What is it?"

"My father's power and knowledge of the universe aren't the only thing in the jewels! Graynor's is there, too! Don't you see? With my father's power, I am the Dark Lord's equal! But with Graynor's, I can send him to the Pit with his Demon friends and lock him in there for eternity, if I choose."

"Graynor?" Thomas wrinkled his brow and cocked his head to one side. "Just what kind of powers did he have?"

"Those that were equal to my father's if I'm 'remembering' it right!" Duncan turned back to studying the dark and forbidding castle. "I only received a small portion of what the jewels really contained on that beach! The full-blown explosion of their power will be transferred sometime in the next few hours. That's what they're concerned about, especially the Dark Lord. If he can get his hands on the jewels, he hopes to eventually learn how to absorb the power as his own and use it to rule the entire universe, not just the four continents! None of the Consortium of Elders could stop him then though I doubt they can even now."

"What is a Consortium of Elders and how do you know this all of the sudden?" Thomas watched the light move down the belltower and out of sight.

"It's been there in my mind since I mated the last jewel with its sisters. There is a lot there but until I seek it out, I don't realize it's there!" Duncan had a bad feeling about that belltower, it had something to do with Ember. "The Consortium of Elders hold the power of the universe so it can maintain precise order and balance between the Good and the Evil. They drew up the rules for both sides over hundreds of thousands of years ago and then watch over both sides to see that all adhere to those rules."

"Seems like a great big responsibility!" Thomas said as he, too, sensed something going on inside the castle walls.

"And boring." Duncan answered as he climbed back into his saddle. "That's why father and Graynor gave it up, to live a life that was more exciting, that of the family. Can you believe that, Thomas?"

"No!" Thomas climbed back on his horse and cocked the two crossbows he had hanging from the saddle horn. "Trouble if we stay. Trouble if we go, you choose."

Wordlessly, Duncan kicked his horse's flank. Thomas quickly joined by his side and trotted stride for stride toward the battle that awaited inside the dark fortress. Thomas loosened the cords that held the ironwood spear as Duncan lifted the helmet to his head, set it in place and tied the leather straps under his chin.

"Stay close behind me and watch your back." He told Thomas as the horse's hooves echoed off the dark stonewall a little louder with each step toward the two large wood and iron reinforced gates that stood wide open, inviting them to come inside and tempt fate. "And don't leave my side no matter what you see or think you see!"

"Okay!" Thomas managed. He could feel the sweat beading on his arms and forehead from the pressure of hundreds of eyes staring at him and his friend. A sudden blast of icy air sent chills down his back causing him to shiver.

"If the binding spell doesn't hold them, put a bolt in their heart!" Duncan turned his head to Thomas

and spoke softly just above the clopping of the hooves on the flat stones that lead into the courtyard.

Slow and carefully, they held the horses back to nearly a trot. Watching, ever so suspiciously of even the dark shadows and what might have been hidden there. But nothing showed itself as they passed through the gateway and continued down the ink colored street.

"Why don't they come out into the open?" Thomas questioned as he shifted the spear to his left side, away from Duncan and toward the seemingly empty buildings that stood not a stone's throw away.

"I don't know. Orders, probably." Duncan answered as he sensed something move ahead in the growing light. "It's all about to change."

Ahead of them, the street was being illuminated by torches held in iron rings set in the castle walls and posts anchored into street stones. The light encircled a slab of gray and red speckled granite that was close to eight feet long, three feet wide and thick. Small black iron rings were set in it's top and bottom at each corner. Duncan recognized it at once, the stone from his nightmares! The very same slab he had battled his way to in an effort to win his mother's freedom.

A movement in the door below the belltower caught his eye and out stepped the man who was responsible for his being here, Janax Nerbo! And behind him was Ember, her eyes dreamlike and dressed in the same style robe as Nerbo except his robe was black and shining while hers' white as the sunlit snow of the north. As he moved down the two steps in front of the door, Duncan saw Ember was being escorted by two black robed 'followers'. Behind them was a pikesman carrying a wicked looking ax.

"Welcome!" Nerbo spoke loudly as if his voice would cover the sounds of other 'followers' and a few Demons easing from the shadows that surrounded them. "I was half afraid that you would not be able to keep your 'appointment'. Where is my old friend Graynor, I don't see him coming behind you?"

"He had another 'appointment' to keep, he sends his regrets!" Duncan spoke softly but with a voice that carried well past Nerbo's ears.

"How disappointing." Nerbo said trying to decipher Duncan's true meaning and turn it to his own advantage.

