

A Night of Shadows

Prologue

The shattered windows rattled in the wind. The cabin lay still as the distant wail of the storm echoed within the darkened room. Snow gusted through the broken glass, the soft white flakes covering the wreckage of bodies and ash strewn across the blood-stained floor. Some of the dead were men, hooded and dressed in black, but the others were strange, lithe yet muscled creatures, only vaguely human in appearance. Their skin was smooth and darker than the night outside, and their armor was darker still, seemingly molded to their sleek frames.

With a sudden crash, the door burst open and Sylvia spilled into the room with the elements shrieking around her. She absorbed the carnage at a glance, her eyes finding the pair hidden in the shadows. They had tensed at her entrance. Flames leapt in the hands of a tall man robed in white and gold. Beside him, a slender veiled woman readied a pair of narrow blades. Upon recognizing her, they both relaxed, relieved. “What happened?” Sylvia demanded.

“I don’t know how, but they found us,” the man replied wearily, the fires vanishing from his hands. “I don’t believe they expected us both. Still, it was a close thing.” His voice sharpened as his penetrating blue eyes fixed on Sylvia. “Why are you alone?” he asked. “Where is Jarias? Is the child unharmed?”

“I don’t know,” Sylvia answered harshly. “The baby, something happened . . .” she began before shaking her head angrily. “There is no time,” she snapped, working hurriedly to free herself from the straps binding the slumbering infant to her back. “We had to separate. They came for us and Jarias lured them away so that the baby and I could escape.” Removing the

harness, she gently lifted out the child and cradled the baby lovingly for a moment before crossing to the veiled woman. "I am trusting you with my child," she said with sudden intensity, handing the infant into the woman's waiting arms.

"With my life, *Saiyasa*," the woman replied softly, her veiled gaze drifting to the white-garbed man.

Sylvia met the man's eyes without flinching. "I'm going back for him," she said fiercely, the emotion strong in her voice. "I won't lose him, Amalor."

The man frowned as he looked to the open door. Outside, the shrill wailing of the winds was audible and he could see the relentless fall of snow whipping violently through the frigid night. "Of course," he answered quietly, "I would have never doubted it."

His voice grew determined. "We should hurry. Jarias can care for himself, but this is as black a night as I have seen. Even he may have need of help before it is done." He turned to the woman who held the baby, her face unreadable behind the veil. "Do whatever you must."

"I have given *Saiyasa* my word," the woman replied, her voice an airy whisper. "No harm shall find the child while in my care." A strange light flickered behind her veil and Amalor nodded grimly. Satisfied, he looked to Sylvia, who wasted no further time in darting through the open door. Bracing himself, Amalor raised his hood and followed her white-cloaked form into the furious night.

The Flame Rekindled

Chapter I

Ghosts Within the Gray

The woods were quiet. Tiran frowned faintly at the silence, his gaze sweeping the trees before falling to the forest floor. Dropping to one knee, he studied the markings, his fingers brushing lightly over the disturbed earth as he read the faint traces of passage. Satisfied, he rose in silence, absently adjusting his heavy gray cloak while he considered his surroundings. When he was certain that he was truly alone, he moved, blending quietly into the dense undergrowth.

He kept his steps measured as he followed the signs. The forest around him was lush and vibrant with the approach of summer and the afternoon sun shone through the thin cracks in the heavy foliage to fall sparingly upon the forest floor. Tiran's eyes drifted between the vague trail and the forest ahead as he glided forward with a quiet rustle of leaves. Dressed in a soft blend of greens and brown, the gray of his cloak caused him to blur into the landscape. He was slight of build but strong and lean, with smooth sun-browned skin and striking features, a pair of intense green eyes gazing out from beneath golden hair.

Tiran grew cautious. His senses strained for any trace of movement. He knew his quarry was close, but not how close. Their tracks had been well-covered, but not quite well enough to escape his practiced eye. Advancing warily, a gradual thinning appeared in the trees ahead and the faint murmur of voices reached his ears. Instantly, Tiran ducked into the brush, the long blade of his sword clearing the scabbard on his back with a soft rasp. Stealing forward with his blade held low, the voices grew louder as he neared the clearing and shapes moved through the breaks

in the trees.

