

BOUND IN FROST

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Bound in Frost by J. W. Meyer

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I WHICH WAY

“Don’t let them fizzle out this time. Your sequence needs to be faster.”

As he accepted the obviousness of the gnome’s statement, Aribious took his eyes from the flecks of ash drifting over the field to glance down at Styke with mock disdain. “It’s not a simple matter. Intertwining spells is not mixing up a potion.”

Styke needlessly straightened his patterned doublet before planting a hand on his hip. “Everything is relative to practiced mastery. You know the spells, now you just need to perfect the timing. Bring it all together.”

The wizard shook his head. “Easy for you to say. You’ve only had to learn a new list of potions to brew. No one asked you to completely change skill sets when you were summoned into the army’s service. Blasting things to death is far different from the regular enchanting I’m used to.”

“What can I say? A good decoction always has its use.” Raising his chin, Styke poked his long nose upward.

Cocking one eyebrow, Aribious glanced at the farmer standing nearby. The man’s amused expression showed he was already impressed by what he had seen, but the mage was not done yet. He took a deep breath and prepared for another attempt, letting it out slowly as he took in the area around them, the orange sunrise highlighting the surrounding farmlands, all steeped in drifting haze.

Concentrating on the target, he embraced the flow of magical energy. Enath pulsed into his body with a tingling sensation that twitched through his muscles. He shaped the magic with practiced gestures that seeped into the words of casting. Upon his initiation of the spell, a crimson streak shot from the wizard’s fingertips, engulfing a distant haystack in a ball of fire.

Aribious channeled still more energy, then raised his hands and called out, “*Berthral tumag whurnak.*” The flaming haystack rose into the air with a gust of wind that scattered the stalks outward. His chanting continued as he transformed the maelstrom into a deadly assault. Sending forth the remaining energy, Aribious lowered his arms,

and the countless pieces of burning hay transformed into flaming arrows that rained down upon a large swath of the open field.

“Truly amazing.” The farmer stared at Aribious with his mouth open and stubbled chin hanging down.

“Yes, stunning!” Styke clapped his small hands together, jingling the ornamental jewelry pinned to his fine clothes. “I knew you could do it.”

“As I’ve said, this isn’t the first time, but now that you were here as a witness, I guess the accomplishment can officially be recognized.” Aribious dug into one of the numerous pouches on his belt and pulled out two silver coins. “Here you are, to replace the cost of your hay.”

“Many thanks to you, milord.” The farmer rubbed the coins together. “The show alone was worth the price of that hay. My neighbors aren’t going to believe this.” The sound of the man’s chuckle was unmistakable as he ran back toward his homestead.

Styke rolled his eyes. “Giddy in these parts, aren’t they?”

“He’s a simple man who’s probably never seen real magic in his entire life.” Pleased with himself, Aribious put a hand over his trimmed mustache and

stroked downward, maintaining the pointed form of his dark goatee.

“Not to mention, you paid far more than that hay was worth. And now he doesn’t even have to take it off the field.”

“No matter. I’m sure he needs the silver more than I.”

“That’s a bunch of human rubbish. You’d never catch me giving money away.” Styke rubbed the side of his foot against a tuft of grass. “Come on. Let’s get back to camp before my boots collect more mud.”

“You better get used to it. Before long, we’ll be leaving Sedrinia and heading into the wilderness. Armies aren’t known for avoiding mud, or is that news to you?” His dark-brown eyes scanned the field to make sure the previous day’s rain and the morning dew were sufficient to prevent the cut stalks from igniting as his spell’s fire dissipated.

Styke let out a groan. “Don’t remind me of the muck. My clothes have already accumulated a year’s worth of grime. The army wants me to brew potions, but the conditions in which I’m expected to achieve perfection have become more and more difficult to accept. Honestly, there is no true reason why I can’t just stay here in the village and send a flow of elixirs ahead to those in need.”

Aribious turned to follow his short companion back toward camp. “The Magical Consortium could never allow such behavior. Just speaking like that makes it sound like you wish to impede progress toward achieving overall victory.” He poked fun at Styke’s practical logic.

“Bahh.”

Imitating a crotchety voice, Aribious recited the exact words the high mage had spoken before they had left Drakenport. ““Those healing potions supply an immediate effect that is critical to our success in this campaign. Your service to the Arch Lord is held in the highest regard.””

Styke blew a puff of air through his bushy mustache. “So they keep telling me.”

“Oh, and you believe otherwise?”

“You know as well as I do: the Arch Lord will continue to throw bodies into this war until he can achieve victory. Sedrinia’s army has the military advancements and might necessary to defeat the Ice Clans. It’s just a matter of how many will die before that happens.”

Styke had a special gift for pointing out the negative side of almost any situation, but the gnome also brought a measure of realistic truth that could not be denied. That very fact was exemplified by

the training Aribious was conducting this morning, training he would soon need to put into practice.

People gifted with the ability to harness and shape Enath into magical effects were very few, and Aribious possessed talent beyond most. Such a skill was not something the military commanders were willing to overlook, and as such, all known spellcasters in Sedrinia had been called to Drakenport, expected to serve the needs of their Arch Lord.

Although his true magical aptitudes lay in enchanting, imbuing items with mystical effects was a time-consuming process and brought with it excessive costs. Believing destructive magic would have a greater effect on the war, the viceroy's battle mages had chosen to expand Aribious's foundational knowledge in that particular sphere of spellcasting.

For these reasons, Aribious and Styke now found themselves attached to a company of soldiers who had marched from the capital six days prior. The unit was now situated outside the small town of River Crest. Presently, they were awaiting orders, said to be coming from one of the front-line commanders. The wizard knew there were only two options: either they would travel toward Elkwood and the conflicted regions of the Stelgreth Forest

or continue onward through Thrush Water and into the frigid north, where the relentless attacks of the Frost Bear Clan had been battering the forces of Sedrinia. Whatever the case, the time for practicing would soon be over.

2

UNEXPECTED ORDERS

Prompted by the sound of marching, Aribious leaned over to pull the tent flap aside and peer out. Another company of soldiers was filing into their encampment. Some were on horseback, but most were on foot. Over their armor, they wore grey tabards with a printed black sword vertically dividing the center. Ahead of each team of soldiers was a standard-bearer with a banner matching the grey surcoats.

“Reinforcements?” Styke took another bite of his sandwich.

“Hard to say. Looks like they’ve come from Elkwood.”

“Leaving the forward lines. Seems strange.” Styke donned his typical grumpy expression. “Probably also brought orders for Captain Teshaleer. Just watch, we’ll be back on the road before you know it.”

Aribious let the flap fall and went back to his apple.

“Anyway, what do you think of Captain Teshaleer?”

The wizard gave his companion a half shrug. “From the way she drills the soldiers, it seems like she knows what she’s doing, and it’s clear the company has respect for her command. I just wonder what will happen when things get serious. They say everything changes when the real fighting starts.”

“Not to cast a shadow over your expected duties, but I’m glad I won’t be next to you on the front lines. It’s no place for a gnome like me.”

“Don’t worry. I employed magic to get out of a few dangerous situations when my friend Morviar and I worked together seeking magical treasures for the viceroy, before I began taking commissions to do my own enchanting.”

“I heard you spent time traveling with crazy old Morviar. Hanging out with him, it’s no wonder you found trouble.”

“He’s not so bad once you get used to his quirks.”

Styke brushed away the stray crumbs that had fallen into his beard and wiped an embroidered handkerchief over his mouth, effectively stifling a

reply that never came since a sudden rap on the tent drew their attention.

“Ahem. Good sirs, excuse my intrusion, but Captain Teshaleer has requested your presence at the center of camp.”

Aribious raised his dark eyebrows. “Tell her we shall come directly.”

“Very well.” The man’s armor clanked as he tromped off.

Styke stood and adjusted his garments. “What did I tell you? Just like that and we’ll be on the move again.” He stamped his little foot. “I just got all my things settled.”

“Let’s go find out.” Aribious bit into his apple, gripping it in his teeth as he grabbed his cloak and ducked through the tent flap. While he held it open, the fussy gnome stomped right through, an ostrich feather poking out of his floppy velvet hat and bobbing as he went.

Styke continued his rant. “The worst part of this whole situation is the farther north we go, the colder it gets. I can barely feel my toes as it is. And soon there will be no inns for us to find decent food and ale. I’m beginning to think I should have stayed in Gillengroden with the rest of my kin.”

“Look on the bright side. If it gets cold enough, the mud will freeze and you won’t have to worry about dirtying your boots.” Then he chewed a bite as they walked through the rows of tents.

The gnome shot an upward glare at his companion. “You’re no help.”

Aribious flipped the apple core over his shoulder as they came into the center of camp. He could see the ranking soldiers of their company were assembled beside Captain Teshaleer, busy conversing with three of the newcomers. There was a copper-toned man with long black hair standing near a hulking capritauren with red-painted horns and a mean look on his goatlike face. The third man was the only one not wearing the grey insignia with the black sword.

Captain Teshaleer acknowledged the spellcasters as they joined the group. “May I present Aribious Kethgor and Styke Poldenderstap, the magic users I told you about.”

“Excellent. Now we can get started.” The man who spoke was of medium build with a clean-shaven head. “I am Captain Vorcald, and I’ve come from the battlefields of Stelgreth. Because of the recognized success my soldiers achieved there, the viceroy has deemed us worthy of the greater challenge

presented by the Frost Bears.” His hazel eyes passed over the assembly as he spoke. “Like I mentioned before, I have also brought your orders. Captain Teshaleer, it will be your duty to replace us in Stelgreth. I hope you can live up to the challenge. Tomorrow, you are expected to march your company to Elkwood and report to the garrison commander. He will have further instructions.”

“Understood.” Her expression was resolute.

Captain Vorcald shifted in his armor as he turned to face the magic users. “And which one of you has been trained in the use of combat spells?”

“That would be me, sir. Aribious Kethgor.” The hand he had raised dropped as he stared at the captain’s round face.

“Aribious, perfect. As it turns out, our previous mage was killed in the last battle we fought. He was a good man, and his death was most unfortunate, but as a result, you have been ordered to fall in with my command. You can pack tonight and join our company before we depart at daybreak.”

After the wizard acknowledged the request with a nod, Vorcald turned to march off with his lieutenants. Before Aribious had a chance to process the ramifications, Styke’s pitchy voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Well, that’s downright unfortunate.” He threw his hands in the air. “Even worse than I expected.”

3

SPLIT

In the early morning, Aribious bid farewell to Styke. “Alright, remember that shielding spell I taught you. Who knows where you’ll wind up. If the arrows start flying, keep your head down.” He rumbled Styke’s blue hat, something he often did to playfully annoy the gnome.

Following with his own typical response, his friend kicked Aribious in the shin. “Don’t worry about me. Being little means I’m harder to hit. You’re the one who should be concerned. We’ve all heard rumors of the devastation the Frost Bears leave in their wake, and the wizards sent to fight on that front don’t seem to make it back.”

