

The Old Ways

by David Dalglish



BOOKS BY DAVID DALGLISH

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Jerico reached for his shield as he heard the rider thunder into the dark village of Wilhelm.

“What’s going on?” asked Darius, sitting up in his bedroll. “Is he one of Sebastian’s?”

Jerico shook his head, peering through a crack in the door of the small shed that they slept in.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think so.”

They’d been on the run since the battle between Arthur and Sebastian Hemman, the two paladins originally on opposite sides of the conflict. But Jerico had won his friend over, and together they’d defeated several faithful to Karak. Arthur’s army had lost, however, forcing them to flee to safety. Sebastian’s men had combed the surrounding forests, and it had taken a lot of running, and a bit of luck, for the two to reach Wilhelm without being seen. They’d rented the only room available in the farming village: the shed.

“I only use it when an animal gets sick, to keep it away from the others,” the farmer had said. “Don’t worry none. Been awhile since the last, and I changed the straw.”

Jerico had been looking forward to his first peaceful night of sleep in what felt like days, but then the horsed rider had come, crying out something Jerico hadn’t quite caught...

“He might be looking for Arthur’s men,” Darius said, rubbing his eyes.

“The village is loyal to Kaide,” Jerico said, pressing open the door. The rider had stopped in the village square, and several older men and women were coming out to greet him in their bedclothes.

“You so certain?”

Jerico nodded. Kaide was a local hero in the North, a bandit who robbed Sebastian Hemman’s caravans and gave away the wealth and supplies he didn’t need. It was his private war against Sebastian that had started everything, with Arthur only recently taking up arms against his brother.

“We are safe, no matter the coin they offer.”

“No matter the coin?” asked Darius.

Jerico shrugged.

“Well, within reason. Everyone has their price.”

“That so? Then what is yours?”

“Eternity,” said Jerico, stepping outside the shed. “I’d love to see Sebastian offer me that.”

Given Jerico’s prominent role in the battle, he knew he needed to be careful, in case the rider had been told his description. With his long hair, red beard, and blue-silver armor, he wasn’t the most easily forgotten of men. Still, the night was dark, and his armor was in the shed. If he kept his distance, he should be able to listen in without being noticed.

The rider was still gathering people, ensuring that there would be no need to repeat himself before riding off to his next destination. Jerico leaned against the side of a house, hidden in the shadows cast by the torchlight. The rider wore light armor, and he bore a crest Jerico recognized. Sir Robert Godley and his men had worn similar markings when they came to help fight off the wolf-men in Durham. It seemed like ages ago to Jerico, but he knew it’d been hardly three months. He felt his worry lessen. Robert was a friend, and had little to do with the brothers’ conflict.

“People of Wilhelm, I seek a man responsible for a most terrible tragedy,” the rider began. The speech was well-rehearsed, and though his words were fiery, he spoke them in a perfunctory

manner. To Jerico, he sounded beyond exhausted. "Not long ago, a man helped burn down the village of Durham, and slaughtered many of its residents. This act was done without mercy and without reason. I've come offering a bounty of five hundred gold coins to whoever brings me, or any proper authority of the King, this man's head."

A gasp ran through the people. Five hundred gold was a fortune, a thousand times more than any farmers might see in their lifetime. Jerico felt something catch in his throat as he thought of Durham. He'd preached alongside Darius there, becoming friends with the people. He'd lost many fighting the wolf-men, succeeding only because of Robert's help. Now someone had attacked it again?

"Who?" asked one of the crowd, as if on cue. Who indeed, thought Jerico. He found himself wishing he held his mace in hand. Who would dare defile the sacrifices they'd made?

"His name is Darius," cried the rider. "A tall man with long blond hair. He hails from the Stronghold, and wears the cruel armor of their kind. He is extremely dangerous, and should be greatly feared. My master, Sir Robert Godley, offers this bounty so this vile criminal will be brought to justice for his terrible deeds."

Jerico felt like he'd been punched in the gut. His blood drained from his face, and as the people began to murmur, he remembered the words he'd spoken in jest not moments ago.

Everyone has their price.

Indeed. And the villagers' were just exceeded tenfold.

Jerico turned and ran for the shed, knowing time was not on their side. Darius waited for him, leaning beside the door with his arms crossed. Seeing Jerico's worry, he frowned.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Put your armor on," Jerico said, ignoring him. "Now."

The countless hours spent putting on and taking off the cumbersome plate and chainmail served him well as Jerico donned it in the darkness. Darius strapped on his greaves, then reached for his chestplate.

"What's going on?" he asked again.

Jerico knew he should ask about Durham, but wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer. Still, he had to know.

"There's a bounty on your head," he said, not looking at his friend. "They say...they say you helped destroy Durham. Helped kill a lot of people."

He left his question unspoken as he pulled on his gauntlets. Torchlight flickered through cracks in the walls as outside the first of many arrived. They would not rush in until the whole town was gathered, Jerico was certain. Their little shed would be surrounded, with more coming every second, all to guarantee no escape. He grabbed his mace and his shield. Soft blue light shone across them. In the light, Darius met his gaze.

"I killed no one," Darius said. "But I was there, and I deserve their anger."

Jerico struck a board, felt the whole shed vibrate. Several people outside gasped.

"Come out, Darius," someone shouted. Jerico recognized him as the messenger from Robert. "There's no reason to spill any more blood."

Darius finished putting on the last of his armor, then reached for his weapon. It was an enormous two-handed sword, its edges serrated in sections. It shimmered with a faint light, far dimmer than Jerico's shield. The glow represented the strength of their faith, and Jerico felt worry squirm in his gut at how weak Darius's was. Whatever had happened at Durham, it still troubled him greatly.

"Darius!" cried the messenger amid an uneasy rumble of conversation.

“What do I do?” asked Darius. “They’ll be knocking down the walls any second.”

“We can’t kill them,” Jerico said. “They’re just desperate.”

“I’d say greedy. How much was the bounty?”

“Five hundred,” Jerico muttered.

“Silver?”

“Gold.”

Darius chuckled. “Damn.”

“If you are guilty, they’re just obeying the law. I won’t shed innocent blood.”

Darius shook his head.

“I won’t give myself up for a hanging. You must trust me. I killed no one; even did my best to protect them. Don’t you dare turn on me here.”