Tiran slowed, his eyes searching until at last they settled upon a massive oak. Quick as a thought he was up amidst the branches, sliding carefully along an outstretched bough to peer through the screen of leaves.

A rough camp occupied the open ground. An assortment of weather-worn tents encircled the low flames of a covered fire. Nearby, the dressed carcass of a deer and a brace of rabbits were trussed and ready for cooking, while a collection of unsavory-looking men lay sprawled around the encampment. Some lounged by the fire while others engaged in an idle game of dice. Atop a small hillock, a hulking brute of a man, whom Tiran took to be their leader, was watching them absently, taking frequent pulls from a heavy wineskin.

It seemed he had found them, Tiran thought, settling in to watch. He quickly spotted the pair of sentries inside the forest's fringe keeping a disinterested eye on the surrounding woods. There were good woodsmen among them but success had made them lax. These men were only going through the motions of caution.

His gaze drifted over the camp, settling on a disorderly pile of once neatly-packaged goods, with several shaggy but sturdy-looking draft horses picketed nearby. Their take from the caravans no doubt. The casks, crates and packages showed indications of having been carelessly rifled through.

The memories returned to him. Images of smoke still billowing from the smoldering fires and corpses lying bloodied and blackened within the burnt wreckage of the wagons. A faint anger stirred inside him. Tiran had seen his share of death, but this massacre had been particularly vile;

the foul smell of it hanging thick in the smoke-filled air had been inescapable.

He was confident nothing had been overlooked but caution forced him to check once more, meticulously absorbing every detail of the camp. Finally satisfied, he raised his hands to his mouth and the call of a mountain finch sang out over the woods. Listening to the fading sound, he settled back against the tree.

He did not have to wait long. Almost immediately he heard an answering cry and Tiran nodded without surprise. It appeared Morin had found the camp as well. Despite the signal, Tiran remained where he was, considering the situation.

Abruptly his face grew hard as he seemed to reach a decision. Rolling from the branch, Tiran dropped lightly to the ground below. He moved with purpose, a blur of gray among the forest's shadows.

The sentry had no warning as Tiran separated from the woods. Doomed eyes widened as Tiran's sword flashed in a sudden angled lunge, silencing the man before he could make a sound. Leaving the corpse still leaning against the tree, Tiran slipped soundlessly back into the forest.

He circled quickly, closing upon the second sentry in a rush. He struck from the man's blind side, his hand closing firmly over the sentry's mouth, muffling his cry as the sword plunged home. Sliding his blade free, Tiran's eyes narrowed as the camp stirred at the muffled sounds.

Inside the encampment, several men had risen. Their eyes searched the encircling trees as they listened warily to the quiet that had crept back over the forest. "What is it?" a surly-looking man asked irritably from near the fire.

"I thought I heard something," a thin weasel-faced ruffian answered, his hand on the

wicked knife at his belt.

“I heard it too,” a hard-featured man added, his grip tight on the haft of his bow.

“Probably just Lukas bleeding the lizard,” the sullen man replied with a disinterested shrug. “Look, it hasn’t bothered Kas none,” he said, gesturing at the barely visible form leaning back against a tree. “Hey, Kas, what’s there to see?” he called loudly, frowning as only silence answered.

The others had risen at the commotion. The hulking leader scowled as he peered into the shadowed woods. “Harl, go take a look,” he said quietly.

“Why me?” the surly man demanded, blanching as the huge man’s expression blackened. “All right,” he said hastily, hefting a well-worn axe and starting reluctantly into the trees. “Lazy bastard is probably asleep,” he grumbled as he warily approached the forest’s edge. Weapons in hand, the others watched as Harl neared Kas’s position.

One moment Harl was there. The next he was simply gone. A blur of gray flashed among the trees, so swift it was difficult to be certain it was real. As sudden as it had happened, all lay still once more, as if Harl had been consumed by the forest. An ominous silence drifted from the surrounding woods.