“Thanks for boosting my confidence. I’ll be sure to stay on my toes.”

“Doesn’t seem like you have a choice.” Styke turned and picked up two small bottles from the pillow on his cot. “Here. Extra potent, just in case you happen to scratch that pretty face of yours. Now

get going before that spunky new captain starts tossing the camp to find you.” He crossed his arms over the trinkets adorning his doublet and nodded to the exit.

“Thanks.” Aribious stowed the potions in a belt pouch, then grabbed his traveling pack. Halfway through the tent flap, he looked back. “I’ll see you again when all this nonsense is over.” With that, the mage made his way into the predawn light and headed to the assembly point.

The parting was tough for Aribious. They had lived together the past eight months while undergoing war training with the high mages in Drakenport. Though Styke generally maintained a grumpy demeanor, Aribious had no trouble seeing through most of it, and the two of them had become dear companions. Both had expected they would be facing the coming challenges together. Apparently, that would not be the case.

Aribious left the arrayed tents and approached the main road, where his new company was already assembling. There were some squads of archers, but most of the soldiers wore swords and were carrying shields and a spear as well. Spaced between the various units were horses pulling carts laden with rations and other supplies.

In the middle, he passed a group of muscular capritauren, some with horns that curled and others that poked out at angles. On their cloven feet and thick legs, they stood with their heads well out of his reach. The capritauren guided teams of shaggy grack. Stout framed and mild tempered, the tough beasts of burden easily pulled the heavy wagons filled with the company's tents.

There were two units of pikemen and a smaller team of mounted knights at the front of the column. It was here that he found Captain Vorcald, doling out instructions to the ranking soldiers who would help maintain the organized movement. After dismissing the troops, the captain turned to greet Aribious. "Welcome to Dark Sword Company. I've already secured a mount for you. Hopefully you can ride."

"Since I was a boy."

"Exceptional. The wagons with our equipment are ready, and the ranks are falling into place. Won't be long now. We might as well saddle up."

The mage pulled up the traveling pack slung over his right shoulder. "Lead the way."

Atop a brown mare, Aribious rode beside Captain Vorcald and his black charger as they left the village of River Crest behind. The road followed

along the banks of the Drenin River. This broad waterway was one of the main avenues crossing the green heartlands and was frequently used for transporting goods to the larger cities and trading hubs. Late autumn was upon them, and the trees beside the river were either bare or had a smattering of leaves in ranging hues of scarlet, orange, and yellow. To their left was a sprawling stretch of fertile farmland extending beyond sight, countless fields already harvested, others planted with winter crops.

As they rode, Aribious wondered about his reassignment. *These soldiers are all battle-tested, with bonds written in blood. While their experience is a comfort, I can only imagine how they feel about a replacement wizard coming fresh from Drakenport. Vorcald has shown me fair treatment, as is general practice for spellcasters, but I'm still a newcomer, and these men and women know nothing of my ability. Hopefully I can prove they can depend on my skill.*

Looking at the captain in his armor, Aribious considered his own wool pants and oiled buckskin overlayer. On top, his linen tunic somewhat reduced the irritation of his woolen coat. It was suitable garb for the chilly climate, but less effective when

it came to combat. The knight wore half plate and chainmail, a level of protection a step above the other soldiers and something well beyond the warm garments Aribious had brought with him.

The mage continued to assess Vorcald, whose arming sword was accompanied by a long parrying dagger. Aribious adjusted the awkward position of the dagger at his own hip. Thus far, his expertise with the small weapon completely pertained to cutting food on his plate. *If I need to use this thing in a fight, it's probably already over. So long as I stay behind him, I should be alright.*

In an attempt to spark up conversation, he asked the captain, "Have you been to Millstone before?"

Vorcald turned to glance his way. "Years ago, I was stationed amongst the garrison of Thrush Water. Been through Millstone quite a few times. Not much to see, just a small hamlet at a bend in the river. The village probably wouldn't exist if not for the narrow crossing that made an ideal place for a bridge. Keeping this pace, we should be there by tomorrow afternoon. I plan to march through and make camp on the north side of the river."

"You said you lost your previous spellcaster? Was he with your company long?"

“Since early spring. Raghel was actually our second. The first could barely start the camp cookfire with his pitiful magic. He took an arrow in the throat. It was an ambush during our first weeks of the campaign. Raghel, on the other hand, was quite accomplished, a half-orc castaway from the mountains beyond Endrid Mine. His peculiar spells saved our hides on a number of occasions.”

“No doubt you’ve seen the company through some hard times.”

Vorcald barely acknowledged the statement. “I’m also lucky enough to have a few accomplished fighters amongst the company who can empower their attacks with Enath, but the clans have strong shamans fighting beside their barbaric warriors.” The captain fixed him with a serious gaze and swept out his arm to indicate the marching column behind them. “I’m responsible for every one of these soldiers, and it is a duty I take quite seriously. I hope you know what you’re doing when it’s time for the swords to come out.”

Aribious held eye contact. “I’ve seen danger before and needed to rely on my magic to stay alive. My skill is dependable.”

“I hope you’re right.”

While not threatening or aggressive, there was a discernible message of pragmatic necessity in Vorcald's crisp tone. Aribious watched as the knight turned his horse to ride along the lines, checking the progression of movement once again.

I have a few more days to get some practice in. It will be a good opportunity to show them a bit of what I can do. He glanced at the gruff expressions of those around him. *After that, I will need to prove my worth with deeds. Until that happens, I believe acceptance will linger in the shadows.*

4

DUTY BOUND

As Vorcald had said, Millstone was rather unremarkable, just a smattering of dwellings, the grain mill with its waterwheel, and a wooden bridge set into pilings where the river was divided by an islet in the middle. Despite the simple setting, Aribious had been able to impress a portion of the company with some magic when he'd practiced in plain view of the camp before they marched out in the morning.

For three more days, Aribious repeated the predeparture practice sessions. In one case, he had a pair of willing soldiers roll pumpkins down a hill as he summoned brilliant globes of magical energy that streaked after the moving targets and exploded upon impact with a popping spray of flying squash. Although his volunteers and the onlookers laughed at the scene, it was clear they were impressed, thinking of how useful the gambit could be in a battle.

On the following day, with a smattering of troops at his back, all overlooking the large pond they had camped alongside, the wizard raised his hand and began to chant and wave somatic gestures. The spell came to life as he crumbled a crystal shard between his fingers, ripping from the low-hanging clouds a torrent of fist-sized hail, which hammered the entire pond into a froth of violent splashes. The effect was obvious, and Aribious hid a smirk at the exclamations from the soldiers.

The final day of his exercises, the sun rose to shine across the pastures they had occupied the previous evening, and Aribious prepared to give his growing audience something to think about. More than two dozen soldiers were gathered around when he turned away from the sunrise to face them. “If you have a weapon with you, I want you to come to the front. Spread apart from each other, holding your weapons as if ready for an attack. Use your courage, and do not drop them when the magic begins. It will not harm you.”

When the warriors were positioned, Aribious released the Enath surging inside him into the handful of broken coal he held. The coals became glowing orange embers that flew to the ends of the raised blades, igniting the swords, spears, and

pikes with flame. The soldiers voiced their surprise and eagerly waved their weapons with striking motions. Aribious grinned as he concentrated on maintaining the intensity of the enchanted fires for a few more moments. Finally, with a snap of his fingers, he snuffed the magic, saluting his thanks to the participating warriors. "This spell will require some training before we can use the tactic in battle."

Throwing his cloak over one shoulder, he walked through the group and left them to ponder the implications and talk amongst themselves. Shortly after, Aribious was back on his horse, plodding ahead to reach his appointed spot near the front of the formation. The occasional nods he was now receiving told him his effort with the magical displays was paying off.

Throughout the journey, Vorcald continued to maintain his professional demeanor, and as expected, the knight directed most of his attention toward his soldiers. Good-natured, he always shared an easy smile with the troops as he kept things in proper order.

Aribious shifted in the saddle, trying to relieve the soreness in his rear and legs. He was glad they would be coming into Thrush Water this evening. The town housed the main garrison protecting

this stretch of the Argath River and was the rear support for the fighting taking place in the Frost Bear territory. Here they would encounter other companies and the commanders who would disseminate their next orders, but the mage was more interested in the chance for a hot meal, a warm bath, and a soft bed for the night.

While entertaining the idea, he spotted a lone rider galloping toward them. As the man got closer, the insignia on his uniform identified him as a royal messenger.

The rider slowed his steed as he came to the column's lead element. "Is this Dark Sword Company?" he called out.

"It is," replied the long-haired knight with richly tanned skin, one of Vorcald's ranking soldiers.

"I've brought a message for Captain Vorcald."

"Let him through, Genkahl." Vorcald waved to the messenger.

The slender lad maneuvered his horse off the road and came to ride alongside Vorcald before giving a rigid salute. "Captain, your arrival is most timely. General Jarketh will be pleased." He dug into the satchel strapped over his shoulder and brought out a rolled parchment, which he passed over.

The captain pushed up the wax seal with his thumb and opened the message, reading as the horses plodded forward. *What could be so urgent?* Aribious wondered.

When he finished reading, Vorcald nodded to the messenger. "Inform the general I will be arriving shortly. I shall report immediately and send my company forward to emplace themselves at the staging ground."

"Very good." The young man offered another salute, then urged his horse ahead. He was soon galloping back the way he had come.

Vorcald also rode ahead to meet with Genkahl at the front of the column. Aribious watched the note change hands, but very little was said between the two knights. Afterward, the captain turned his horse and cantered toward the back of the procession. The wizard raised an eyebrow. *Whatever transpired is apparently reserved for those in charge.*

The orange sun hung over the distant range of mountains when they rode into Thrush Water. This had been a fully established town of a few thousand citizens before the war, but now the military presence had nearly doubled those numbers. As the conflict began to escalate, the Frost Bears had raided the town more than once. With Thrush

Water being part of the official boundary to Arch Lord Calgrishon's territory, the fortifications and additional troops were meant to ensure that line would not be crossed again.

After passing under the gatehouse, Aribious watched Vorcald ride ahead. The knight hurried past the sturdy buildings constructed from stone or the timber post-and-beam framing common to the region. As the rest of the company rode through the cobbled thoroughfare, the mage eyed three bustling inns occupying part of the busy town center. *What are my chances of getting a room with this many soldiers about?*

Leading the company atop his tan stallion, Genkahl kept them marching past the main square, through to the other side of town, where they came to a barbican and extending walls. After a brief exchange with the gate guards, Genkahl waved the company forward. Moments later, Aribious passed beyond the great portcullis, riding onto an arched stone bridge spanning the Argath River. As the company squeezed onto the crossing, Aribious took in the beauty of the turbulent river crashing against the rocky banks and exposed roots of the cedar trees clinging to the jagged limestone.