The door rattled. Jerico kicked it open, and as the people scattered away, he stepped out amid the mob, his shield shining bright on his arm. There were over two hundred gathered, men and women of all ages. Those closest bore weapons, sickles, pitchforks, and staves designed for farming, not warfare. Only Robert’s messenger wielded a blade, and he held it before him as if expecting Jerico to attack at any moment. Jerico looked into their eyes as they held their collective breaths. He saw fear, desperation, and a greedy hope for something far beyond their tired, meager lives. He could not blame them.

But that didn’t mean he had to accept it.

“Go back to your homes,” he told them. “We were offered safety, and a soft place to lay our heads. Will you betray that now, all for the promise of gold?”

“He’s a criminal,” said an older man. Jerico recognized him as the farmer who had lent them the shed. Several others murmured in agreement.

“As am I,” Jerico said. “An outlaw, so says your Lord Sebastian. Will you turn me in next?”

Plenty looked unhappy at that. Support for Kaide ran deep, and Jerico had quickly become a hero for his pivotal role in the battle at Green Gulch. Only the messenger seemed not to care.

“That’s different,” muttered one of the farmers. “You ain’t done what he’s done. Send him out, and let it all be over quick.”

Jerico felt torn, but knew he could show no weakness. He needed to hear it from Darius’s lips, know for certain what had happened. Shed no innocent blood. If there was anything that had been hammered into his thick skull during his training at the Citadel, that had been it. But he was also trained to protect, and letting his friend be strung up by a mob felt a bit contradictory to that.

“The coin won’t buy you happiness,” Jerico said, his voice softer. “It will only tear apart the love you have for one another. It won’t bring peace. It won’t bring safety. Do not do this. You offered us shelter and safety. Don’t stain your hands with treachery.”

Before any could answer, Darius stepped out into the night. His armor, dark steel, shimmered in the torchlight. His hollow eyes looked to the crowd, which gave him a wide berth. Despite their numbers, attacking someone so well armored, strong, and skilled was something none of them were prepared to do alone.

“Enough,” he said, his voice carrying authority. Jerico had always considered him the far better speaker, and a master at manipulating crowds. Many stepped back, as if expecting him to draw his blade, which so far remained on his back.

“Darius, you’re under arrest,” said the messenger. He was sweating, and his sword was unsteady in his hand.

Darius shook his head.

"I have too much to atone for. My life does not end here, not to a misled mob in the dead of night. I do not want to hurt any of you, and Jerico will insist the same. I have done many wrongs, but of this, I am accused unfairly. I took no lives. I spilled no blood. If you would hang me, or cut off my head, you end the life of the wrong man. The one who committed that deed is dead, slain by my hand. Move aside, and let us be. We still fight for you, for Kaide. But I will protect myself if I must."

He drew his sword and pointed ahead of him.

"Move aside."

At first Jerico thought they would. The speech was sincere, his certainty forceful. Jerico felt uncomfortable with the implied threat, but surely the people would understand. Surely they would realize the gold coin was not worth the bloodshed and betrayal of...

"Cowards," said the messenger, thrusting for a crease in Darius's armor. Before it hit, Darius stepped to one side and swung. The blade cut the messenger at the wrist. Blood arced across the grass as both weapon and hand twirled and fell. Jerico felt his heart stop, and his breath catch in his throat.

The mob saw blood, and it was like fire on dry leaves.

"Push through!" Jerico shouted, ducking his head and leading with his shield. His armor was thick, and his shield thicker. He felt blows strike him, mostly ineffective. A sickle scraped across his pauldron, and a pitchfork struck the shield before sliding to one side. Legs pumping, Jerico continued on, giving them no chance to resist, no chance to regroup. He burst through the other side of the crowd, feeling battered and bruised, but alive.

Spinning, he saw Darius trying to follow, but the crowd's attention had turned on him. Without a shield, he could only lead with his sword. He cut and parried, relying on his armor to protect him from fists and clubs, and his blade to protect him from all else. His armor had many sharp ridges and edges, and he slammed through people who tried to block his way. Blood coated the dark steel.

"Darius!" Jerico shouted as the way closed between them. He ran, using his shield to shove aside a group of three trying to stop Darius's exit. Two more blocked the way, both with heavy sickles. Darius smacked aside one, but the other slipped through his defenses. The curved end hooked over his chestplate, past his neck, and into the flesh of his collarbone. Darius screamed, and then whipped his sword around, cleaving the attacking farmer in half.

"No!" Jerico cried.

The way was clear, and Darius sprinted free. Jerico stood before the crowd, and he braced with his shield.

Forgive me if this is wrong, he prayed. Light swelled in the center of his shield, then burst outward with the strength of a lightning bolt. Blinded, the people staggered. Hooking his shield on his back, Jerico turned and ran, following Darius out of Wilhelm and into the wilderness beyond.

They ran for a long hour, both of them conditioned to such exertion as well as blessed with strength from their deity. Not a word was said between them. At last they reached the end of the farmland, and feeling confident they could lose themselves in the hills beyond, Jerico slowed. Bending over to catch his breath, he let his shield slip to the ground, glad to be free of its weight. Darius did the same, jamming his sword into the dirt and leaning on it, the handle pressed against his face.

"You're bleeding," Jerico said.

"Most of the blood isn't mine."

“No, your neck.”

Darius pulled off his glove and then touched the wound at his collarbone. His fingers came back red.

“Not too deep,” he said. “I’ll live.”

An awkward silence fell between them. Jerico felt he should be the teacher, Darius his student, even though Darius was actually older. He knew more of the world, understood better the politics of the North. But he’d erred, badly.

“Darius...” he started to say.

“Save it. I know. I made a mistake.”

“A mistake? You cut a man in two.”

Darius glared.

“I was hurt, and frightened. A second more, and they would have buried me. What would you have done then? Watched me die? Or risked dying yourself when you tried to save me? There was no reasoning with them, and you know it.”

“They might have listened until you cut off a man’s hand!” His voice was rising, and much as he knew he shouldn’t, he continued anyway. “We’re beacons, examples for others to follow. We’re not executioners!”

“Bullshit!” Darius was in his face now, overcome with exhaustion and frustration. “I saw how many wolf-men you killed, far more than I ever did. I saw you slaughter Sebastian’s men. You’re just as good at killing as I am, if not better. I killed one man, *one man*, protecting my life. You think I’m happy about it? Think I enjoyed it? Gods damn it, if this world were just, they’d have killed me in my sleep without giving me the choice. You weren’t there. You didn’t see it.”

He fell silent. Jerico took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. He couldn’t judge Darius harshly, not without knowing everything he’d gone through. This was a man turned from Karak to Ashhur. A dark paladin would have had no qualms about slaughtering an entire village to protect himself. That he felt guilt at all was a poignant sign.