The men drew back, staying well away from the trees that suddenly loomed menacingly around them. “It’s the damned Ghosts,” a man cried in fear. The others shifted uneasily, worried whispers rising among them.

“Be quiet,” the leader snarled, cutting through the murmurs.

“He’s right,” the hard-faced man said, an arrow resting on his bow while he watched the

woods. "I hid our trail myself. No one else could have found us." Rounding accusingly upon the leader, he said angrily, "I told you we'd been too active, Raevan. Your cursed greed is going to get us all killed."

"Enough, Kevis," Raevan growled. "Keep your ground and stay together. Even if it is the Ghosts, they can't hide in the open. Sooner or later they'll have to come to us and then we'll carve them up."

"Well, you're right about one thing," a voice answered as Tiran stepped fluidly from the trees, his hand flashing forward to hurl a long hunting knife that split the air with a hiss of steel. The deadly blade slammed into Kevis with an audible thud. The hardened woodsman looked in disbelief at the hilt sprouting from his chest as he fell with a choking gasp. For an instant the bandits stood frozen in shock before scrambling frantically for their weapons.

Tiran was already racing into them, his sword rising in his grip. As he tore across the clearing, Tiran thought he heard a muffled grunt from the woods and he hoped Morin's heart hadn't stopped. Then Tiran was upon them. His sword led the way, diving through a stunned man's guard and impaling him with a swift effortless strike. Twisting to free his blade, Tiran slid around the swing of a jagged axe, casually decapitating his foe with a sudden slash and flowing into his stance, his bloodied sword held low.

His eyes darted as the bandits rushed him. Before they could close, he was moving once more, ripping forward to clash with a giant bull of a man. The muscular brute never slowed, unleashing a devastating two-handed chop. But Tiran glided into the blow. Angling his sword with a swift snap of his wrist, he deflected the savage strike and spun past, his back-swing

freezing the man's surprised look on his face as the doomed man's weapon thudded to the earth.

"He can't take all of us," the leader snarled. Striding forward, he tore the air with powerful swings of his heavy sword. He was halted mid-stride, however, as an arrow buried itself in his stomach. Before the startled men realized that Tiran was not alone, another pair of feathered shafts had streaked from the forest. Tiran was quick to exploit their surprise. His blade hissing forward, he felled another pair, while Morin's final arrow hurtled from the trees to finish the battle for good. As the clearing went still, Tiran surveyed the chaos, feeling the tension slowly leave him.

He glanced up as Morin dropped lightly from the trees. A hard, lean and capable-looking man of somewhat more than forty, he was dressed much as Tiran was, clad in a patchwork of soft greens and browns with a heavy gray cloak slung over his shoulders. A blade and quiver were strapped to his back and in his hand he held a massive longbow.

There was a dangerous quality about him, a lethal grace in his movements and a quietness to his step that was revealing. Sun-browned skin covered hard and rugged features, his dark-brown hair reaching to the nape of his neck. Walking slowly into the clearing, his intense hazel eyes swept the carnage before settling with all their forceful intensity upon Tiran. "What was that?" he demanded.

Tiran frowned slightly and then shrugged. "I thought it went rather well," he replied.

"Well?" Morin growled. "That was reckless, and for what? If we had waited for nightfall not a blade need have been raised against us. Ability is no excuse for being careless. An enemy can always get lucky given the chance. Besides, no matter how skilled you are there is always

someone better.”

“Have you ever met anyone?” Tiran asked, unfazed by the reprimand, a small smile spreading across his face. “Better than you, that is?”

“Not yet,” Morin replied, struggling with a smile and shaking his head in irritation at Tiran’s grin. “But they’re out there,” he added firmly. “You’ll be one of them soon if you don’t get your fool self killed.”

Tiran’s smile faded. “You know I don’t care for killing men in their sleep,” he said, frowning at the bodies strewn across the clearing.