The Thrush Water crossing was just downriver from where the two main tributaries of the Argath River came together. Flowing out of the mountains and hill country, the current here was fast, beating itself into white froth upon the boulder-clogged gap between the cliffs. *It seems a completely different river, nothing like near my home, where it flows as a calm sheet of swirling ripples.*

The town proper had sprawled over to the other side of the bridge, but Aribious saw that quite a few buildings had been burnt to their frameworks. While some dwellings had been repaired, there were no longer villagers here. Instead, everything had been repurposed by the army. The encampment was bordered by a newly constructed palisade with a secondary gate, which they also crossed through.

Just as Aribious began to wonder if they were even going to stop, Genkahl turned his horse from the road and trotted into a field with jutting stalks left from the harvested buckwheat. Raising his dark eyebrows, Aribious smoothed over his goatee. *This doesn't look promising.*

By the time half of the company had marched into the field and the gracks were starting to pull their heavy wagons off the road, Vorcald rejoined

the Dark Swords. “Ground the equipment and call everyone to assembly,” he shouted.

Aribious dismounted and stretched his legs as he led his mare off to the side. The evening chill was emerging with the setting sun, so he pulled his cloak around him while he walked. It was not long before the soldiers had gathered into formation at the edge of the field. With the group together in uniform ranks, the wizard counted the company to be over two hundred strong. Captain Vorcald paced along the road as a few stragglers fell into place.

Finally, the knight centered himself before the assembly, turned to face them, and paused for a moment before addressing his soldiers. “You all know why we have been called to this front, and in the past week, the reports reflect an even greater need for our skill. There are five other companies forward of this position, and a recent increase in attacks by the clans has taken its toll. General Jarketh believes the line might be fragmented, needing our support to prevent collapse.” The volume was building in his voice. “The general says our timely advance could make the difference if we are able to reach the front in time. Now, I ask you this: is there any chance Dark Sword would think of letting Sedrinia down?”

“Never!” the soldiers shouted in unison.

“Who brings the battle?” Vorcald yelled.

“Dark Sword!” Weapons were raised and banners pumped in the air.

“And who will triumph over the enemy?”

“Dark Sword!”

Aribious got a shiver of elation as he watched Vorcald rile his troops. Their enthusiasm bordered on frenzy as mailed gauntlets pounded on shields.

After encouraging their display a little longer, the captain raised his hands to calm the racket. “Alright, alright, I know you were all expecting a brief reprieve, but duty dictates that we press onward in the morning. That being said, I have requested fresh cheese and bread, hot venison stew, and a few barrels of ale for us to enjoy.” This brought a resounding cheer. “Now, I bid you all make camp before darkness falls. Word will be sent when the food arrives.”

As the soldiers dispersed, Aribious passed off his reins to the caretaker who came for his horse. Seeing an opening, he stepped up to Captain Vorcald. “I had hoped to room at the inn tonight, but it seems that may not be possible.”

“As long as you are here to move out in the morning, I cannot stop you from going back into

town and finding a room. I will point something out though. These soldiers have been pushed hard and have marched without the slightest luxury for months. All of them were hoping for a taste of relief. If my observations are correct and you truly have been trying to gain their respect, I doubt that being the one person to sleep in a warm bed would bring you any favor.”

“I can accept that.”

Vorcald smiled and gave him a nod. “Your regular accommodations should be ready soon.” With a second nod, the captain departed.

Like all the previous nights, Aribious was provided a tent of his own, and as usual, he found inside an allotment of rations to see him through the next day. When they had not been riding, most of his time thus far had been spent in solitude. He missed sharing a tent with Styke, but the absence of the gnome’s constant grumbling gave Aribious a chance to focus on his studies.

Generally, his evening work involved reviewing newer spells he expected to use once they encountered the enemy, but this evening, the underlying passions of an enchanter were driving him to experiment and tamper with weight-altering

magic. In truth, the idea had come from a weightlessness solution Styke had given him.

He was trying to combine properties by implementing a technique for bending magic that he had been taught by his old friend Morviar. Thinking of the intended goal, Aribious glanced at his traveling pack and wondered how many times he had wished it were lighter and less cumbersome. *Removing the strain on my shoulders would be most welcome.*

He sat on his cot and uncorked Styke's potion. His test subject was a small pebble that rested in his palm. Aribious took a deep breath and opened himself to the flow of Enath. Controlling the magical energy, he coaxed a single drop of the turquoise solution from the small bottle so that a globule floated in the air before him. Alternately focusing on the pebble, he willed the magic to do his bidding, making the stone rise to meet the hovering fluid.

As the two came into contact, the pebble shimmered with radiant flecks as the solution was absorbed. He chanted words strange even for his type of magic, attempting to transform the potion's attributes, which granted temporary weightlessness. His will focused on warping the

result into a lasting enchantment that would reduce the actual weight of the pebble.

“Aribious? You in there?”

He had almost completed the process when a surprise call from the door interrupted his concentration. There was a fizzling pop of green sparks, and the pebble fell to the ground in pieces. A deep sigh escaped his lips. “Yes. I’m here.”

“Pardon the intrusion. Our food has arrived, and Captain Vorcald sent me to ask if you would like to share an ale with him.”

The mage considered the invitation as he corked the potion and tucked it back into his belt pouch with some of his other spell components. Usually, he was not one to be distracted by the dulled senses given by alcohol, but he recognized this could be more than an offer to share a drink.

“I will be right out.”

5

PASSING TRADITION

Stepping past a wagon parked near the center of camp, Aribious caught a savory whiff coming from the kettles of stew loaded inside. At the back of the wagon, a soldier filled his mug from one of two barrels of ale. The spellcaster stepped into the firelight and nodded to the various soldiers seated on cots set up around the blaze. Most of the group was hunched over steaming bowls or sipping from wooden mugs.

At the far side of the fire, Vorcald stood to wave at him. “Over here, wizard. Come have a seat. The venison’s good, and the ale makes it better.” He directed Aribious to sit on the end of a cot, then the knight picked up his empty bowl and refilled it from the kettle beside the fire. “There you go. Watch your tongue. It’s burning hot.”

“Thank you.” Aribious took the bowl as the captain sat back down next to Genkahl. Both knights still wore most of their armor, but their

physical similarities ended there, with Vorcald's round face and shaved head a direct contrast to Genkahl's slender frame and long black hair.

"Would you believe I grew up together with this one?" Vorcald leaned over and elbowed his lieutenant. "Our fathers were assigned to the guard unit responsible for manning the barbican in Drakenport. In our youth, we ran the walls, acting as their specially appointed lookouts." He smirked.

Genkahl nodded, his burnished bronze tones shining in the firelight. "They even gave us clay whistles to sound the alarm, but the wax seals at the end were only to be broken if we truly saw an enemy banner. Pretty sure they knew those whistles would have been blowing day and night."

"And since no one has dared to attack Drakenport in a few thousand years, it didn't really matter." Vorcald shrugged. "After a while, they started realizing we were useful enough to keep around and they gave us actual duties."

"It was some time before we got anything for our efforts, but they finally threw us some coin. Just like that, we were part of the guard, fully adopted protectors of Sedrinia." Genkahl raised his mug.

"And here we are, still causing trouble together." Reaching over, Vorcald thumped drinks

with his friend. “Oh, and now he’s said to be the best swordsman in the regiment.”

Genkahl rolled his eyes. “And they put him in charge because he’s got the biggest mouth in the regiment.”

Aribious smirked at the lieutenant’s smart remark. “Did you start training with swords early on?”

“Naturally. My father knew a few things about handling weapons, and I guess we started banging sticks together shortly after I was able to walk.” Genkahl pushed his long hair back and stared into his mug. “I picked up on things pretty fast.”

“Don’t let him kid you. His father’s a master swordsman who escaped the savage jungles of the Shadowlands. At this very moment, he’s teaching advanced swordsmanship to the next wave of soldiers training in Drakenport.”

Aribious raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

“Like I said, biggest mouth in the regiment.” The lieutenant and captain both laughed. Genkahl took a drink before getting up to refill his ale, and upon returning, he passed the full mug to Aribious with a nod. “Alright, I’m off to check the ranks. Sleep well.”

“Thank you,” the mage replied simply. As the dark-haired lieutenant departed, Aribious took a drink and leaned over to prop the ale between his feet. After scraping up the last two spoons of stew, he moved to set down the bowl, but Vorcald reached out to stop him.

“Refill the bowl and give it to Rix, the lad over there by the wagon. He proudly carries one of the company banners when we march.”

Aribious stood and went to the kettle to heap the bowl, then brought the stew to Rix, passing it to the young man with a nod. After returning, he sat back down beside Vorcald and picked up his mug. “Alright, I think I follow the system you have going.”

“We’re all brothers and sisters here. We live and die together. We fight, sleep, and eat together. When we’re privileged enough to have an occasion like this, we all share the benefits. Sometimes you’re first in line and sometimes you’re last, but everyone gets a portion. After we’ve finished, we fill the cup or the bowl and pass it on to another, the bounty of a shared blessing.” The knight raised his ale.

“Then I should feel fortunate to be the one who received the captain’s bowl and his lieutenant’s mug.” Aribious clanked his ale against Vorcald’s.

After they had both taken a drink, Vorcald turned to the spellcaster with a gleam in his eye. “I think Rix over there will be the one bragging about getting the wizard’s bowl. Probably thinks he has good luck now.”

Aribious considered the captain as he sipped his ale. *I don’t believe he’s a man chasing glory. Sure, he’s obviously willing to stand up when something needs to be done, and he seems to know what he is doing, but the captain also tries to look after the individuals of Dark Sword Company.* It was easy to discern this invitation was not just an act of politeness. This was a way of welcoming their new wizard into a ritual that displayed the comradery Vorcald strove to build amongst the members of this unit.

After a moment, the knight finished his mug, refilled it, and passed it on to a woman with a confident expression framed by trimmed blond hair. She stuck her spear into the dirt and toasted the captain as they began speaking.

After a short chat, Vorcald came back to stand near Aribious. “Two mugs for each, so you have another one coming. We also saved the cheese and bread to break our morning fast, along with any leftover stew. I must make my rounds, but you should

have no trouble finding someone to chat with. Just make sure you also get some sleep. It'll be an early march again tomorrow. Good night, wizard."

Vorcald threw up a casual wave as he turned to wander into the torchlit rows of tents filling the buckwheat field.

6

SHADOWS IN THE TREES

Plumes of steam puffed from the horses' nostrils as the soldiers left Thrush Water on the rustic path heading northwest. The track of half-frozen mud winding into the untamed forest was just wide enough for the horse carts and grack wagons that bore their equipment, but the going was tough, and often the company was delayed when the animals had trouble pulling their loads through the deep ruts choked with frigid water. In some places, a full halt was made, with a perimeter of guards pushed into the forest while other soldiers chopped logs to make bridge-like coverings for the impassable mires.