“What happened in Durham?” Jerico asked softly. “I’ve not asked before, but now I think it best you tell me.”

Darius looked back to the village, then sighed.

“A priest found me, wandering and lost,” he said. “He offered me a chance to redeem myself in the eyes of Karak. He was a cold, cruel man, Jerico, if he was ever even a man. Very powerful, and worst of all, his words were like poison in my mind. I believed him. He was Karak’s prophet, the voice of my god. And then he brought me to Durham, to make amends for my mistakes. I was to convert the faithful, make the entire village bend its knee.”

Jerico thought of the many he knew there, and could guess their reaction.

“What happened then?” he asked.

Darius chuckled, and he wiped at his eyes.

“I couldn’t do it. I tried, but they knew me better than I knew myself. Yet it didn’t matter. The prophet...when he came back...damn it. Damn it all, I told them to run! I told them how dangerous he was. Some listened, but not enough. He came with fire and magic, and...”

He started laughing, despite his grief.

“You know what, Jerico? I’m glad there’s a bounty on my head. It means a few made it out alive. It means at least I might have done something right.”

Jerico looked back, and he saw a distant cluster of torches, about a mile away by his estimate.

“We need to continue,” he said. “It looks like they’re pursuing us farther than I thought.”

“I don’t blame them.”

They gathered their things. They had terribly few supplies, and Jerico expected a very hungry day until they could reach another village, or trap a rabbit or squirrel.

“Darius,” said Jerico. “Please, just promise me you won’t kill anyone else coming after you because of that bounty. They’re only obeying the law. I’ll help protect you from the people, but don’t make me protect the people from you.”

Darius looked down at his armor, saw the blood on the sharp edges.

“I’ll try,” he said. “Forgive me. I’ve much to learn.”

Jerico thought of his dilemma earlier and chuckled.

“I think we both have plenty to learn. Let’s just keep the body count to a minimum while we do.”



Sir Robert Godley was at the top of the Blood Tower when Karak's army arrived.

"Robert?" asked Daniel Coldmine, Robert's most trusted companion. The lieutenant stood at the half-open door, his fingers still wrapped about the handle.

"I know," Robert said, staring out the window at the reinforced doors of the walls surrounding the tower. Beyond were tents, caravans, and many, many armed men. His heavy hands lay flat across his desk. Between them were a bottle and an empty glass. "Send whoever is in charge up to me."

Daniel hesitated.

"Sir, we still have the option to turn them away. The worst they can do is voice their complaint back at Mordeina. They can't be mad enough to attack servants of the King and expect no retribution."

"I said bring their leader to me," Robert said, still refusing to turn around. "I will show no fear, not to the likes of them. Now go."

Daniel bowed.

"I'll return shortly."

"Take as much time as you need," Robert said to no one. He reached for the bottle, then pushed it away. He wasn't drunk, but he was getting damn close. It was shameful enough using the liquor to bolster his courage. Confronting the priests' shit-faced was an embarrassment he'd never let himself live down. He was better than that, and more importantly, he owed his men better than that.

It hadn't taken long. Within two weeks of his bounty on the paladin Darius, he'd received message that an envoy from Mordeina would soon arrive to represent the Stronghold. Robert had put a death sentence on the head of one of their own. At the time, Daniel had warned him such an action would not go unnoticed, and he'd been right. As to how Karak's children would respond, he could only guess, but seeing over five hundred private soldiers bearing the mark of the Lion surrounding his tower, Robert's imagination didn't need to work too hard.

A knock at the door sent him slowly to his feet.

"Enter," he said.

The door opened, and Daniel escorted two men inside. One was older, with thin gray hair that hung down to his bony shoulders. He stood straight, though, and walked without a limp. He offered a wrinkled hand, and when Robert shook it, he squeezed with impressive strength.

"Greetings, knight," said the priest. His voice was deep, well-aged. "My name is Luther, priest of our glorious god, Karak. With me is my pupil, Cyric."

The other man stepped forward. Unlike Luther, he looked young, barely into his twenties. He bowed low, in a manner more respectful than Luther had shown. His hair was a deep brown and cut short, so that his forehead seemed much larger than it was. Combined with his blue eyes and slender nose, it gave him an awkward, youthful look. When he spoke, though, his voice echoed with an authority and a certainty that immediately revealed why he'd been chosen as Luther's pupil.

"I am honored to meet the man who devised the banishment of the heathen elves from our lands," said Cyric. "You did Mordan a great service."

“You’d have been at your mother’s breast when that happened, if not still in her belly,” Robert said. “How could you know much of that?”

“He’s a voracious reader,” said Luther. “I doubt there is a book in our library he has not read. But come, we have not traveled all this way to discuss forgotten battles. Word of your bounty on one of the Stronghold’s paladins reached us quickly, Sir Godley.”

Robert exchanged a look with Daniel, who shifted his stance so his hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

“I’m not a fool,” said Robert. “I knew you’d come, but if there were ever a guilty man in the North, it would be Darius. I have over a hundred people who’ll swear that he...”

“We have not come to question his guilt,” Luther interrupted. “Darius is a fallen servant, and has rejected Karak’s teachings. We have reason to believe he killed several of our paladins, good men sent to find and ascertain his faithfulness to our ways.”

Robert’s eyes narrowed. They weren’t here to argue, or to protect Darius? It sounded too good to be true, which made him all the more suspicious.

“Then why have you come, Luther? I can see your armed men from my window. The North is dangerous, but not so much to require that large an escort for only two priests.”

“Indeed,” said Luther, smiling. “I pray we have not frightened you, but yes, we have come with a request. You handed Darius a sentence of death, but we ask that you deliver him unto us instead.”

“You want to spare his life?” asked Daniel, and Robert could see his anger ready to burst forth.

“Spare it?” asked the young Cyric, laughing. “Our tomes detail quite clearly the fate blasphemers and traitors must suffer. Whatever death you think Darius deserves, I assure you, ours will be worse.”

Luther shot his pupil a look, and Robert recognized it well. It was a warning against speaking out of turn. Robert had just sent Daniel that same look for his own outburst.

“This is about more than punishment,” Luther said, clearing his throat. “Darius is a dangerous man, and your bounty invites much unnecessary death. If he can kill our skilled paladins, then poor farmers and soldiers desperate for a bit of coin stand little chance. I ask that you retract the bounty, and instead make it for information only. Let the Stronghold deal with Darius. He will not remain hidden for long, not from me.”