"I've come here after the woman and if you or anyone or anything has harmed her being in anyway that I consider to have defiled her, the universe has no place in which to hide you from my wrath!" Duncan's voice lifted from the soft spoken tone to one that seemed to command the thunder of stormy skies yet to come.

Nerbo stepped back as if Duncan's booming words frightened him. "You should not come into my domain and demand anything in the presence of the beings here."

"You think, puny mortal, that you or any of the slimy creatures that crawled up out of the Pit to do your bidding worries me? Don't you realize what you and the Dark Lord set into motion when you encased my father in that crystal jewel?" Duncan was standing in his stirrups nearly shouting at Nerbo, who shied even farther back and stopped only when he bumped into Ember.

"How dare you!" Nerbo snapped his fingers and more than a dozen Demons floated toward Duncan and Thomas. Thomas quickly bound more than half as Duncan and Nerbo watched. Duncan bound the rest with one large rune then snapped his own fingers as he spoke the ancient spell, instantly all of the

bound Demons flashed, falling to the ground screaming and wiggling in pure torment before disappearing out of sight.

"You can do better than that!" Duncan sat back down in the saddle. "My father's power will never be your's, nor your Dark Lord's! That power is my inheritance from my father and I alone can claim it."

"Then the woman dies!" Nerbo snapped his fingers, again. A knife flashed up to Ember's throat, held by one of the 'followers' with the same look in his eyes as Ember's, drugged no doubt.

"No!" Duncan and Thomas shouted at the same time.

"The jewels!" Nerbo demanded his face distorted with anger. "Give the jewels to me or she dies! Now!"

"All right!" Duncan told him as he stepped down from the saddle and approached the sacrificial stone. He slipped the sword from its scabbard and slowly unwound the leather strip that had concealed the glowing jewels for the past couple of weeks. He heard Nerbo gasp in surprise as the rainbow of colors illuminated the entire courtyard as bright as any sun ever had.

"Release her and it's yours." He held it flat by the dark blade, his right hand next to the beautifully shining hilt, moving slowly forward offering it to Nerbo.

"Let her go." He told the knife-wielding pikesman. He did but she didn't move.

"Get her, Thomas!" Duncan watched him fluidly slip off the horse and approach his sister. One step at a time, Thomas lead her around Nerbo and toward her horse. Slowly, Nerbo walked around the stone and straight toward Duncan.

"There's still the matter of my father's release, also." Duncan broke the silence.

"Get the old man!" Nerbo nearing Duncan turned his head and spoke to someone near the door.

Almost too fast to see, Duncan's right hand grabbed the sword's hilt as he pushed an unaware and startled Nerbo toward the stone. Nerbo's head and back smacked hard against the cold stone knocking the breath from his lungs and stunning him so he couldn't move. Duncan was on him before he knew what was happening. Quickly, Duncan rammed the glowing blade through Nerbo's chest and into the stone, pinning him solidly. The look on Nerbo face was one of total surprise and shock. He knew he a deadman but still with blood bubbling from his mouth he signaled for his 'followers', Demons and other hideous creatures to attack.

Thomas guarded Ember with his crossbows, the spear and the binding spell Duncan had taught him just for this moment. Duncan cast his own spells, sending both the Demons he bound and those Thomas bound to the Pit leaving only living creatures to deal with. Pulling his sword from the stone and Nerbo's chest, he cut Nerbo's head from his shoulders with a short swing and then turned to face the flesh and blood things that wanted only his death.

It was like the battles in his nightmares! Duncan would kill one creature and another would take its place. The brightly glowing sword sung one death-dealing song after another as he fought with Thomas to protect the three of them. His arm was throbbing from overuse as he climbed free of the dead and dying bodies. No sooner was he free till he was forced to fight more as they kept coming aimlessly. He

and Thomas had killed or maimed nearly every living thing in the now crimson stained courtyard.

Blood covered, he staggered over and helped Thomas put Ember on her horse and then lead his own past the bodies toward a clear spot next to the wall when a flash in their path nearly blinded them all.

"Puny mortal, indeed." A tall well-built man dressed in black leather armor much like Duncan's said as he stood in the street blocking their path. Duncan recognized him at once, the Dark Lord himself. He was staring at the area around the stone.

"You must ignore our appearance," Duncan spoke as if he was an old friend and this meeting was an everyday occurrence between the two of them. "We are on our way to wash up before freeing my father. Now, if you will excuse us."

"Why do you mock me, Son of Ambrose?" The Dark Lord demanded of Duncan.

"If that is what you think, then you should try another thought." Duncan needed time, he knew it was close. "I am tired and do not want another challenge at this moment. I would like to have a few minutes to wash the lifeblood of so many from my body and my armor before I am forced to spill more, be it yours or my own."