“You’d dislike someone killing you a lot more, I’d imagine,” Morin growled with some of his former heat. Glowering at Tiran a moment longer, he finally sighed in resignation. “Well, I can’t say I entirely disagree with the sentiment. It’s over and done with regardless. At the least, these murderers got what they deserved. Besides,” he added more brightly, “this means we’ll be paid in time for the festival. A good thing too. Knowing Baran, he’s likely to raise the price of ale the minute the first merchant rolls into town.”

“You’re right about that,” Tiran said with a wry grimace. “I think Darvan taught him that trick.”

“Figures,” Morin grumbled darkly. “That friend of yours is a menace. If he had any interest in it, I think he’d be running the Five Towns by now. I’m still worried he might just try one day.”

“I think you’re safe,” Tiran grinned. “Darvan is too impatient to tell others what to do. He’d likely get bored the moment the challenge passed.”

“Well, here’s thanks for small blessings,” Morin said with a brief sigh followed quickly by a laugh. “Let’s see to our own business then. This bounty won’t collect itself and even Ghosts have to eat. You see to the bodies while I cook the rabbits. We’ll camp here and pack up in the morning.”

“Funny that you never ask me to do the cooking,” Tiran observed as he began to rifle deftly through the corpses’ belongings, sorting weapons and valuables into neat piles.

Morin made a face. “I’ve made that mistake before if you recall,” he replied with a shudder. “If I want to poison myself I’d prefer it quiet and painless. I shall never understand how someone of your talents can be quite so terrible at something so simple.” Laughing at Tiran’s mock scowl, he waved it off dismissively and ventured back into the woods for his pack, which held the cooking salts.

The night passed uneventfully and the two men rose well before the dawn. Eating a cold meal, they worked efficiently in the pale predawn light. Loading the draft horses with the goods from the merchant caravans, they stripped the campsite bare before departing with the sunrise. They made good time and the breath of morning lightened their mood, the two men lapsing into occasional fits of banter as the sun climbed higher.

After several hours of steady travel, they broke from the trees and onto the hard-packed earth of the road that cut through the thick forest. Traffic was heavy on the well-worn trail and many of the travelers started nervously at their quiet emergence from the woods. The sight of their cloaks reassured, however, and many tipped their hats respectfully, a few of the more boisterous calling out greetings.

The two men raised their hands in acknowledgment, merging with the stream of traffic headed southwards. A fresh round of murmurs started at the train well-laden draft animals and finally someone raised his voice to ask the question on everyone's mind. "What news? Are there bandits hereabouts?"

"Not anymore," Tiran replied with a certain grim satisfaction.

Nervous chuckles sounded through the crowd before a heavyset merchant on a nearby wagon cleared his throat. "Someone must have been hurt for the Ghosts to be sent for," he said gravely, his beady eyes drifting with calculating interest over the burdened animals. "Whose wagons were hit, if I may ask?"

"Jovik's caravan, and from the look of things a few others besides," Morin replied. "It's difficult to know for certain. They weren't the type to leave survivors behind to carry tales."

"Damn it all, Jovik," the merchant said heavily. "I told him to wait for the crowds but the stubborn fool was determined to make it south before the rest of us. At least you dealt with the bastards. If not for you Ghosts these trails would be overrun with villains of their sort. The King cares for nothing south of Edden."

"Captain Gregor and the garrison at Trader's Crossing do as best they can," Morin replied mildly. "They're simply spread too thin to cover all the Five Towns, but it's hardly the King's fault that there's not enough soldiers to go around. Too many died during the war and it takes numbers to keep the bandits at bay. We who wear the gray can only hunt down those who call enough attention to themselves."

The merchant was studying Morin carefully while he spoke. "You're him aren't you?" he

exclaimed, his voice breathless with excitement as an expression of awe spread across his face. “You’re the Slayer of Sadon. I saw you once in Edden years ago and I’d not forget your face.” A trace of fear tinged the merchant’s expression. “They say you’re more spirit than man, that none living could have done what you did upon the black cliffs. I’d heard you lived within the Five Towns but I never expected to meet a flesh and blood legend.”