Robert crossed his arms and tried to think. The offer was tempting, but something about it bothered him. The two priests were acting too kind, too understanding. No doubt they were trying to save face for their order by having Darius executed in private. Hardly the example Robert wanted to set.

“His crimes are against the King’s citizens,” Robert said, trying to stall.

“Whose protection has been left to Lord Sebastian,” said Luther. “But has he done anything? Of course not. He’s too busy squabbling with his brother for land, leaving this matter to you. Speaking of which...”

The old man walked over to the map on the far side of Robert’s wall, and he rubbed his chin as he stared at it with bloodshot eyes.

“How goes the North?” he asked. “We hear only rumors in Mordeina, and struggle to know what is true and what is not.”

“Lord Arthur met Lord Sebastian in fair battle, and lost,” Robert said. “He retreated to his castle, which Lord Sebastian has put under siege. That is the last I have heard, but I expect it to take months before the Castle of Caves falls.”

“Sebastian is a good friend of Karak,” Cyric said, more to Luther than Robert. “We must ensure his victory over his brother.”

“I thought the priests and paladins of Karak remained neutral in political matters,” Daniel interrupted again. Robert knew well his distaste for the priests, and if he couldn’t hold his tongue...

“Go prepare lodging for Luther’s men,” he ordered. Daniel looked displeased, but he bowed low and left to carry out his orders.

“A rebellious man,” Luther said, softly chuckling.

“He only asks what I myself am thinking,” Robert said.

“And you are right, in a way. We are neutral in most politics, but when it comes to Karak and his children, we are ever vigilant. Sebastian is a faithful servant, whereas Arthur is under the delusion we are a ... detriment to the North. Besides, is Sebastian not the lawful ruler of these lands? We only uphold the law, Robert.”

“As do I,” said Robert. “And Darius has broken it. Forgive me, but my bounty stays. If he is no longer a paladin of the Stronghold, then he should be of no concern to you.”

“We do not operate under your laws,” Cyric said. “We live under the law of Karak, which is wise as it is...”

Cyric looked furious, but Luther remained calm, not even turning from the map.

“Enough, Cyric,” said Luther. He gestured to the door. “Leave us. I will speak with our host in private.”

Cyric’s look was bitter, but he bowed low and obeyed. As the door closed, Luther sighed.

“May I sit?” he asked.

“By all means.”

Luther walked over to a chair pressed against the wall that was usually reserved for Daniel. His joints creaked as he sat. His eyes bored into Robert, who sat at his desk. Something about that look shriveled his testicles and made him wish he could call Daniel back in.

“You must forgive my pupil,” Luther said. “He is still young, and has difficulty understanding that the way of the world is rarely as easy as his books would imply.”

Robert grunted.

“Very little of the world is easy, especially here in the North.”

“Indeed. I do not think he would understand what I have to say to you, for I know what he expects me to say. The will of Karak is lord of all things, and for you to resist speaks blasphemy against that which is holy.”

Robert decided to the Abyss with it, and poured himself another glass.

“And what would you say?” he asked before taking a drink.

“That such a claim would be an insult to your honor. You have the safety of many people in your hands, and the lawful authority to do what you have done. You also fear our power, for you know how strong our influence is in Mordeina. You also fear Karak. I can see it in your eyes. Yes, what you did is within your power, but not all we do is wise. You may have the authority to lay judgment on a priest or paladin of Karak, but it is not your *place* to do so. I need to be convinced you are aware of that.”

“You just said Darius was no longer a paladin of the Stronghold.”

“Something you were unaware of when you offered that bounty.”

Robert tried to summon fury at having his station challenged, his authority mocked. Instead he could only stare into Luther’s eyes and feel the power of the entire priesthood prepared to move against him.

"I fail to see how you are any different from your pupil," he said, putting aside his glass.

"Cyric would view your resistance as blasphemy, worthy of punishment and purging with cleansing fire. He would threaten you with the Abyss, and escalate this into a conflict of wills and pride. I only hope that we might see eye to eye. You do not have to agree with me, Robert, only acknowledge who wields the greater power, and act as the pragmatic man I know you are."

Robert swallowed. There was no doubt about who wielded the greater power. It took months of begging just to get King Baedan to send a fraction of their needed resupplies, yet meanwhile, the priests of Karak whispered into his ear day and night.

"You want the bounty changed to capture only, correct?" he asked.

"I do," Luther said. He smiled, as if sensing Robert's breaking resolve.

"I want you to make me a promise," Robert said, "and swear to it in writing on the same parchment upon which I alter the bounty."

"And what do I promise?"

"That your order will execute Darius for his crimes. I don't care how, and don't care when. I just need to know he will suffer for what he did to Durham."

"He has turned his back on our god," Luther said, rising to his feet. "The stars may fall from the heavens, and our sun dwindle and die, yet his suffering will continue amid darkness and fire. Never ending. Never relenting. If you wish, you may write so on your parchment, and I will sign it with my blood. Will that suffice?"

"It will suffice," Robert said, but he felt no comfort. Cyric may have been a fanatic, but this man...he truly believed what he said, that he would capture Darius and force him to endure such tortures. But even amid the fanatic belief, he could still see through Robert's eyes, understand his motives, and react accordingly. Luther had left him with no argument against accepting his request other than basic pride. Should he resist anyway, it would only take the time for a letter to reach King Baedan and back before he was reprimanded and overruled.

"Excellent," Luther said, clapping his hands. "My men will stay here while we await word of Darius's location, as well as plan our conflict with this rebellious Lord Arthur. Oh, and before I forget..."

He pulled out a scroll from one of his lengthy robe pockets.

"I know your provisions are low, so as a measure of gratitude, we have brought gifts from Mordeina."

Robert accepted the scroll, unfurled it, and began to read. His jaw dropped. Bread, butter, caskets of ale, jars of honey, clothes, coats, furs, blankets...He could reinforce nearly every tower along the Gihon for the winter, just with what their wagons had brought.

"Thank you," he said, stunned.

"No, thank you," said Luther, "for your cooperation."

Robert heard his meaning loud and clear.

"My men thank you as well."

Luther smiled.

"I am glad. Do not worry about finding my men a place to sleep. They will bunk in our wagons and tents, to lessen our burden upon you. I must insist upon a room for Cyric and myself, though. Now, if you do not object, I must oversee my companions."

He left, and Robert leaned back in his chair. His eyes flicked over the list, still stunned by the donated wealth. A rock built in his stomach as he thought of how refusing the priests would have kept him from receiving a single crumb of bread. His men would have found out, too. His blood chilled. They'd hear of the warm coats, the abundant food, and then hear how they'd lost it

all because of a single criminal. As dissension spread, Luther would have remained outside his tower, surrounding it with his wagons...