"You have the same brashness as your father, young one but I have eternity ahead of me! Where as you face only death and the permanent darkness that will follow!" The Dark Lord lifted his hand and the twin wooden gates closed by themselves. "I will allow you a few minutes to prepare for your death."

"That will be very generous of you." Duncan lead his horse to a water barrel next to one of the buildings followed by Thomas and Ember.

"Is that..?" Thomas asked as he too dipped his hands in the barrel and washed the blood from his face and arms.

"Yes, the Dark Lord." Duncan removed his helmet and rinsed the blood from it and his long golden hair. Slowly, he washed his arms and face, stalling for time. He knew that the moment he was waiting on would be there soon. But would it arrive before he was forced to battle the Dark Lord in a hand to hand fight to the death?

"Son of Ambrose, I await you!" His terrifying voice send chills up Duncan's back. Duncan had finished washing and turned to meet his cold hate filled eyes.

"Duncan is my name!" Duncan replied as he set the wet helmet back on his head.

"It is good to know one's enemies." His eyes trying to pierce Duncan's soul or so it seemed.

"Indeed." Duncan softly answered as he felt a slight change around his skin.

"You have something I want!" The Dark Lord shifted his stance to create the illusion of growing taller, as if trying to frighten Duncan. "You can hand it over then leave with your life and the lives of your friends! Or you can choose to fight, in which case I will end not only your life but also the lives of your friends as well."

"Are you sure you can kill me?" Duncan asked, hoping for more time by making him uncertain. "Nerbo didn't tell you that the jewels transferred their powers to me as I retrieved them, did he? He only

told you what my father and Graynor wrote in their journal, didn't he?"

"No! But I had reached the conclusion that you were gaining power when the Demons and Trackers I sent after you kept disappearing without a trace." He dropped his hand to the hilt of the sword strapped to his waist. "When Janax told me of the time limit he had set on you and where, I sent several of my Demons to seek you out without telling Janax. I was quiet upset by the one that you returned, it wishes for death now! I needed those jewels and still do so hand them over and I will spare your life!"

Duncan could feel the energy growing around him like the air was charged with small bolts of lightning. A few more seconds and he would be ready. "I cannot give you that which is not yours. I owe you nothing except payment for your part in the Evil that hurt so many of my friends! So hear my words and heed them! If you force this issue, I will not stop until you too, are like Janax Nerbo, gone from this time and place into the next. You are the one to whom that the responsibility falls! Choose well for your life will depend on that choice!" Duncan knew the time had arrived and drew the sword, lifting it high above his head. The jewels suddenly came to life, shining brighter than the sun causing the Dark Lord to shield his eyes with his arm and step back, drawing his own sword.

"From the father to the son!" Duncan shouted as the air in the courtyard swirled like a hurricane and a bolt of rainbow colors shot through the thick black clouds overhead, parting them to reveal a bright blue sky. As the rainbow fell, the winds picked up.

"From the brother of the father to the son!" Duncan screamed above the roar of the winds. Again, the jewel exploded and the fiery flame that looked like a rainbow shot outwards to fill not only the courtyard but the heavens as well. What clouds were there, disappeared quickly past the horizon all around and remained so as the rainbow fell upon Duncan, again.

"My uncle's powers were stored in the jewels with rest of my fathers! Those I now claim as mine! I am sorry that you are tired of your existence!" Duncan said as he took a defensive posture, the beautiful rainbow colors flowing around him like water flowing over the stones in a brook.

"You are the one that will lose today, boy!" He cast a glance at Thomas and Ember but before he could speak his spell, Duncan had wrapped them both in a protective rainbow colored cocoon.

Angered, he strode forward and traded blows with Duncan's black sword. Sparks flew out as metal struck metal. Viciously, he swung his heavy sword over and under, again and again. Thrusting and trying desperately to break through Duncan's blazing defense. Duncan remembered what Ember had told him, watch for his repeats, he will do his favorite moves over and over. If you wait, you will see the opening and Duncan saw. Like a deadly snake the black blade thrust through under the Dark Lord's sword as it lifted. He screamed in pain as Duncan's fiery blade passed through his shoulder forcing him to drop his sword. Duncan quickly placed the black sword's point against the Dark Lord's throat.

"Do you have anything to say about those innocent people whose lives you have destroyed before I pass sentence?" Duncan asked as the point drew blood.

"NO!" A shout came from behind them as nearly a dozen men and women suddenly appeared from nowhere to form a circle around Duncan and the defeated Dark Lord. The other members of the Consortium of Elders, Duncan knew at once.