Morin’s face had grown still but a slight tightening was noticeable around his mouth and eyes as the surrounding travelers crowded around them excitedly. “I am a man, nothing more,” he said roughly. His expression was unreadable but an unmistakable reticence had descended over Morin. Staring straight ahead, he ignored the onlookers, placing one foot grimly before the other.

Keeping pace with the older man, Tiran glanced at Morin out of the corner of his eye. A slight frown crossed Tiran’s face as he turned upon the travelers. “The battle at Sadon was not an easy one,” he said softly. “Surviving it once was enough. Some memories are better left buried.” His voice was firm and tinged with a faint hint of warning as he faced the crowd. The merchant and a few others looked about to protest but something in the way Tiran held himself made them swallow their words.

The crowd stirred uneasily before melting away with a muted collection of awkward and respectful murmurs. Morin nodded ever so slightly in acknowledgment but never turned his eyes from the road as the onlookers withdrew.

Tiran relaxed as the throng subsided. Recognizing that Morin was preoccupied, Tiran contented himself with studying the surrounding flow of people. It was exciting, if vaguely

disconcerting, to see the long lines of men and wagons stretching the length of the trail, all heading southward like a winding river of humanity streaming past the high banks of the watching forest.

Tiran was unused to such crowds. The wilds were his home as much as the lodge he shared with Morin. He knew the forests of Cathal's southern wilderness better than anyone excepting his friend, yet although he'd visited the small villages of the Five Towns often, the bustle of true cities was beyond his experience.

He had heard Morin's and Darvan's accounts of the trading center at Edden and even the King's city of Entar. He'd often meant to accompany them but whenever the opportunity arose events always seemed to conspire against him. This time, however, the masses normally reserved for the northern cities were coming to him. The Five Fairs Festival was in Halvern this year for the first time since before the war. Merchants from the north and travelers from across the Five Towns crowded the rough southern roads, descending upon the small village where he and Morin made their home.

Dusk was still some hours off when they reached the outskirts of Halvern. Set within the remote southern region of the eastern kingdom of Cathal, Halvern was the easternmost of the Five Towns that encircled the small garrison and market of Trader's Crossing.

Far from the great civilizations of the western realms, Cathal was a rugged and untamed wilderness bordered to the north and east by the vast waters of the Calmerian Ocean. Cathal was the furthest frontier of the human kingdoms and the Five Towns, the final fringe of civilization before the unknown wilderness that stretched south past the dark cliffs of Sadon and beyond, into

the ruin of Dorhal and the ancient reaches of the Lost Lands.

“The Edge of the World,” the locals called their small settlements in jest, but as far as men were concerned it might as well be truth. No one ventured beyond the cliffs of Sadon any longer. The evil days of Dorhal’s fall still lurked too large. Tiran shifted uncomfortably at the unwanted thought. Dorhal had fallen over twenty years ago, before his time, but the old stories and memories still lingered. Forcing his thoughts into a different vein, Tiran refocused on his surroundings, examining the striking transformation that Halvern had undergone in his absence.

The fairgrounds on the outskirts of town were a sea of activity. An expanding collection of wagons formed a loose circle around the large field. The merchants were busy unpacking their wares for the week’s festivities, while townsmen labored to put the finishing touches on the stages for the games. A small but growing crowd had already gathered to inspect the goods. The festival was not due to begin until tomorrow but the merchants were hardly about to turn back customers.

Halvern's normally quiet streets were awash with people. Travelers from across the Five Towns milled within the square. Sharp-eyed merchants hurried about unknown errands and mercenaries lounged idly in small groups or browsed the stalls of the local craftsmen. It would be good to see Darvan again, Tiran thought absently, and Shiera as well if he could. It might be difficult, but it had been too long. He would have to find the time.

Morin’s mood had lightened as they traveled and with Halvern in sight he seemed to shake off the last of the grimness that had clung to him. “Well here we are, and what a mess it is,” he observed to Tiran good-naturedly. “Captain Gregor is bound to be here somewhere. Let’s

finish our business and drop this lot in his lap,” he said, gesturing lazily over the burdened draft animals. “Then we can find us some of Baran’s ale before he starts watering it down.”