"Damn it," he said, tossing the scroll to his desk. It had never been an option. The result had never been in doubt. In time, Luther would have had his way.

Once more he felt the power of the priesthood arrayed against him, and knew how helpless he was before it. His only consolation was knowing that that same power had turned its focus to Darius. Deep down, he believed Luther would find him, and bring him back to the Stronghold in chains. It would only be a matter of time.



Valessa stood naked before the door of the farmhouse. She wanted to barge in, but knew she had to find out for certain. She had to know how much was left of her humanity. Her knuckles rapped against the wood, its solidity against her touch reassuring. At least there was that. As the door opened, she tried her best to act the poor, wounded girl. She held her daggers behind her back.

"Bandits," she stammered to the heavyset farmer and his wife.

Her body shivered like she was cold, yet her red hair was singed in places as if by fire. The husband set aside the dagger he'd been holding while the wife reached for her, sympathy in her eyes.

"You poor dear," said the woman. "Come in, please. Cale, go see what you can find for her to wear."

The ceiling was low, but the house was large enough for several rooms. The walls were old wood, but clean, as the floor was meticulously swept. A fire burned in the hearth, and she fought an urge to sit beside it. As Valessa stepped inside, the woman reached for her. Both flinched at the contact, the woman's fingers touching her shoulders only briefly.

"Oh my," she said, pulling back and rubbing her hands together. Her face looked a mixture of sadness and fear. "By gods, you're cold."

Cale returned holding a blanket, and he made a point to stare at her eyes instead of elsewhere.

"Here you go, miss," he said, wrapping it about her shoulders. As the blanket settled over her, she forced herself to concentrate, to remain calm. Part of her expected it to fall right through her, as if she were a ghost, but it did not. There was no warmth to it, no comfort, but at least she wasn't standing there naked.

"Care to sit with me by the fire?" asked the woman. She gestured to two chairs carved of wood, each on opposite sides of the fireplace.

"I...yes," said Valessa. She shuffled as if she had been wounded. In a way, she had been, though of her own volition. Every time she closed her eyes to rest, she relived the memory of impaling herself on Darius's blade. Darius, the betrayer...

"My name's Dora, and this is my husband, Cale," said the woman, settling down in her chair. "Might I have your name?"

"Valessa," she said, wrapping the blanket tighter about her. It wasn't her nakedness she was trying to hide. It was how with every movement she made, her skin thinned, its color draining away as it became liquid shadow. She was darkness given form, and a soul. That she could hold the blanket gave her hope. Perhaps there was still a chance she might have some decency and normality, even in the form her god had cursed her with.

"Forgive me," she muttered. *Blessed*, not cursed. She'd been given a chance to hunt down the traitor, to make amends for her failure. Never should she spit in the face of her god and his gifts.

“Oh, it’s no bother,” said Dora, misunderstanding her. “Truth be told, neither of us were sleeping. The older we get, the more the night seems to like us better than the day.”

Valessa settled in the chair, focusing on every inch that touched her body. There could be no give, no shift. There was still plenty she had to experiment with, but if she were to be the assassin she needed to be, simple acts like sitting in a chair needed to be mastered. So far, so good. Feeling confident, she set her daggers beside her, still hidden by the blanket.

Cale returned, a meager assortment of clothes in his calloused hands.

“It’s not much,” he said, holding them out for her to take. “But it’ll do until we can get you back to your family.”

Valessa tried to smile. As a gray sister, she’d been trained in a hundred different personas, from obedient servants to wealthy noblewomen. She tried to be the wounded victim, to keep her motions quick and startled, her eyes wide, her speech rare. Concentrating amid the pain, though...

“Thank you,” she said, reaching a hand out from underneath her blanket. Her reaction was too fast, despite it being appropriate to the persona she channeled. A wisp of smoke trailed over her skin. Cale didn’t seem to notice, and she thanked Karak for that. Grabbing the clothes, she felt the rough fabric, its touch almost painful. She set them on her lap, and assumed correctly the couple would understand if she remained there, still warming.

“I’m hungry,” she said.

Dora stood, and she motioned for Cale to take her seat.

“I think we still have a bit of soup from earlier,” she said, nodding to a pot set near the fireplace. Retrieving a wooden bowl and spoon from a cupboard, she knelt and scraped up a meager portion of soup. It was a dark brown broth, with hints of meat and vegetables floating inside. It looked appetizing enough. Valessa had yet to eat or drink a thing since her...what should she call it? Resurrection? Recreation? Salvation? It didn’t matter. That was over a week ago. She should have been dead, but she was not. Or perhaps she was.

She took the bowl, slowly. This was it, she knew. She dipped the spoon into the bowl, then brought it to her lips. Her hand shook, and its color faded. Opening her mouth, she slipped the spoon inside. She imagined the taste, heavy and meaty, but it was not there. No sensation, just the texture, and an awareness of its lukewarm temperature. The only thing she felt was pain. Every second, day and night, she felt a throbbing ache everywhere she once had muscle and flesh. The taste of food was just another sensation, without pleasure or satisfaction. She wanted to cry, but tears would not come. Her new form refused such a weakness.

Valessa swallowed. Instead of traveling down her throat, the liquid passed through the bottom of her chin and neck, dripping across her blanket.

“Careful dear,” Dora said when she saw the mess. Cale had not seen at all, too busy staring into the fire with a half-asleep expression on his face. Fighting down her fury, Valessa offered the bowl back to Dora with one hand. Too fast, her hand became shadow and smoke. The bowl fell right through her, hitting the floor with a dull thud. This time Dora saw, and her mouth dropped open.

Valessa moved before she could scream. She grabbed her daggers and shot from her chair. She didn’t cast aside the blanket, for she passed right through it. In a single smooth motion, she slashed open the woman’s throat, then turned to Cale. The man was still trying to get up from his chair when she jammed a dagger into his chest and twisted. He coughed once, his knuckles white as he clutched the arms of his chair, and then he died. Blood poured across the handle of her dagger, but when it reached her quivering flesh, it slid past and down to the floor.

She dropped the dagger, and naked on her knees, she howled out in mindless fury. Softness, pleasure, comfort, a loving embrace...all denied to her. And why? Because she had failed her duty, failed to kill that bastard, Darius. Hatred seethed in her heart at the mere thought of his name. He'd suffer, oh, how she'd make him suffer. Her new form might be a penance imposed by Karak, but there would be no penance for Darius, only torment. When finished, she'd use her daggers to send him to Karak, and let her deity deliver for an eternity all the suffering Darius deserved.