Unlike the old-growth forests near his home, where most of the smaller trees had been cut down, this region was thick with a tangle of younger vegetation contending for sunlight at the feet of coniferous giants. The earthy smell of damp moss and the persistent gloom hanging about seemed

to reinforce the invasive chill numbing Aribious's hands.

Early on the second day of travel, the Dark Sword Company came upon a small camp that had been burnt and abandoned. Supplies had been taken, and the bodies of the defenders had all been stripped of their weapons and armor. At Vorcald's signal, the company paused while he checked his map.

Genkahl's raven hair dangled as he leaned closer and pointed. "If this is the first outpost, we're still a day and a half from the forward lines. Have our forces already fallen?"

Vorcald shrugged. "Hard to say. In the thick forest and these boundless hills, a party of raiders could have gotten through with ease. Without knowing more, we must proceed like nothing has changed. Our mission lies ahead. Full alert. Stay ready, with hands to your steel." He rolled the map to stow it, then removed the barbute helm he kept hitched to his saddle and slipped it over his chainmail coif.

Through the slanted eye slits of the open-faced steel helm, Aribious could see a seriousness in the captain's expression as he waved the column forward. *I guess we're no longer out for*

a leisurely stroll. Squinting, the young mage scanned the trees and immediately began to doubt his ability to spot an enemy hiding in the dense undergrowth.

By midday, puffy snowflakes began to fall through cracks in the pine-bough canopy above. Aribious kept an uneasy watch over the shadowed surroundings. Other than birds, he had seen no wildlife along their journey. They climbed through the woodland hills, bringing them ever closer to the main forces of the clansmen, who were said to be hiding near the mountains.

This entire area was conflicted territory, and the destroyed camp was an obvious sign of the hostility taking place. *I should be less worried, riding amongst these ranks of battle-hardened fighters. Vorcald does well to keep them on high alert, and they're all experienced. It's obvious the captain is a capable leader. I just need to relax and stay focused, lest I wind up dead like their last spellcasters.*

After they'd left the burnt outpost behind, Aribious noticed conversation amongst the men dwindled to occasional whispers, and their eyes scoured the hills and trees just like his. As the company marched farther into the wilderness,

the cold surroundings seemed to shun their very presence. He had read historical accounts of ancient forests that held long-forgotten magical secrets and those possessing a mystical sentience.

His thoughts wandered as he reasoned with the possibilities. *This is a timeless land, long unspoiled until now. Perhaps the army's struggles here stem from something far older and harder to explain. Could it be that we're intruding upon more than just a stretch of territory controlled by the Frost Bears?*

By midafternoon, the continued snowfall had blanketed the forest in white. The clouds were so thick, the little light that passed through the trees almost made it seem like dusk. After his many days on the road, the gloomy silence was making Aribious drowsy. He shook the snow from his cloak and rubbed his eyes to help bring back some focus.

He startled along with his horse when a blaring horn rang out. The danger was impossible to spot until snow-covered branches were thrown aside and the woods came to life with screaming attackers. The soldiers were quick to respond, though, and weapons flashed to the front as they formed defensive lines.

With a gaping mouth, Aribious looked on as the enemy rushed forward, but he was broken from his initial hesitation when the clan warriors smashed into their column. He pulled at the Enath, and magical energy swelled within his body. Waving his hands and incanting arcane words, Aribious thrust his palms outward. Before him, shards of hardened ice shot from an azure swirl, fizzling as they ripped through the air and devastated a group of five clan warriors, whose leather armor was shredded by the jagged projectiles. Their cries of pain joined the clang of weapons and aggressive shouts, all mixing together with the overall chaos of battle.

Nearby, Vorcald brought his horse through a gap in the line to thrust his sword into the neck of a hefty clansman. “Hold formation!”

Brilliant jade flashes drew the wizard’s attention. Aribious saw Genkahl had dismounted and was now positioned in front of his squad, whirling two scimitars. His enhanced attacks moved with green streaks and a speed beyond compare. Foes fell before the knight’s blinding strikes, and any who approached his flanks were thwarted by his savage pikemen.

The Dark Sword soldiers were already thinning the oncoming attackers. Working together with

shouted prompts and coordinated maneuvers, the company clashed with the barbarians, chopping them down with the ruthless efficiency of a well-disciplined unit. As the battle turned, a long call from the deep-toned horn sounded again, and the clan warriors broke off the assault.

“Stand fast!” The captain’s order was repeated down the line.

Focusing on a knot of fighters escaping into the trees, Aribious took a handful of iron filings from one of his belt pouches and threw it into the air. Iridescent magic flowed from his hands to bring the filings to life. With brilliant crimson sparks trailing behind them, the particles shot toward the retreating clansmen. Raining around the enemy, the bits of iron exploded with concussive force and ripped them apart with violent bursts of scalding shrapnel.

“Stay ready! I want reports,” Vorcald called out.

His heart still racing, Aribious scanned the woods. The attack was over as quickly as it had begun. Unfortunately, a few soldiers had been killed and others injured. Far more attackers had fallen, however, and Genkahl’s pike squad was already working their way through the defeated barbarians, dispatching the wounded without a second thought.

“You will not take prisoners and interrogate them for information?” Aribious asked with a frown.

Vorcald scoffed. “You’ve done well today, but you’re still green, wizard. The Ice Clan warriors do not turn on their own. Interrogation, deprivation, even torture—you will not get them to talk. To betray brothers and sisters completely goes against their warrior code.”

Detecting a hint of respect in the captain’s words, Aribious let out a sigh as the harsh treatment was carried out upon those still clinging to life. He looked at the Frost Bear warriors lying in the snow. Many wore bear skin cloaks with teeth and claws decorating the fringes. Their faces were marked with powdery blue runes, and most had long hair braided with beads and bits of metal.

The column regrouped, and reports were passed through the lines, relaying accounts of casualties and overall status. Aribious listened as word came from farther back. Apparently, the company had also resisted a second attack closer to the rear, but their losses were minimal. Judging from the response, it seemed Vorcald was viewing the repelled ambush as a success.

While they waited for the wounded who could no longer march to be taken to the wagons, Genkahl

walked amongst the dead, sifting through the fallen and inspecting the enemy bodies. He tapped the tip of his sword on a breastplate worn by one of the clan warriors. “Many are wearing pieces of our armor, and some of the weapons are ours as well. Do you think these are the ones who raided the camp back there?” He threw back his hair and glanced up at Vorcald with rich brown eyes.

“It’s impossible to say. The fighting in these parts has been going on for nearly two years. But after such a time frame, I would expect their tactics to be more refined. I’m confused by the futility of this attack. They did some damage but lost far more in the process. It’s not as though they couldn’t see the size of our force. Why bother to attack at all?”

Aribious cleared his throat and voiced his thoughts. “We are newcomers on this field of battle. Perhaps they didn’t expect your company would react with such effectiveness. Or the ambush might have been a calculated loss, aimed at testing your response.”

“If this was done to probe our capabilities, they paid a high price.” Genkahl climbed back onto his stallion.

Vorcald turned to Aribious and nodded. “You may be on to something, wizard. They could

have suspected the confrontation would turn out differently. Or they were willing to sacrifice a few to find out what we are made of. Either way, they've learned something, and you can bet the next attack will be better executed."

7

THE RABBLE

After the ambush, Vorcald fell back to check over the soldiers while Genkahl got the head of the column moving again. The captain had made clear he wanted to continue onward and find a defensive position where they could make camp before nightfall.

Aribious stroked a hand over his goatee as one of the soldiers marching alongside him gave an affirming nod. “Not bad.” She wiggled her fingers as if casting a spell.

“Glad I could help.” The compliment pleased him, but he knew he could have done better, especially when the fight began. *If the barbarian ranks had been greater, my hesitation could have cost lives. I don’t want to let the company down, and the more I can help to support the lines, the easier it will be for them to keep me alive.*

While Aribious was contemplating his performance, Vorcald rode up next to him. “I’ve

been speaking with some of the soldiers from Mist Vault, and they happen to recognize your family name. Do you in fact hail from Kethgor Keep?”

Aribious raised an eyebrow. “Indeed. The keep has been my family’s ancestral home for a number of generations.”

“Then you come from a proud lineage with a highly respected history.”

“As they say.” He tried to be nonchalant since his own deeds were hardly renowned.

“So if you’re nobility, I’m curious why you haven’t expressed your position or requested better treatment.”

“Well, I did ask to stay at the inn in Thrush Water.”

The droll remark brought a chuckle from Vorcald. “I just thought that was a lousy attempt to desert the army,” he joked.

“Honestly, I have no reason to expect better treatment.” Aribious held up the reins. “You’ve already given me a horse to ride and a tent to myself. What more could I want? As you previously pointed out, we’re all in this together. I can enjoy my comforts when this is over and we all go home alive.”

“Well said, wizard.”

“Thinking about the attack and my position in the company... It gives me a desire to be more useful. I have been trained to employ my magic in combat, but you have experience that I do not. I want to ask: what is the best way for me to combine my skill with that of your soldiers?”

Vorcald looked at him and grinned. “I was told you had talent when you were assigned to Dark Sword, but I took that with a grain of salt. From what I saw earlier, and over the past days on the road, you obviously know your spells better than any wizard I’ve ever seen. You did well to target fighters in the open, and hitting them hard not only strips their numbers, but also causes fear amongst their ranks.”

Aribious accepted the recognition, but being aware of his mistakes, he was not about to gloat. “Anything else?”

“The truth is, our enemy expresses an uncanny nature and attacks more like a predatory animal than a soldier. Their disadvantage of smaller numbers generally gets evened out by their ferocity as warriors and the tactical use of ambush or hit-and-run attacks. I’m sure you also noticed they use their knowledge of the land to their advantage as well.”

“I did indeed.”

“You want my best recommendation? Focus ranged attacks against critical targets. Prioritize the elimination of their shamans and tribal leaders, if you can identify them.”

“That makes sense.”

“Most importantly, don’t get yourself killed.” Vorcald leaned over and clapped him on the shoulder. “We’ll definitely be needing more of those fancy spells.”

He snickered. “I’ll do my best.”

The last shreds of daylight were waning when a pair of scouts rejoined the front of the column and reported to Genkahl. After a brief exchange, the pair galloped off again and Genkahl fell back, taking a position beside Vorcald. “They’ve found a hilltop with sufficient visibility over the surrounding region. It’s not far ahead. I ordered them to scour the area for danger while we approach.”

“Very good. That will likely be our best option for the night. No doubt the enemy is still tracking our movement. Upon arrival, we’ll establish a strong perimeter of fifty percent security, and the others will prepare the camp.”

“Do you think they will attack us again tonight?” Aribious asked.

“A guarded camp is a harder target. After the beating we gave them today, I suspect they’ll be licking their wounds, but I don’t plan to take any chances.”