“You’ll get no argument here,” Tiran replied with a short laugh. “Hunting killers is bad enough but between the sun and this damned dust I’m about finished. I think I have half the road on my tongue. At least the forests are cool, even if you do fight murderers now and again.”

Morin coughed to cover his laughter. “I’m not sure what’s worse,” he said, shaking his head, “your complete lack of perspective or that I just might agree with you.”

“An excellent debate for Baran’s,” Tiran responded gamely. “Now, let’s see if we can’t improve the Captain’s day.”

They pushed their way deliberately into the crowds and eventually found the commander of the Trader’s Crossing garrison engaged in conversation with the large form of Baran, the innkeeper. Captain Gregor saw them first as they emerged from the crowd, bearing down on him with the burdened horses in tow. His expression soured at the sight, a look of grim resignation settling on his features. “Why so glum, Captain?” Tiran asked innocently as they reached him. “It’s a wonderful day. You should really try and enjoy yourself.”

Gregor’s expression was pained as he glowered at the smiling young man. “Did you have to make him a Ghost?” he asked Morin plaintively.

“I could always have left him with Darvan,” Morin replied feigned indifference, clearly trying not to laugh.

Gregor’s groan was tinged with despair and he ran a hand over his eyes. “Forget I mentioned it. That would have been unbearable.” Eyeing Tiran sourly, he added, “One of you is

bad enough, but together, it's like striking tinder in a grain barn." Tiran simply shrugged, a small smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. Wincing, the Captain sighed. "I take it you dealt with our murderers?" he asked more seriously, his hard gaze sweeping over the laden draft horses.

"I wouldn't expect them to be bothering anyone again," Morin replied levelly.

"Unless you count the smell," Tiran offered earnestly. "Although death might be an improvement there as well."

"Good to hear those killers got what they deserved," Baran rumbled. He had watched their exchange with Captain Gregor in open amusement but now his expression was hard.

The innkeeper was a giant of a man in his middle years with a kind eye and a generous paunch. He was a tactful and resourceful man, well liked and respected by his fellow townsfolk and always willing and able to add a laugh and wink to any conversation if the need arose. Beneath his friendly exterior, however, lay a forceful personality and a powerful frame, perfectly capable of sending trouble out of his inn with or without the help of his two massive sons.

For the moment, the beaming tavern owner had been replaced by the hard intensity of the village leader. "Is it true they hit Jovik's caravan?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so," Morin replied with a sigh. "These men knew what they were doing. From what we could see, Jovik and his guards never stood a chance."

"That is foul news," Baran said heavily. "Jovik may have been a greedy little miser but he was reliable and one of the few independent traders willing to make the journey from Edden. With him gone the Merchant Alliance will look to fill his place. It will mean more of their cursed mercenaries and higher prices no doubt, with the only benefit to the High Merchant's coffers in

Edden. At least this might convince the traders that hiring guards isn't the place to save a few coppers."

Abruptly, Baran blinked, his frown vanishing beneath a rueful grin. "There I go, letting my lips run away with my thoughts again," he laughed. "I should be congratulating you both on another job well done. I don't know what we'd do without you pair to keep the roads safe and the bandits on edge."

Captain Gregor nodded ever so slightly in tacit agreement while Baran rolled on, seeming to gain momentum by the moment. "I'll tell you what," he said enthusiastically. "Once you've finished with the Captain come by the inn. Your drinks are on me for the evening. It's the least I can do."

"We'll be sure to look you up then," Tiran replied with a laugh while Morin remained quiet, an amused smile playing on his face as he regarded the innkeeper wryly.

"I bet you will at that lad," Baran said with mock apprehension. "That reminds me, Tiran. Darvan was poking about looking for you earlier. You had best see what he wants before he decides to get creative. I don't believe the good captain could take any more excitement today."

Gregor's face soured at the mention of Darvan but there was a pleading note in his voice. "Tell him not tonight, Tiran. I have twenty men trying to watch five times as many mercenaries, who are eyeing one another like packs of strange dogs. It'll be all I can do to prevent a war from breaking out once those ruffians get in their cups."