"You cannot!" One of the old men was saying.

"Then you just watch!" Duncan shouted as he pressed the blade harder against the Dark Lord's already bleeding throat.

"NO! That's not what we mean!" One of the women stepped next to Duncan. "If you kill him, you'll tip the scales the other way! Time and the universe will end just the same as if he had destroyed you, in total chaos!"

Duncan suddenly knew what she was saying was true. He instantly knew too much. His heart was not ready for the revenge he truly wanted, not if the universe was to be destroyed as well.

"I was caught up in my own anger! You're right, of course." Duncan dropped the blazing sword from the Dark Lord's neck and slipped it back in the scabbard. Then he spoke a spell, softly and drew the runes that quickly closed the wound to the Dark Lord's shoulder. "You will remember what you have done for a long time, both to my father and any others that suffered because of you!" Duncan drew another rune, colored by many rainbows and cast the spell that went with it. The rainbow rune squeezed the Dark Lord tightly until he disappeared in a puff of multicolored smoke without a chance to say or do anything.

"In one month, you will come to me where I will choose to build my home southwest of Esosia. Do not be late, we have a lot of things to change!" Duncan slowly addressed the Consortium then quickly dismissed them and went to see about Thomas and Ember.

Together, the three of them found Duncan's father, weak but still alive. And as they rode back to where the ship was waiting to put this newly awakening land behind them, Duncan, Thomas, and Ember smiled, laughed and cried as they told Ambrose of the wonderful and exciting adventures they shared as Duncan sought each piece of the Rainbow Jewel.

Epilogue

Sitting with his back leaned against a large white ash, Duncan watched as the stonecutters went about their job of building Duncan's new home. A home that he would share with Ember and her brother, Thomas. Ember's stuporous state lasted only a few hours after her rescue and with little or no side-effects from nearly two months of being forced to take the white powder known as elen. Duncan, with help from Thomas and others, hoped to help wipe elen production from the entire face of the world in the next couple of years. He was happily in love with Ember and her, with him. Turning his head, he watched the small puffy clouds drift slowly across the blue skies above the Sea of Storms.

His father was regaining his strength and now that Duncan's mother had rejoined him, Duncan could see a little of the reason his father had laid aside one of the greatest positions in the universe. Duncan, although he was happy to have and share all the love of those around him, had no desire to give up his newly acquired powers or position so soon. He had no idea what his limitations were, if any. But he was

going to explore the possibilities as he grew older, if older was the right word. Maybe more mature was what he was seeking.

The Consortium had agreed to a lot of his demands when they met with him and his father, two months before. His first victory was one he was sure Graynor would have liked to have shared in even more. The Pit of Darkness was one way until further notice. That added a bit of relief to Duncan's worries, now. Even if the Dark Lord found his way back, he would be trapped in the Pit with his Demons until members of the Consortium helped him out And the way they agreed on things that was very unlikely to ever happen.

Ambrose had told him about some of the things he could do and it excited him. The Elders had told him what he could not do. Between the two, he knew there was much to learn. He really liked the possibility of being able to go places not just here but anywhere he could imagine. He wondered if he could take Po and his friends home? Someday, he would try if they all wanted. Deep in the back of his mind, he was trying to ignore what his father had said when he had seen the beheaded form of Janax Nerbo, 'That's not him! It's a double he found through the Demons.' That meant that somewhere, out in the universe, Janax Nerbo was still plotting and now that the Dark Lord was out of his reach, just who would he side with? Chills shot down Duncan's spine as he looked around to see if he was being watched but mortals are harder to feel than Demons, he would have to keep on his toes.

As the rose colored sun slowly fell past the grassy horizon, Ember walked gracefully from the tent that had been home for the last few weeks. She was carrying a basket and a blanket as well as a smile, that usually meant that tonight's supper would include a romp under the stars. Maybe some night, he would show her a romp through the stars.

THE END

The Adventures of the Rainbow Sword

Book 1

(Quest for the Jewels)

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Howard Thompson, a quadriplegic for twenty-three plus years due to a diving accident, lives, writes, works and plays in the rolling hills of Eastern Kentucky with his wife of twenty years, Jo Ann. They've raised three children, two boys and a girl up the 'holler' he refers to as "Cyber Holler". He enjoys writing, reading, shooting, camping, fishing, woodworking, Wildcat basketball and hundreds of other things. Howard enjoys the quiet lifestyle the rural area offers as well as the abundant wildlife that also calls the holler home. You can write him at the address below or by E-mail.



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