Aribious nodded but said nothing.

“The heightened security will be our standard from here on out. If it doesn’t interfere with your studies, I would also prefer that you stay in the command tent from now on.”

“As I said, special treatment isn’t necessary.”

“I merely intend to have you nearby. It speeds our reaction time in case something happens, and with your keen mind, you should also be aware of operational planning. Besides, the nights will grow colder, and one more warm body in the tent serves all our interests.”

Aribious combed a hand over his black goatee.

“Fair enough.”

Snow kept falling as they continued along, and by the time they reached the hilltop, it was already ankle-deep. The camp came together with the standard efficiency Aribious had come to expect from the Dark Swords. Before long, he was warming his hands in the command tent, where his cot had been set up. Five other cots filled the tent, but for

now he was alone while the commander and his lieutenants were ensuring duties were carried out.

He was reviewing his spell book when his rations were brought in by a sharp-eyed soldier with a purple scar on his chin. “My thanks,” Aribious said after the food was set down.

“Some of the others are saying you took out a score of barbarians today. That true?” The young man focused his gaze, waiting for confirmation.

“I wasn’t exactly counting, but I would wager it was a few less than that.”

“The more the better. Those dogs killed my brother this summer. I say we should wipe out every last one of them. At any rate, well done.” The soldier nodded and promptly left.

The young man’s desire for vengeance was clear, and Aribious wondered how many of the others shared his sentiment. It was true the clansmen had provoked this war by starting their raids into Sedrinia’s territory. *Could these people be so different from our own? They have communities and families just like us. As long as this conflict goes on, we’ll count dead brothers and sisters on both sides.*

He pictured the hatred he had seen in the soldier’s eyes. *Self-defense is one thing, but I*

could never see myself wanting to kill off the entirety of a neighboring populace. If only Arch Lord Calgrishon would make stronger efforts for peace, perhaps all this suffering could end.

8

CROSSROADS

Although the snowfall continued into the following day, it could not cover the visible signs of conflict alongside the forest road. In one place, the soldiers came upon an overtaken supply caravan, the dead horses and burnt wagons now pushed to the side for all to see. Not long after, the company marched into a tight valley between two hills where a large-scale battle had taken place.

Bodies from both sides littered the ground, frozen faces of death poking out of the powdery snow. Aribious had never seen anything comparable to the haunting aftermath. Caws of scavenging crows interrupted the forest's stillness, making the eerie scene all the more unsettling. He was glad once they had passed the carnage, but the deathly images lingered in his mind.

The next thing they encountered, though, was hardly an improvement. Scattered groupings of partially destroyed log fortifications were emplaced

along each side of the roadway, all manned by ragged-looking soldiers. There were plenty of dead here as well, most of them stacked closer to the edge of the cut tree line.

One soldier abandoned his position to investigate as Dark Sword marched past a ditch and freshly built wall. “How many have you brought?”

“A company. Just over two hundred,” one of Vorcald’s men replied.

The unshaven man let out a deep sigh, and his shoulders slumped with visible disappointment.

As they approached, the captain signaled for the column to halt. “What has happened here, lad?”

“We hold this position and fend for our lives, sir. There’s no telling when the next assault will come.”

“What of the forward lines?”

The young man shook his head. “Hard to say what remains, but the Frost Bears are on both sides of our lines, sir. Most of us would have already turned back, but it’s too risky to chance the forest with the few that are left here.”

“Turn back?” Vorcald sat up on his horse. “There is no turning back. The forces of Sedrinia have been sent to defend this front. Where is your commander?”

“Pardon, sir, but your guess is as good as mine. We haven’t seen him in over a week. Probably dead. It’s only the rabble left here.” The man shrugged and spat on the ground. “If you continue on ahead, you’ll find the main part of the last company that was sent. They’re manning the crossroads now. Perhaps you can find someone who will be able to give you more answers.”

“Keep your head up, soldier. The viceroy’s generals are sending more fighters. Stand strong beside your comrades in arms, and I will do what I can to send back some relief.”

“Yes, sir.” The man saluted, but the doubt on his face remained unchanged.

As the company progressed, there were similar pockets of bedraggled soldiers peering from the meager defenses, clinging to the barricades like the narrow strip of roadside was their last shred of hope. Aribious remembered Vorcald’s speech outside Thrush Water. *There should be five other companies posted throughout this part of the forest. We’ve passed fewer than one hundred men. This does not bode well.*

The sun was sinking when the column came to the crossroads. It was a four-way intersection with a walled fort dominating one corner. Farther down the

roads to the left and right, he could see torches had already been lit around more barricades, housing stubby towers for archers. Evidence of the ongoing fighting was present here as well.

Vorcald dismounted and ordered Genkahl to take charge of the formation, then turned his gaze to Aribious. “Why don’t you climb down and we can find out what has befallen this place?”

Curious as to why he’d been chosen, Aribious released the reins and slipped from the saddle as one of the men took hold of his steed’s bridle. “Lead the way.”

The knight stepped off toward the gate to announce himself before the posted guard. “Captain Vorcald of the Dark Sword Company. Who is in charge here, and where can I find this individual?”

The husky woman thumped the butt of her spear to the ground and pulled it to her side as she saluted. “That would be Sergeant Taldin. He’s probably in the main building to your left, sir.”

Before they stepped through the gate, Aribious glanced at the tall lookout tower in the corner of the fort with its clear view of the intersection. A few log buildings had been erected within the palisade, and packed between them were overfilled medical tents with many wounded soldiers huddled in blankets on

the outsides. There was a stable area and a handful of wagons that had carried crates of goods, which looked as though they had been ransacked as they were unloaded.

“Doesn’t seem any better here,” Aribious remarked after observing the shabby conditions and obvious signs of hardship.

“I agree. I also worry that what we’re about to hear might be even worse than appearances let on. That’s actually why I brought you to accompany me. I trust my lieutenants, but even at the top, soldiers are prone to talking. The truth of what happened here might not be something I want circulating through the ranks. I can already tell the company has been affected by what we witnessed on the march in. You saw those soldiers’ faces. They’re all but broken. Ruined morale is a killer, and I cannot allow such infectious thoughts to take hold of my soldiers. At least this way, I still have the option to be selective about what I reveal to them.”

Aribious nodded. “I understand.” Growing up at Kethgor Keep, he had seen his father withhold information from the people under his care when he knew it would cause greater harm if spoken freely. Vorcald’s reasoning was no different.

Wasting no more time, they headed toward a boxy one-story building constructed next to the outer wall. Upon its flat roof, three archers roamed behind the wooden ramparts. Vorcald pulled the door open, and they used the sill to kick muddy-brown snow from their boots as they went in. Across the room, the several men sitting at a table reviewing maps all turned to face the newcomers.

“Is Sergeant Taldin here?” Vorcald took off his helm and tucked it under his arm.

A tall man with fiery hair stood. Dangling from his slender face was a long mustache that jostled as he spoke. “I am Taldin.”

“Captain Vorcald of Dark Sword Company, and this is our wizard, Aribious Kethgor. We have been sent to support this front.”

“Just one company, sir?”

“Yes, but General Jarketh promised more will be on the way.”

Taldin and his companions exchanged dour expressions. “Better than nothing,” one of them offered in a low tone.

Captain Vorcald cleared his throat. “Please explain what has happened here.”

“Come have a look at the map, sir. It’s better to show you.” The sergeant waved them forward.

“When we arrived under the Brass Hammer banner, the crossroads were held by another company and there were two more spread along the roads to the left and right. Brass Hammer was sent forward to reinforce a fourth company, who was establishing a camp at the border of this lake.” He identified the Pindrum Lakes grouping and slid his finger to the one farthest southwest. “When we arrived at the lakeside fort, there was nothing left. The soldiers were all dead, and everything was destroyed. Recognizing the danger, our commander turned us back.”

“That doesn’t explain what happened here.”

Taldin continued. “As we returned to the crossroads, the sounds of battle became evident. We rushed in to find the Frost Bears devastating the entire area with a coordinated attack. We joined the fight, and attacking from behind, Brass Hammer was able to drive their main force off toward the mountains, but the loss along the front was catastrophic. This is the only camp that has not been fully destroyed. We still hold portions of the road in each direction, but I wonder if it’s even worth it. All our command elements have been killed, and I have been doing my best to keep everything together. But now I guess you are in charge, sir.”

Vorcald raised his eyebrows and rubbed a hand over his shaved head. “This is far worse than I expected. Where did they all come from?”

“It seems the Frost Bears gathered their clans and formed into a large army. From the reports that came in, I’ve come to believe they wiped out our fort in the east before moving on to the lake.”

“Do you know where the remaining forces gathered after they were driven back?”

Taldin pointed to the map again. “Some were divided, but we have scouts who spotted a large encampment on the far end of the lake two days ago. A hundred or more are there now, probably waiting for others to join them and planning another attack.”

Vorcald took a deep breath as he contemplated the information. After a long pause, he finally spoke. “Here is my decision. You will continue to lead this camp, Sergeant Taldin. I want you to send runners with orders to collapse all the positions along the roadways. If their state is anything like the ones we passed coming in, the lines are no longer secure. Bring everyone here to protect the crossroads and this fort at all costs.”

“Yes, sir. That all makes complete sense, but if I am to remain in command here, what will you do?”

“Dark Sword will stay here for the night and support the initial stages of the drawback. Tomorrow, I will take my company to the lake, where we will bring the battle to the Frost Bears. There is no reason to let the enemy fully regroup for another strategic attack. While this takes place, you will have sufficient time to band the remaining companies together and strengthen the fortifications surrounding the crossroads.”

Aribious was not sure this was the answer the sergeant had hoped for, but Taldin accepted the knight’s orders without rebuke. “Your logic is clear, but I have some recommendations, if you are willing to hear them, captain.”

“Speak freely.”

“The oncoming winter storms rolling out of the mountains push across the lake with heavy snow. We struggled with our horses. I would advise you to leave them and any wagons you might have behind. The road to the lake is poor quality, and conditions will only get worse.”

“That will result in a serious reduction of my supplies.”

“Might I suggest food and shelter as a priority? If you have them, grack can manage the trails while hauling gear. We still have a few of the beasts here

I can lend to your cause. I also have an exceptional tracker I will send with you. Kleska is the one who spotted the Frost Bear camp, and she can act as your guide.”

“That will be most helpful. I appreciate the consideration, Sergeant Taldin. After I have briefed my company, I’ll return to help you with preparations for pulling the other companies together, and we’ll also look at tactical adjustments for a strategic defense.”

Maintaining a serious face that looked more like a frown because of his long mustache, Taldin offered a salute. Afterward, Vorcald reached out and clasped the soldier’s forearm, a gesture Aribious took as a sign of respect for what the sergeant had done to keep the battered forces under some form of leadership.