Stop it, she told herself even as she continued to shriek. Karak was not a god of love. He was a god of order. Darius had broken that order, as had Valessa in failing to kill him. She couldn't be angry. Not at Karak. No, that wasn't fair. It took all her willpower to choke down her fury at her beloved deity. Now was not the time for weakness. It was time for revenge.

She looked down at her naked form. Valessa was not ashamed of exposing her body in any way (and in truth, had seduced many in the name of her god, all to execute the unfaithful), but trying to go about unnoticed would be impossible. She needed clothes. Returning to her chair, she grabbed a shirt and slid it over her head. It was too big, and left much of her breasts exposed, but it was better than nothing. Pausing for a moment to focus her thoughts, she took a single step. Every inch of fabric brushing against her shadowed flesh itched in her mind, but she remained solid. Another step, still good. But she could not waddle everywhere like a lame animal. The real test came as she lifted her arms above her head and twirled in a half-remembered dance that had been common in court.

The shirt fell through her to the floor, her body a whirling creature of shadow and smoke.

"Why?" she shrieked. Her fists pounded against the floor until her hands began to pass through, striking nothing. It made no sense! How could she perform her god's will when saddled with such difficulty? How could he expect her to stroll naked through open streets in a hunt for his fallen paladin?

"Please," she prayed. Her body might not create tears, but she was sobbing anyway, her grief overwhelming her. "Please, help me, Karak. Show me the way."

She heard no answer, which perhaps she deserved. Trying to overcome her grief, she looked at her naked body and began to think. Her body was not real, only an illusion. She could make parts of it solid, particularly through concentration. Was her skin not also an illusion? As she stared at herself, she tried to see what she truly was, not what she remembered. Before her eyes, she became darkness. The sight terrified her, but in it, she found hope. Perhaps there was more to it than that. Closing her eyes again, she imagined her old leather armor, covered with dull plain clothes, and a long gray cloak wrapped about her shoulders. She'd worn such an outfit so often it was natural to her. She could still imagine the way it felt, and how her cloak would billow in the wind.

When she opened her eyes, she was no longer naked.

"Thank you," she whispered. She moved her arms, watched the sleeves fade along with her skin. Her body was just an illusion, a projection of how she imagined herself. Which meant...

She closed her eyes again. Thinking of her former partner, Claire, she tried to imagine Claire's blonde hair falling down to her shoulders over her more slender form. And then she opened her eyes, saw the hair, saw the subtle shift of her hands. The true power of Karak's gift came to her then, and she might have wept for joy. Yes, she would have to endure pain, but all gifts came with a price. She could be anyone, limited only by her imagination.

Valessa retrieved her daggers. Only they would remain in her grasp when she moved at full speed, somehow blessed by Karak during the process of her...revival. One last thought came to

her, one she had to finally test. Turning to a wall, and without any time to think, and therefore frighten herself off her course of action, she ran straight at it. No slowing. At the last moment, she closed her eyes.

When she opened them, she was outside, daggers still in hand.

She laughed.

“Where is he?” she asked, looking to the stars. “Where is the traitor?”

When she lay down to sleep, she relived her moment of death, thrusting her neck upon his blade. But when she focused on his name, his face, she could always look to the sky, day or night, and see a red star burning, showing her the way. Sure enough, she saw it, and forgetting her hunger, her pain, her sorrow, she left the corpses inside the farmhouse and headed southwest.

Toward Darius.



As the two paladins walked into Stonahm, Jerico did not wonder about linking back up with Kaide, or worry that the villagers might hand Darius over for coin. All he cared about was finally getting himself a decent meal.

"You sure they won't try for the bounty?" Darius asked as they passed the nearby homes. "I'm not too eager to repeat what happened at Wilhelm."

"Neither am I," said Jerico as he glanced about. "But this is Kaide's home, his family." The last time Jerico had been in Stonahm was not long after Sebastian's army had come and pillaged it. Much of the damage had been repaired over the past two weeks, and as faces peered at them from windows and doorways, he saw no anger, only fear. "I've helped them, fought for them. To go against me, and turn over an enemy of Sebastian, wouldn't even cross their minds."

He stopped in the center of the village, with not so much as a word spoken to them in greeting. Everyone seemed eager to either avoid them or pretend they were not there.

"I think," Jerico muttered as a group of men came around a corner and approached. He recognized their leader, the elderly Kalgan, the closest person the village had to a healer.

"I see you survived," Kalgan said, hardly sounding pleased by that fact. Jerico tried not to feel angry with him. Jerico's protection of a woman from one of Sebastian's knights had caused the lord to send his army down to punish them in the first place. As much as he tried to convince himself he was in the right, it did little to sway his guilt, and he well understood Kalgan's ire.

"We've come for shelter," Jerico said. "We've traveled far, and are hungry."

Kalgan eyed him and Darius, and the other men with him shuffled nervously.

"Follow me," he said. "We need to get you out of sight."

Jerico glanced at Darius, who only shrugged. They followed the elderly man back to his empty hut. Opening the door, he gestured for them to enter. Once inside, Kalgan waved away the others, then joined them, shutting the door after them.

"You have a lot of nerve to return here," Kalgan said, his voice more tired than angry.

Jerico sat on the bed, glad to be off his feet, while Darius remained standing in the corner, clearly on edge.

"I never fled the battle, if that is what you're thinking," Jerico said. "I was there to the end, but Sebastian had too many. It was Kaide who called for the retreat, not me."

"It's not that. I've heard what you did. You are a two-faced blessing, Jerico, sometimes bringing joy, sometimes sorrow. Sebastian has sent knights to all corners of the North looking for, as they put it, 'the man with the god shield'. His reward is substantial, though I wouldn't worry about any of the villagers here turning you over. Should you travel beyond Kaide's influence, however..."

The old man looked to Darius, and his frown deepened.

"And you. You look like the man Sir Robert is searching for, the one who supposedly burned Durham to the ground. Are you Darius of the Stronghold?"

When Darius nodded, Kalgan rubbed his eyes and swore.

"Two wanted men appearing in our town. Ashhur help us. Sebastian already fears us rebelling. To have both of you out in the open...damn it, do neither of you have any sense?"

"I thought you said no one here would turn us in," Darius said.