"No need to worry so much, Captain," Baran said with a broad grin. "Darvan's not so bad as all that. He can cause his share of mischief sure enough, but he doesn't mean any harm."

“That’s easy for you to say,” Gregor grumbled. “You’re not the one that has to deal with that maniac’s games.”

“True enough,” Baran admitted with an unapologetic smirk. “Still, you can’t argue the lad’s as clever as they come. He has a gift for seeing things others miss and a way of solving problems as well as causing them. Why I doubt there’s a person in Halvern he hasn’t helped with some business or other. Without your knowing he’s already helped with your current spot of trouble,” Baran added, taking a small pouch from his belt and bouncing it in his massive hand.

“What is that?” Captain Gregor asked suspiciously, eyeing the pouch as if it were a live viper.

“A dash of this in a drunkard’s ale and he’ll be asleep in minutes,” Baran said, beaming proudly. “Darvan had old Nedel mix it up this morning before he could get too heavy into the drink. All I need do is add a pinch to the tankards of those who are starting to look rowdy and they’ll be slumbering like babies before too long.”

“We’ll see,” Gregor said grudgingly. “Any help keeping a lid on this mess would certainly be useful. There is little trust between the Alliance’s Guard and the independent bands, or even my own soldiers for that matter. The last thing we need is trouble between the Merchant Alliance and us Royals. Best be certain that stuff does as claimed,” he added warily. “If anyone can start a war by accident it’s Darvan Reinar.”

“Not to worry,” Baran said with a smile. “Darvan already warned me to test it on Nedel first. If that drunken old fool is going to poison anyone it’ll be himself.”

“The less I know the better,” Gregor said, waving his hands. “If this works I might even

thank him, though I'm likely to choke on the words. Still, any help is appreciated," he added, a thought seeming to strike him. Appraising Morin and Tiran, he said, "I don't suppose I could interest you in lending a hand tonight? The mere sight of you would be worth ten men each in heading off trouble."

"You can count on us, Captain," Morin said with a faint grin. "We'll guard the Inn for as long as there are kegs to watch. Baran has offered us his hospitality out of the generosity of his own heart," he added sardonically.

Gregor sighed heavily. "You can't get any guards from me so you bribe this pair with ale," he said to Baran accusingly.

Baran glowered back at the captain balefully. "Now don't go trying to poach them after I've gone and lured them so clever like. A little less talk out of you and I would've had them thinking I was doing them a favor."

"Well, I know better than to try and match a tavern keeper's bribes," Gregor said glumly. "Let's settle our accounts before any of the excitement starts."

"You two can haggle well enough without me," Tiran said to Morin. "I'll see what Darvan wants and maybe poke through the stalls for a time."

"Probably for the best," Morin said dryly. "Negotiations are not really your strong point." Reaching to his belt, Morin tossed Tiran a coin purse that the young man caught easily with a soft clank. "There's an advance on your share. I'll see you at Baran's when you're finished. If you're lucky I'll even save you a tankard or two."

Tiran raised the pouch to Morin with a nod of thanks, saying a pair of brief but respectful

farewells to Baran and Captain Gregor before disappearing into the crowds.

Morin watched him go with the slightest shake of his head. There was an effortless quality to Tiran. His raw talents were unique in Morin's experience and sometimes he wondered if his partner's potential was limitless. For all the ease with which he learned, there was a quiet determination about Tiran that seemed to drive him, an unspoken resolve to be the best that lay beneath his friendly exterior. It was his greatest strength and also his weakness. Tiran's calm assurance in his abilities and the intensity of his convictions gave him an unrivaled confidence but could also lead him into recklessness and danger.

Darvan drew out the best and worst of those instincts in his young partner. What little caution and restraint Tiran possessed became dust in the wind of Darvan's singular focus and unbridled enthusiasm. Banishing the worries from his mind, Morin turned his attention back to Captain Gregor. Tiran could take care of himself, and after all, free ale didn't come around every day.