9

THE APPROACH

Dark Sword started their push toward the lakeside fort on the following day. A team of six grack led the way, along with the hulking capritauren warriors, who were accustomed to handling them. On their stout legs, the shaggy animals were nearly tireless, perfect for blazing a trail through the calf-deep snow, making it easier for the soldiers to march behind.

As they edged closer to the Dragon's Bite Mountains, the hills became larger and the land more rugged, with outcroppings of rock breaking out of the forest floor. Huffing from the exertion, Aribious tromped along beside Vorcald, not far behind the first rank of pike wielding troops and capritauren leading the grack.

Gosh, I'm missing that horse already. I don't know how those soldiers carry on in their armor and with all that gear. My little pack is already too much. I really need to perfect that

enchantment. If the enemy doesn't kill me, this marching surely will.

It was almost midday when Kleska, the tracker, took her bow from over her shoulder and turned to address the captain. "Atop this next rise is the destroyed fort. Shall I run ahead and scout for danger, sir?"

"Hold your position. If there is an ambush, I doubt they would allow you to give us proper warning." Vorcald's gauntlet clanked as he waved off her inquiry, then he called out to the soldiers behind them. "Tighten the ranks. Full alert."

When they crested the hill, the blackened beams of the burnt-out camp and fortifications came into view, and just beyond, the trees gave way to a broad alpine lake overshadowed by jagged mountain peaks in the distance. Apart from the nearby destruction, the snow-covered trees on the far shorelines held a serene beauty that was grandiose in scale.

Aribious watched frigid gales blast across the icy lake, kicking up swirls of blowing snow, but the immediate area was still and without obvious signs of danger. As he thought of the bodies buried beneath the drifts, the wizard was struck by the smoky scent still fresh upon the scorched timbers

of the toppled palisade and collapsed interior buildings.

“Have the company fan out and form a perimeter,” Vorcald instructed Genkahl, then he turned and put his hand on the tracker’s shoulder. “Please show me where you last saw the Frost Bears’ encampment.”

Aribious tagged along as Kleska trekked across the open ground and headed to the frozen shoreline. As she got closer, her movements became more like that of an animal and her eyes swept across the landscape with a slow and shifting focus. “Farther to the west, the lake juts out toward the mountains. If they are still there, we should see their fires.”

As they passed beyond the ruined fort’s outskirts, Kleska crouched to inspect the ground. “A few people have been here since I left, but the tracks are mostly covered with snow. Probably three days ago.” She pointed. “You see how the depressions follow the tree line and skirt the shore? Likely clan scouts.”

“I suppose that’s a bit of good news,” Aribious offered.

“Perhaps. Unless they cleared the area and slipped from our grasp.”

Kleska flipped her dirty-blond braid over the back of her leather cuirass and crept farther ahead, cautiously coming to a large hemlock at the edge of the shoreline. Her gaze stayed to the left as she squatted in the snow. “They’re still there, sir. See the smoke drifting over the trees on the far end of the lake?”

Vorcald grinned. “Then we’re in luck. Are there any trails leading in that direction?”

“Only untamed forest, sir. Like their scouts, I always followed the shore, but with an entire company of soldiers, they would spot us long before we could get to their camp. The clan would be ready when we arrived and probably try to push us against the water with flanking movements.”

“Good evaluation. I would do the same in their position,” Vorcald admitted.

“It will be tough going through the woods, but that’s what I would recommend. Hopefully we can avoid their scouting parties until we get closer.”

He nodded. “Any guess as to their current numbers?”

“There I cannot help you, sir. I was able to get much closer last time, and it was surely over one hundred at that point.” She pursed her thin lips.

“Fair enough. I’ll pass word of the situation through the ranks, and after a short break here, we’ll continue. I intend to march into the evening to let darkness cover our approach. With the moonlight on the snow, visibility shouldn’t be a problem. We’ll be upon them by morning.”

Their movement through the snowy forest was indeed difficult, and after nightfall the pace slowed even more, but Kleska believed they would have no trouble reaching their destination by morning. Scattered rays from the moon broke through the clouds to cast light on the surroundings and gave shifting accents to the steamy breath drifting from the column in the crisp night air.

Aribious stepped closer to the captain, speaking with hushed tones. “You are not concerned about exhaustion being an issue for the company when the fighting starts?”

“I’m more worried about you.” Vorcald flashed him a toothy smile, white like the moonlit snow. “This band of fighters has battled for days on end and marched even longer. They are as strong as any you will find. How are you holding up?”

“I’ll be alright, as long as you don’t make me swing a sword.”

The knight chuckled. “Honestly, pressing through the darkness without sleep is our best option. If we made camp, it would be a frigid night without fires, simply because there is too much risk of being spotted. The cold is far more dangerous than the lack of sleep, and this gives us a chance to obtain the element of surprise. With the beating the Frost Bears gave the other companies, this group probably believes they are out of danger and might be lax enough to catch unawares.”

“We can only hope so.”

Aside from brief pauses to ensure the line was not stretching too far apart, they slogged through the knee-deep snow until a faint glow began to brighten their surroundings. With the coming dawn, Aribious spotted occasional groups of chickadees flitting through the evergreens. In one place, they were forced to cross a small stream, its partially ice-covered flow gurgling with a musical chorus as it splashed against the frozen edges.

Holding her bow in hand, Kleska approached Vorcald. “Sir, here we must shift to the right somewhat and follow the curve of the lake. We’re not far now. I can already smell their fires.”

“Very good,” Vorcald replied. “Genkahl, head to the front and speak with Drolshorn. Have him do

his best to adjust the gracks so they leave a path allowing for five soldiers abreast. When the time comes, we need to storm in and hit them hard.” The captain then turned to one of the soldiers behind them. “Sergeant, post here and instruct the file to widen as they pass your position. Make sure they are ready to begin the rush at a moment’s notice.”

“Yes, sir.” She dipped her head and stepped out of the ranks.

More and more, Aribious was impressed by how well Captain Vorcald brought decisive control over his force as the situation evolved. *He clearly has a tactical bearing that understands things I would never think of. It does bring some comfort as I move forward with the front lines. ‘Just don’t get yourself killed.’* He remembered Vorcald’s comical advice as an uneasy nervousness knotted his empty stomach.

The sun was just peeking through the treetops and Aribious was struggling to keep his eyes open when the sound of a signal horn broke the silence of the forest. He shook off his delirium as it was followed by another.

“Forward charge!” Vorcald cried.

10

THE RAID

Blaring war horns were joined by wild shouts as barbaric clansmen appeared, rushing through the trees with weapons raised. Their dangling fur garments and long hair flapped as they bounded through the snow. For a moment, it felt like Aribious watched the advance in slow motion, but when the capritauren bellowed battle cries of their own, he snapped into focus.

As he called upon his powers, the bulky capritauren abandoned their gracks to lead the Dark Sword charge. Moving fast on their long legs, the brute fighters barely slowed as they crashed into the first clansmen with horns down and weapons swinging. The outcome was impressive to witness.

A wave of crimson force radiated from Drolshorn's battle-axe as he swept an attacker from his feet and flung him aside with a brutal strike. Other clansmen were forced to the ground with thrust tridents or knocked flat by ramming

from broad skulls and vicious horns. Fresh blood splattered across the pristine white as the brave capritauren plowed right on through to meet the next wave.

Aribious lashed out his hand, firing a cobalt lance that seared a hole through one of the warriors who had gotten past the lead ranks. Other fighters were already beginning to engage Genkahl and the pike squad who followed the raging capritauren. Once again, the copper-toned knight whirled his swords with brilliant streaks of green.

“Spread out and press on to their camp,” Vorcald shouted. Right after the command, he struck away the axe of a clansman and flashed his sword around in a sweeping arc that crumpled the man at his feet. “To victory!”

Hurrying past the nervous gracks, Aribious tried to stay behind the captain as other soldiers around them dashed forward. With scattered enemies clashing against the forces of Sedrinia, he needed to choose his targets with caution. “*Dorkethia flemdrigald.*” A snap of his fingers set the fur garments of one combatant ablaze. The man’s thrashing frenzy was put to an end when Kleska buried an arrow into his chest.

“Fill the ranks! Battle formations!” Pointing with his sword, Vorcald directed the soldiers.

More of the magical energy surged through him as Aribious caught up to the captain. He was about to set another warrior on fire when a pair of attackers broke from a cluster of trees and rushed in to claim his life. Vorcald was quick to intercept them, using his dagger to parry a thrust spear and impaling the screaming woman, whose momentum faltered behind the shaft of her diverted weapon.

Still focused on his initial target, the other combatant screamed as he raised his morning star overhead. Aribious reeled backward, tripping in the snow as he fumbled with the words to a shielding ward.

Ripping his blade free of the dying woman, Vorcald spun to slash the second enemy across the back. Continued motion brought his sword around and down to cleave into the man’s skull. In mortal shock, Aribious was plastered with a spray of blood as the corpse flopped into the snow next to him.

“Get up.” Vorcald sheathed his dagger and offered his hand. “We need to keep moving.”

Still shaken, Aribious allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. Before fear had a chance to soak into his reasoning, he found himself chasing

toward the front lines with Vorcald and the rest of the company. Surging adrenaline enhanced the tingling sensation of the Enath as it mingled with the magical influence of his gift.

Moments later, they were breaking through the trees and swarming the Frost Bears' camp. In a hasty retreat, their people were fleeing the rudimentary tents and woodland shelters with the few belongings they could carry. Protecting their escaping families, most of the remaining warriors came together and put up a defiant stand. Their wild shouts of aggression displayed unmatched courage.

Having gained the advantage, Vorcald changed his tactics. "Slow the advance and flank both sides. Smash them as the rest of the company fills in!"

Aribious focused on the fighters gathered before them and began to voice words as he prepared to use a mind-altering enchantment. Upon completion, he clapped his hands together, fusing his mental bearing with the magic. An invisible wave hit the enemy with oppressive confusion and dread, a crushing effect reinforced by the mass of soldiers closing in on them.

A few clansmen turned to run, and others lowered their weapons as the spell altered their ability to form rational thought.

Their courage-filled bloodlust was replaced with befuddlement, and Vorcald's soldiers did not hesitate to take advantage. Barely meeting any resistance, the skilled fighters sliced through the dazed Frost Bears like fodder.

Seeing the rest of the clan fleeing in the distance, Vorcald was eager to end what he had started. "Rout the enemy and finish them off!"

"Over there!" Kleska nudged Aribious in the arm with her bow and took aim.

Her arrow fell short of the two forms standing on a nearby hill, but Aribious took clear notice of the threat. A pair of shamans waved their hands, forming symbols in the air while chanting. As they completed the spell, sizzling and popping sounds arose from the snow surrounding the company, and a steamy white haze rose from the ground.

Gauging the distance, Aribious hurtled a blinding ray of golden light. His beam struck one of the men just before a cloud of thick fog swallowed Vorcald's forces in an impenetrable veil that obscured all vision.