"I meant Jerico, not you," Kalgan said. "And it doesn't matter. One errant word, one man with more greed than sense, and Sebastian's knights will ride in again, and this time they may not stop at just rape and fire. You two must leave now, before you cause any more trouble."

Jerico leaned against the wall and sighed. So much for a night of relaxing and enjoying a bit of corn meal, warm soup, and maybe a roll of bread...

"Where is Kaide?" he asked. "That is why we're here. We separated after the battle, with Sebastian's army between us."

"He's back in the forest," Kalgan said. "Not sure how long he'll be there. He's trying to recruit more men. The gods help him, he thinks he can break Sebastian's siege of Arthur's castle."

Jerico frowned, though he wasn't surprised by the news. With Arthur's defeat, he'd have little choice but to flee. A lengthy siege would be expensive and draining for Sebastian's men, but he had the patience and manpower to do it. Victory would only be a matter of time.

"We'll leave for his camp, then," Jerico said, slowly rising to a standing position. It felt like every muscle in his body ached from the constant walking, and his stomach growled, as if realizing its good meal had been delayed. Kalgan opened the door, glanced about to make sure no one waited for them, and then gestured for them to leave.

"A fine welcome for one who fought and bled for you," Darius said as he brushed past the old man.

"There have been enough of both in this village," Kalgan said, unimpressed. "Forgive me for hoping we might have peace for a change."

As they headed for Stonahm's limits, someone cried out Jerico's name. He turned, then smiled, as Beth came running up to him. Without slowing, she hugged both her intact arm and her stump about him. That she was not self-conscious about the injury brightened his mood considerably.

"You're back," she said, all smiles.

"I promised, didn't I?"

"Beth, don't you have work to do?" Kalgan said. Beth took a step back and nodded curtly to him.

"I do, but Katie said she saw Jerico, and I wanted..."

"Enough. Go on."

She nodded again, then turned back to Jerico.

"My father will be so happy you returned," she said. "Tell him I miss him."

"I will."

He kissed her forehead, then continued on toward the forest.

"A fan?" Darius asked, eliciting a chuckle from Jerico.

"A spider bite nearly killed her. I saved her life, but still had to take her arm. She's Kaide's daughter."

"That makes a bit more sense. I'd be interested to meet this Kaide. How does he compare to his rumors?"

"He doesn't care for honor, has no qualms about killing, and is driven by revenge. But he's not a cannibal, if that's what you're wondering."

Darius smirked.

"Well...I guess there's that. How far a walk is it?"

"Better part of a day."

The other paladin sighed.

“We should have asked for food before we left.”

Despite Kalgan’s obvious impatience, Jerico rubbed his eyes and sighed as well.

“Yeah...”



They slept at the forest’s edge, eating a few berries they found as well as some roots that Darius was certain were the most bitter thing he’d ever tasted. They built a large fire, Jerico hoping the smoke might alert one of Kaide’s gang of their approach, but come morning, there was no one. Jerico tried assuring Darius it would be no problem, and with their things packed, they trudged into the forest. There appeared to be no path, though a couple of strangely cut branches might have been a marking.

“You do know where you’re going, right?” he asked Jerico.

“More or less.”

Hardly the confidence Darius was hoping for.

“‘More or less’?” he asked as they pressed through the rough thicket. “Jerico, what does ‘more or less’ mean?”

“I’ve been this way a couple of times. I’m fairly certain I can find it.”

Darius winced.

“And if you can’t?”

“Kaide’s men will find us,” Jerico said, grinning at him.

“Find our starved corpses, you mean,” Darius muttered.

They walked for an hour, at a fairly slow pace, as Jerico kept checking the surroundings. What his friend was looking for, he didn’t have a clue. At last they stumbled upon a stream, which Jerico insisted was a great sign. They stopped to rest. Darius yanked off his armor and dipped his head into the wonderfully cold water.

“What I’d give for a mule or something to carry my armor instead,” he said.

“Not much of a luxury either of us can afford. I’d sleep in it if it were at all comfortable.”

Darius grinned at him as water dripped down his face and hair.

“That worried about daggers in the night? If you’re asleep, wearing armor matters little when the assassin stabs you through the eye.”

Jerico chuckled, then turned his attention to Darius’s armor. He nodded toward the chestplate.

“You should do something about that,” he said.

Darius followed his gaze and saw the lion painted across the chest.

“Would you have me paint a golden mountain there instead?” he asked.

“Honestly? Yes.”

Darius shifted uncomfortably, and he ducked his head back into the river to stall. As the cold seeped into his pores, he tried to think. In Jerico, he’d seen something he knew he wanted, a hope for a dark world far more sacred and meaningful than the fire and order Karak promised. But he still felt uncomfortable calling himself a servant of Ashhur. Ever since his childhood he’d been a warrior for Karak. It was hard not to consider himself a traitor, no matter how terrible some of Karak’s servants had been, or what Karak had shown in blessing him for the killing of innocents because they worshipped Ashhur, the enemy. And now he was sworn to that enemy. According to his teachings in the Stronghold, he was doomed to an eternity of torment. Was that still true? Or would he escape to the Golden Eternity?

Pulling his head free from the cold water, he gasped in air. While wiping at his eyes, he inspecting his armor. Jerico had a point. He looked so much darker, so much more dangerous

than Jerico when they stood side by side. There was little he could do about the color, which was stained into the armor during its crafting. The symbol of the lion, though, he could remove with enough diligence and the scraping of a knife. No matter how hesitant he might be to publicly announce his worship of Ashhur, he was certain he wanted to claim no allegiance to Karak.

"Give me time, and I'll get it off," he told Jerico. "Might make it a bit easier to go unnoticed without it, too. Robert's looking for Darius of the Stronghold, not the Citadel."

At the mention of the Citadel, Jerico's mood darkened.

"Forgive me," Darius said. "I'm sure such a loss will take a long time to heal."

Jerico nodded, then reached for his shield, flinging it across his back.

"I must go back there sometime," he said. "I must see for myself its ruin. But Arthur needs my help more urgently than I need some shallow confirmation. Are you ready to go? If we follow the stream, I believe I can find their camp."

"Just let me get dressed. Daggers in the night and all."

Darius put back on his armor, and for the first time felt uncomfortable with the lion on his chest. To be sure, he touched his greatsword, and saw the faintest of blue light shimmer across its edges. He still believed, at least some small part of him did. He held on to that, and followed Jerico.

Another hour later, Darius felt the hairs on his neck stand on end. Long used to trusting his combat instincts, he looked about, then spotted a man in a distant tree. In his hands the man held a bow, the arrow already nocked and ready to fly.

"Jerico," he started to say.

"I see him," Jerico said. "Let's pray he's a friend. Hail!"

He waved, while subtly letting his shield shift to his other arm, in case he needed its protection. The man tensed for a moment, then relaxed as he caught sight of the blue glow.

"Jerico!" cried the distant man, shimmying down the tree. He was a far bigger man than Darius expected, and his face was covered with scars.

"How have the past few weeks treated you, Adam?" Jerico asked, clasping the man's wrist and pumping it up and down.

"Like shit," Adam said. "Was hoping to be stomping Sebastian's ass all the way from here to Mordeina. Instead we're stuck waiting."

Jerico nodded to the weapon slung across his shoulder.

"I didn't know you could use a bow."

"Gotta hunt to eat, don't you?"

Darius thought of their meager meals the past few days.

"Not necessarily," he said. This brought the big man's attention over to him.

"Who the fuck are you?" he asked.

"Darius," he said, offering a mock bow. "Consider me flattered to finally meet one of Kaide's most infamous knights."

Adam paused a moment, as if still thinking over the words, then his face spread into a giant grin.

"Funny man," he said, punching Darius in the shoulder, despite his armor. "But if you're half as good as Jerico, and willing to fight, we'll treat you fine as any prince."

Darius raised an eyebrow at Jerico, who only shrugged.

"Better than being chased out by people eager for a bounty, right?"

"If you say so."

“Come on,” said Adam. “Follow me. Kaide’ll want to know you made it out of the Green Gulch alive and breathing.”

The paladins let him lead the way away from the stream and into Kaide’s camp. Darius was surprised by the amount of buildings, all built of wood and straw. He’d expected a few tents, maybe a single home, but not this. More surprising was how many wandered about, working at various tasks. Nearly everyone stopped what they were doing as Adam led the newcomers to the camp’s center. Darius could hardly believe the hero’s welcome they received. Even Durham had not been so thankful after they’d protected them from the wolf-men’s attack.

“Where’s Kaide?” Adam roared as the people began to crowd them.

“Out back, training,” said one of the men.

Darius could only guess where ‘out back’ meant, but Adam seemed to know. They followed, curling around one of the buildings to a large open stretch between the trees. Twenty or so men stood in a line, old metal swords in their hands. A man walked before them, barking out orders while making slow motions in the air with his dirk. He was lithe, well fit, with his prematurely gray hair bound into a ponytail. He moved with such authority, Darius knew immediately that he had to be Kaide. His eyes carried such an intensity, it left him with little wonder how the man had managed to raise an army against Lord Sebastian, however ill-equipped and meager it was.

“Jerico,” he said, sheathing his dirk. He wiped his hands on his tunic, and, unlike the others, he seemed only mildly surprised that the paladin had returned. “So you survived after all.”

“There any doubt?” Jerico asked, and he smiled as the two embraced. “It’ll take far more than a couple thousand soldiers to bring me down.”

A half-hearted cheer came from the men training. Kaide turned on them, whatever joy had been present in his composure immediately gone.

“Back to training, all of you,” he said. “Pat, you lead until I get back.”

Kaide thanked Adam for escorting them to the camp, then sent him back to his hunt.

“Takes a lot of food to feed so many,” Kaide said as he headed to his quarters with the two of them in tow. “Thankfully the deer here are plentiful, and even in winter we can usually capture a few squirrels.”

“Venison sounds wonderful,” Jerico said as they stepped inside the small log cabin, and Darius heartily agreed. Once the door shut behind them, Kaide turned and swung. His fist crunched into Jerico’s jaw, the blow knocking him a step backward so that he thudded against the door. Instead of retaliating, Jerico stood there, mouth agape, and rubbed his face.

“When you tell me to flee, you don’t stand there and keep on fighting yourself,” Kaide said, jamming a finger in Jerico’s face. “We fight together, you and I. If you’re going to hold a line until death, then I stay at your side, and if I retreat, then your ass follows. Whatever miracle allowed you to survive, I don’t want to have to rely on it again. You’re the heart of this band now, the one thing that gives them hope, and your stand at the Green Gulch only solidified that. Do we understand each other?”

“You going to hit me again if I say no?”

The tension continued for a few more seconds, and then Kaide broke out into a laugh.

“No, but Sandra might. She missed you. We all have.” He turned his attention to Darius. “I see you brought a friend.”

“My name is Darius,” he said, bowing. “Jerico saved my life, and I seek to return the favor.”

At hearing the name, Kaide froze, and his eyes seemed to sparkle.

“Darius,” he said. “As in Darius of the Stronghold, from Durham?”

Darius swallowed, and he tried not to show any emotion.

“Yes. Will that be a problem?”

“A problem? Depends. Who’d you piss off to get that bounty on your head?”

Darius thought it might be prudent to lie, but he immediately felt ashamed for even entertaining the notion.

“I was once of the Stronghold, but no longer,” he said, standing up straighter so his full height towered over Kaide. “Karak’s followers have never taken kindly to one who leaves the fold.”

“That’s strange,” Kaide said, rubbing his chin. “Report I heard said the bounty came from Sir Robert at the towers.”

“I was there when one of Karak’s greatest priests burned it to the ground. I’m sure the blame has been cast upon me.”

“Enough,” Jerico said, standing between them. “We’ve come back to help, in whatever way we can.”

Kaide shifted his attention to his friend, but Darius felt no comfort. It lingered in the air, that unspoken challenge, the question of his guilt, his role in Durham. No doubt Jerico saw the strong leader that Kaide was, but Darius also saw in him a greed and a hunger that set his nerves on edge. He saw a man with a cause, yet no ideals. The whole world might burn while Kaide waged his war on Lord Sebastian, and it wouldn’t matter, so long as in the end he found victory.

“We don’t have enough men, not yet,” said Kaide. “But soon, we’ll move out. We’ll starve Sebastian’s army of supplies, hit their caravans, set fires when they sleep. Anything to make their lives miserable. With each passing day, my men scour the North, telling tales of Sebastian’s depravity. We’ll build another rebellion, one that won’t be stamped out after a single battle. But we can talk about those details later, once Bellok comes back with more supplies. For now, let’s get you something to eat, and find you a room.”

He opened the door, then glanced back at Jerico, whose face was starting to swell on one side.

“You tripped crossing the stream on the way here,” he said, then exited.

“Aren’t you the clumsy one,” Darius said, following Jerico out, but there was no humor in his voice, only unease, as the rest of the camp cheered once more for their arrival.