11

TRACKS

“They’re getting away.” Drolshorn snorted as he slapped the flat of his axe against his thick hand.

By the time the winds had swept the unnatural fog over the lake, the Frost Bears had disappeared into the depths of the forest. They were now too far ahead to pursue since the rear portions of the company were still catching up to the lead elements.

Vorcald sheathed his sword, glaring at the woods with an expression that shared the capritauren’s obvious disappointment. “Don’t worry. We’ll go after them, my friend. Form a perimeter and allow the company to regroup.” He reached up to give Drolshorn a reassuring pat on the back as he sent him on his way. “Genkahl, designate an area where we can tend to the wounded, then gather your squad and search the camp for anything useful.”

With Vorcald busy taking stock of the situation, Aribious set off to check on the shaman he had struck down with his magical bolt.

Kleska followed the wizard's gaze and picked up on his intent, so she trotted ahead and came along beside him. "You have a rather strong bond with the Enath."

"It wasn't strong enough to dispel that fog. Believe me, I tried."

"But I did see how you were able to affect those warriors. I've never witnessed magic like that before." She turned enough to look at him from the corner of her eye.

"Most battle magic is fairly new to me. I'm an enchanter by trade and usually work to imbue items with mystical powers, but I also delve into the subtle art of mental persuasion."

"Like some kind of trick?"

He combed a hand through his black hair. "Not exactly. Bending the mind requires an extreme concentration of willpower. The confusion those warriors experienced was very real."

"Devastating as well."

"It was the best thing I could do to make sure fewer of our soldiers died." Aribious crossed his

arms over his cloak as the wintery chill settled into the remaining sweat from the battle.

They came to the shaman's fallen body in the snow. Over his leathers, he wore a dappled white-and-brown frost bear pelt, fastened at an angle so the skinned portion of the fierce animal's face was draped over the left side of his chest. Below that was the scorched mark and gaping hole that had ended the man's life.

Kleska crouched beside the body and gave it a close inspection before taking out her knife and cutting at the braids in his grey-streaked hair. They were decorated with etched beads and clasped by ornamental pieces of gold. Aribious knew the precious bits of metal worn by the people of the Ice Clans had become prized rewards for the Sedrinian soldiers fighting in the war. After a moment, she stood and offered him the trophies.

"Keep them."

With a shrug, she pocketed the trinkets. "You know, I can harness the Enath as well. Nothing like you, but I have the ability to decipher remnants of energy left behind in tracks of all kinds."

"Really?" Aribious turned to Kleska with budding curiosity and, not for the first time, feeling

an aura of mystery behind the shining blue of her eyes.

“Tracks are everywhere, and they all hold information. It’s not just the obvious, like these footprints of the other shaman running away. There is so much more hidden in plain view.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can still see traces of the winds that shaped these drifts in the snow. That small hole in the powder was made by a falling pine cone.” Kleska’s gaze shifted from the depression to an overhanging bough, then she reached out and touched his shoulder. “Because it wasn’t there when I met you, I would say this snag in your cloak was made by a stray branch just last night.”

“Indeed, it was.”

“And the tight form of the goatee you like to stroke was trimmed three days past. You carry small scissors, don’t you?”

Aribious smirked. “Precisely. That’s amazing.”

“The tracks all stand out to me, shining with their own radiance, waiting to tell me something. The fresher they are, the more I can see.”

“What can you say about him?”

“I will teach you some signs anyone can learn to identify.”

“Alright.”

“My past knowledge of the bear-face cloak tells me he was highly regarded, even for a shaman. He has also lost a child. You see the lock of blond hair intertwined with his beard?”

“Interesting.”

“Looking at the wound, I can tell your magic burnt with an extreme temperature. The flesh is cauterized, and there is no blood. I would also say, in that last second, he did not like you very much.” She gave him a wry smirk and giggled as she turned to follow the tracks leading away. “Head back to the camp. I will inspect the enemy’s trail and see if there is anything important to report to Captain Vorcald.”

The wizard’s brown eyes narrowed as he watched her go. *So many details in the landscape most of us are blind to.* As he stepped off and pulled his cloak tighter, he could not help glancing at the pulled-up thread from the snagged branch. *The mysteries of our world abound, countless secrets to discover.* His thoughts roamed over the new information with a sense of curiosity.

Back in the camp, Vorcald was already assembling the entire company. A few soldiers had been killed in the skirmish and several were wounded, but most would be able to march on.

Identifying the need, Aribious took one of Styke's healing potions from his pouch and passed it to the captain. "It's potent, so I expect it should be able to help a couple soldiers, or one who is in desperate need."

"Are you sure? You might require this in the future."

"I have another."

Vorcald grinned and took the potion. "You have my thanks, wizard—for this and for your spells."

He responded with a simple nod.

The captain's decision was to leave a handful of men with the injured while the rest of the company pursued the Frost Bears that had escaped. After he gave his force a few hours to eat and rest, they left the lake and were tromping back into the snowy forest well before midday.

12

WHITE DEATH

After a cold night huddled in their tents and sleeping with little more than their bedrolls laid upon the snow, the company packed their gear and continued chasing their quarry. The foothills were giving way to a dramatic range of mountains, and Aribious battled with the constant burning in his legs as they trudged through snow, climbing ever higher into a landscape where much of the deep forest had thinned into sporadic patches of smaller trees clinging to life in the harsh environment.

Easily reading the signs, Kleska reported they were no less than a few hours behind the enemy, and Vorcald spread this knowledge through the ranks to bolster his troops as he pressed them hard to maintain a strong pace. By afternoon, they were hastening into a snow-swept valley between the rocky peaks.

“I don’t like the looks of that.” Kleska pointed to the right before trotting ahead.

“What do you see?” Vorcald asked as they came to the spot where Drolshorn and the scout stood examining a line of separate tracks.

“The fleeing Frost Bears were clearly joined by another group. Because they traveled in a file, it’s hard for me to tell exactly how many. Being conservative, I would say they’ve doubled their numbers, but it’s probably more than that.”

Aribious kept his thoughts to himself, but wondered about the likelihood of more shamans being amongst the additional clansmen. *The war mages said their spellcasters were dabbling hacks, but after the display at the lake, it’s obvious they have more guile than I was led to expect. I will need to spot them before they can sway the battle.*

Drolshorn grunted. “If your guesses are correct, that would give them nearly as many as we have. Fantastic.” He snorted through his broad nose with sarcasm.

“Far as I’m concerned, that’s fewer we’ll have to track down later.” Captain Vorcald waved his hand overhead. “They will be slower now. Keep the line moving. There’s no time to waste.”

The capritauren thumped a fist to his breastplate and rushed back to the front.

Dark Sword Company ranged farther into the open valley, with the snow-packed mountain slopes rising high on either side of them. Gliding upon the wind currents, a pair of great eagles soared overhead, and higher still, the drifting clouds were beginning to break apart, revealing patches of blue sky.

Possibly two hours later, Drolshorn called back in his deep voice. “We’ve spotted some stragglers in the distance.”

“Drive the gracks harder. Chase them down!” Vorcald shouted. He shot Aribious a determined grin before addressing the rest of the column. “Full march! The enemy is in sight!”

Kleska stepped closer to Aribious as they began to jog. “Seems unusual for the Frost Bears to abandon part of their clan because they’re too slow. The strong always defend the weak. That’s their way.” She scanned the sides of the valley with squinting suspicion. “Something feels off.”

“Maybe it’s another group of warriors meant to slow us down like they did at the lake,” Aribious suggested. “Regardless, you might want to bring your concerns to Vorcald.”

“I don’t know.” Kleska shook her head. “Orders have been given, and the men are hungry for blood.

I doubt the captain would back down with his goal in sight. Besides, I haven't the rank to question his command."

Breathing heavy, Aribious kept going. He decided she was probably right, and with little experience, it was not his place to comment either. *Vorcald's decisions have been dependable thus far.*

With the increased pace, the company was stretching into a long line as they tried to keep up with the rushing squad of capritauren and their sturdy gracks. Aribious opened himself to the flow of Enath as he followed Vorcald and Genkahl's pike squad.

The capritauren were closing in on the group of approximately twenty Frost Bears when Aribious began to hear strange voices echoing around them. The displaced calls seemed to come from high within the mountains. Almost like sonorous intonations, the sounds were indiscernible as they faded in and out with the howling winds.

"I think it's spellcasting," he called out, noticing other soldiers were also glancing around in confusion.

"Hold. Slow the advance!" Vorcald shouted. The soldiers around them came to a halt, but the

capritauren were too far ahead to hear the order. From his expression, the commander appeared to be as baffled as the rest of them.

“It’s magic!” Aribious repeated the warning. As the words came out, the chanting faded and there was a distant rumbling. The sound was faint at first but quickly grew in intensity. The gracks, who had been abandoned by their handlers, scattered and scampered off with the company’s equipment.

“There!” Kleska pointed to a billowing plume near the top of the mountain. “Avalanche!”

His mouth hung open as Aribious stared at the impending doom. The calamitous noise was swallowing all other sounds. As the tumbling snow thundered down the mountainside, it snapped trees like twigs, and the soldiers began to panic.

“Brace yourselves,” Vorcald screamed, but amidst the chaotic din, there were few who could hear his words.

They all watched in dumbstruck horror as a jutting ridge on the mountainside diverted much of the cascading snow toward the back half of the column. In the span of two heartbeats, the rear of the company was engulfed in tumultuous white death. Immediately after, a roiling cloud of violent flurries swirled around the cowering ranks that remained.

Aribious fell to his knees and shielded his face with his arms. His clothes fluttered, threatening to rip from his body with the sheer force of the winds. When the blinding chaos settled, he wiped the freezing crust from his face and tried to regain his senses. Shock overtook him as he realized more than half of the Dark Sword Company was gone.

Panicked screams of those half buried rang out from behind, but his attention was drawn to the sound of blaring war horns and a chorus of shouts coming from the other direction. The trailing group of Frost Bears had turned to attack the squad of capritauren, and charging in to support them was the full force of the remaining clan. *So we've avoided the killing wrath of the avalanche to be massacred by the enemy.* Aribious shuddered at the sight.

“Regroup! We’re under attack!” Vorcald got to his feet and yanked his sword from its sheath.

Roaring in defiance of the charge, Drolshorn rallied his brethren. Bursts of crimson flared and bodies flew as he swung his axe like a madman. The brave capritauren fought with unmatched fervor, but severely outnumbered and separated from the company, they were soon cut down by the swarming attackers.

“Fall back! Defensive formations!”

As Kleska fired arrows into the oncoming hoard, Aribious chanted the words to the first spell that came to mind. He contorted his fingers into the correct form and released the magic. A yellow bolt of lightning shot from his hand with a crack. Striking the warriors and jumping from one to another, it dropped many in their tracks, but only made a dent in the mob.

“Come on.” Vorcald grabbed the wizard’s arm and pulled him along with the others.

They pushed through the lines of soldiers, who had shaken off the shock of the avalanche and tried to find safety within the assembling ranks. As the captain issued additional commands, Aribious drew in more of the magical energy. He took a pinch of white wood ash mixed with sulfur from a pouch, then spread his arms as he sprinkled the dust.

“*Keffenthrex*.” Once he’d uttered the command word, a long wall of orange fire leapt up between the two forces.

With more time to regroup, the Sedrinian fighters came together, and the remaining archers shot arrows over the flaming barrier. Spears soared back at the soldiers in response. Feeding on berserk madness, some of the Frost Bears charged right

through the magical blaze. Trailing fire from their burning furs and hair, they slammed into the soldiers, swinging their weapons with frenzied insanity. Others were already rushing around the ends of the wall and clashing with the formation's flanks.

Aribious recognized the desperation of their situation as he tried to sustain his magic with focused concentration. Patches of the wall were already dwindling, and more warriors surged through. The Dark Sword soldiers were making a valiant effort to defend, but he knew they would soon be overrun. Nearby, Kleska let out a scream and collapsed onto the bloody snow with a thrown spear lodged deep into her chest.

Hopelessness crept over Aribious as his spell expired and the flames became harmless wisps of smoke. In unison, the Frost Bears rushed their formation.

13

HOPE UPON REGRET

All around him, fighters were yelling amidst the clang of steel and raging battle. The Dark Sword line was faltering, and clan warriors were breaking through on every side. Aribious fought the dizziness of intense spellcasting to call upon more Enath. Sending the energy outward, he animated fallen swords, which lifted from the ground in response to his urging. Pointing his fingers, he hurled them one by one, impaling enemy targets in a last attempt to push back the closing attackers.

The outcome was plain to see. *This is a bloodbath. All is lost. I must escape.* Digging into his pouch to get the feather needed for his desperate spell, the mage found something he had forgotten. His mind racing, Aribious looked up and focused on Vorcald as the knight heroically dispatched two more clan fighters.

Aribious ran through the fray, dodging assailants and calling upon the last magical reserves

he could muster. Tripping over a dead soldier, he fell into Vorcald, splashing Styke's potion of weightlessness all over the captain in the process.

"Wizard?" Vorcald glanced at him before lopping an arm from a man who was trying to take advantage of his distraction.

"Hold still!" Fizzling sparks trailed up the raised quill, and the feather disintegrated. Aribious threw his arms around Vorcald, and together their feet lifted from the ground as he willed the flying spell to take them above the carnage. An angry warrior lobbed a spear at them, but it flew wide.

"What are you doing?" Vorcald protested.

"Saving your life. Stop struggling and look for yourself," Aribious hissed through clenched teeth as he tried to concentrate.

The knight reached out in vain. "We can't just leave them."

"I'm sorry. It's over."

They rose higher into the air and drifted away from the havoc, watching as Genkahl, one of the last Sedrinian fighters standing, was surrounded and stabbed from all sides. The radiant scimitars fell from his hands, and he went down screaming. Aribious could feel the tension leave Vorcald's body as they gazed upon the battlefield below. In

seconds, the remaining soldiers were slaughtered, and victorious cheers erupted from the swarming Frost Bears. Aribious was taken by a wave of sadness as he viewed the catastrophic loss of life.

Flying farther, they soared over the piled swath of deep snow left behind by the avalanche. The devastation was surreal, a mass of twisted bodies, splintered trees, and ravaged banners half-protruding from the snow.

Aribious pushed the boundaries of his limitations. Doing everything he could to cover as much distance as possible, he took them out of the valley. White pinpoints danced before his eyes as they descended. With his consciousness slipping, the spell failed, and the pair tumbled into the snow.

Through labored breathing, Aribious groaned. He felt too weak to rise, but the pounding in his head and the cold snow numbing his hands forced him to open his eyes.

“Are you alright?” Vorcald was already kneeling over him. His helmet and armor were splattered with frozen droplets of blood, and more seeped from a deep gash in his arm.

“I think so. I just need a moment to pull myself together.”

“I should have died with them,” Vorcald muttered as he looked back. “Escaping like that was cowardly and... disgraceful.”

Aribious brushed the snow from his hair. “Don’t be foolish. We were caught in a cunning trap. Nothing could have prevented what happened.”

“Caution could have. I was too eager. I led them all to defeat and should have suffered the same fate.”

Aribious needed Vorcald’s help to sit upright, but there was no weakness in his tone. “At the last moment, I had two options: save myself or save a life. I chose you, and like it or not, here we are.”

The captain’s shoulders slumped as he accepted the facts. “So, here we are, in this frozen wasteland without food, supplies, or shelter. Hopefully the Frost Bears decide the two of us are not worth chasing over that fallen avalanche. Then we might have a slight chance of surviving when the temperatures fall during the night.”

“See, I knew you weren’t ready to die.” A weak smile broke out between the mage’s mustache and goatee.

“Can you stand?”

Aribious nodded.

“Then we better clear out of here.”

“Just as soon as we take care of your arm.” He dug out the other potion he had received from Styke and poured just enough of the elixir onto the gash to get the wound to stop bleeding. “We better save the rest for now.”

“Wise choice. I can deal with the pain. Let’s get moving.”

As it turned out, they did survive the night, mostly because the two of them kept walking in an effort to stave off the cold. Arm in arm, they stumbled together until darkness broke. With the sun still low on the horizon, they found a grove of trees sheltered from the wind, and both collapsed from exhaustion. The warmth of the golden rays angled in to bring some feeling back to their frigid bodies as they rested beneath the branches of a mighty spruce.

Vorcald removed his helm and dropped it in the snow. “The guilt is tearing me apart. I feel like a failure. I shared a bond with each and every one of them. Some were like brothers and sisters.”

“I cannot imagine the pain you are feeling. Sadly, there is no way to change the past. We can only accept what happened and learn from the mistakes. Your company fought with heroic bravery,

and as difficult as it may be to accept the tragedy of their loss, they died with honor.”

“Perhaps, but what of my honor? What of the leader who ran when the last of his soldiers were murdered?”

“If your honor comes into question, you can blame me, and I will tell them exactly what happened.” Aribious threw up his hands. “The half-wit wanted to die. I was the one who messed it up for him.”

Vorcald shook his head at the teasing remark.

Aribious stared him hard in the eyes. “Want my honest opinion? I say it’s better you live on and avenge Dark Sword. You are a strong leader, and there are still good men at the crossroads who need your guidance.”

“You know, for some reason, I’m starting to like you, wizard.”

Aribious scoffed. “Naturally.”

“The truth is, I really should be more focused on the bravery of your actions during the battle.”

“Don’t even bother. I’m not interested.” He elbowed the knight. “Better to focus on what we should do next.”

“Well”—Vorcald paused and stared into the distance—“the war continues. We get back to

the camp beside the lake and then return to the crossroads with those we left behind. As you suggested, I will need to take command of the survivors and form them into a new unit. Another company will come and then another. Our forces will gather and build better fortifications. The tragedy of past losses cannot be repeated. We must fight on. And we will defeat the Frost Bears.”

Aribious noticed the old timbre returning to the knight’s voice, the tone of a confident leader. He knew the scars of this battle would probably never leave Captain Vorcald. The scenes of terror and death still haunted his own thoughts as well. *So many dead, ours and theirs. Is it really worth it? Even after what happened, I feel no hunger for revenge. I only wish there were a better way to resolve the conflict.*

Aribious let out a disappointed sigh as he remembered Styke’s prediction about the Arch Lord’s willingness to throw bodies into the conflict until achieving victory. *The war continues.*



CONTINUE THE ADVENTURE

Apprentice Gone, *Clutches of Deceit* and *Fractured Harmony* are the first three books of the *Rampant Dawn* epic fantasy series.

Jump into the main *Rampant Dawn* Epic Fantasy Adventure series with *Apprentice Gone*

When an important errand for his master goes completely awry, a young spellcaster is thrown into a life-or-death struggle that could affect the fate of the entire realm. Along the way he meets an unlikely friend and together they discover their unique abilities are able to break through unimaginable boundaries, but nothing can prepare them for the unparalleled dangers they will be forced to overcome. Follow Kresdin and Fuke on their wild adventure into an enchanted world of magical wonder and see if they can unlock the mystery of a long-forgotten artifact.

A company of heroes comes together in book 2, *Clutches of Deceit*.

Driven by the manipulative will of an imprisoned dragon, Kresdin and Fuke are pushed to retrieve an ancient magical tablet long lost in

an outlying region. The companions, joined by new friends with stunning skills, must journey across the sea and trek into the scalding desert.

Relying on deception and secrecy, their dealings intertwine with the underworld element that rules the distant city. Danger rises as the mismatched group is thrown into a devious plot with treacherous adversaries eager to assassinate anyone standing in the way.

Far from home and out of their element, the heroes are plunged into a deadly struggle for power. Can their combined efforts thwart the sinister forces seeking to undermine their objective, or will they be caught amidst the *Clutches of Deceit*?

Chaos and strife besiege the realm in book 3, *Fractured Harmony*.

War has come to the elven forests of Leshraleen, with the brutal ogre invaders slaughtering everything in their path. Each secretly plotting their own conquest, the Dragon Arch Lords have entangled Kresdin and his friends in the fray. The wizards and warriors are thrown together with a legendary elven champion and must fight to shift the tides of battle and bring an end to the chaos.

Amidst the carnage of a conflict fraught with death and destruction, the companions struggle to resist a force threatening to decimate the entire region, but nothing can prepare them for the epic confrontation with the vile master who has been pushing the ogres toward their objective. Even if the heroes survive this battle, are they making the right choices, or are they simply pawns? Will their chosen path renew stability in the realm, or will their actions manifest a latent darkness far worse than any could imagine?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. W. Meyer grew up in rural Wisconsin. He always had a fanciful imagination that dreamt about going on wild adventures to discover amazing places. As a teenager, J. W. Meyer got hooked on reading fantasy novels, and his library began to swell. His interest in writing developed with the help of an amazing teacher, who offered priceless lessons filled with lasting memories for those who could get past the façade of his gruff demeanor.

After completing school, J. W. Meyer worked for a few years before joining the U. S. Army to become an airborne infantry soldier. After a year and a half, he earned the prestigious Airborne Ranger certification. As a paratrooper, he engaged in combat deployments, where he fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Sergeant Meyer was honorably discharged from active service after fulfilling his military contract.

J. W. Meyer resides in Europe with his loving wife and two amazing children. His pastimes include outdoor activities, wilderness adventure, and world travel. On his journey to seek out the wonders of our planet, J. W. Meyer has become passionate about engaging with the values of nature, history, and cultures. Contained in his vault of prized treasures, are fantastic relationships, lasting memories, and priceless experiences.

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