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Tiran walked the crowded streets with his usual fluid stride, feeling a little uneasy in the sea of people that washed around him. A few townspeople noticed him and waved or shouted greetings, which he responded to with quick smiles and a nod.

His place within Halvern was peculiar. People here remembered him with a mixture of affection and exasperation as the wild bright-eyed youth who along with Darvan had so thoroughly terrorized the town. Yet his donning of the gray and partnership with Morin had made him something of a local legend as well. There were few who could keep pace with the Hero of

Sadon Ridge and the villagers of Halvern were proud that Tiran was one of their own.

Tiran kept a sharp eye out for Darvan and before long he spotted his friend among the craftsmen's stalls. He was speaking with Haumen Boyar, the blacksmith, while Avin, Haumen's son and apprentice, waited on a group of mercenaries. Darvan's back was turned to him, Tiran realized, a quick smile flashing on his face as he closed rapidly upon his friend. When he was only a step behind him, Tiran reached out and seized Darvan's shoulder in an iron grip. Making his voice as gruff as possible, he barked, "Don't move, Reinar, we've got you surrounded."

Darvan stiffened but he reacted without pause. "Fat chance of that," he growled. "You'll never take me alive."

"I think Captain Gregor would appreciate that," Tiran said, laughing as Darvan rounded on him with a grin.

Darvan waved off the comment nonchalantly. "I don't understand why he's so hostile," he replied, his expression clouding in feigned puzzlement. "I've always done everything I could to help the man."

"Is that so?" Tiran asked dryly.

"Don't belittle yourself either, Tiran," Darvan replied earnestly. "If not for us, he would have grown dull and lazy in his old age. We helped him keep his edge."

"It did require quite a bit of effort on our part," Tiran admitted slowly.

"That's the spirit," Darvan said. "Gregor's mistrust is just unreasonable."

"I suppose he could still hold a grudge from when you greased his saddle before the midsummer parade?" Tiran offered reluctantly.

Darvan appeared to lapse into thought before answering. “Nonsense,” he replied. “That was years ago and he didn’t fall that far. Besides, I imagine he found it as amusing as everyone else. Why the man was the talk of the Towns for weeks thanks to me.”

“Well then perhaps it was the time . . .” Tiran began slowly.

“The issue isn’t what I may or may not have done to the man over the years,” Darvan interrupted hastily. “It’s a question of motives and I have explained to him that ours were entirely pure.”

Unable to keep a straight face, Tiran broke into laughter. “You didn’t really tell him that did you?” he asked admiringly.

Darvan’s innocent expression broke before Tiran’s laughter. “It didn’t go over well,” he admitted. “Still, I thought it was worth a try.”

The nearby mercenaries had tensed at the initial confrontation but slowly relaxed as the two friends embraced happily, clapping one another on the back. Behind his stall, Haumen folded his massive arms and shook his head slowly as he watched their reunion.

“What brings you out Haumen’s way?” Tiran asked as they separated.

“You do,” Darvan replied easily. “I knew once you returned it would only be a matter of time before you found your way here. Besides, I had to see your latest work after all the bragging Haumen’s been doing, and for some reason he’s a little more amenable to my company than Captain Gregor.” Flashing the powerful smith a friendly smile, Darvan waved cheerfully at the massive man who scowled back at him darkly. “There you see?” Darvan said happily, turning back to Tiran who was struggling not to laugh.

A fit, wiry man of medium build, sharp brown eyes and neat jet black hair, Darvan exuded an unflappable assurance and quiet amusement in all things. He was more than good-looking in a dark and rather mischievous way. It was obvious from how he carried himself that he knew it, but his infectious grin indicated he was unlikely to take himself too seriously. Even his ready smile, however, could not quite hide the dangerous intelligence and razor wit that lurked behind his eyes.

The son of a wealthy Forin merchant who had run afoul of the law, Darvan had come to Halvern as a newborn baby in his mother's arms. Tragically, the young widow hadn't lasted the year, falling sick to the summer fevers and leaving what remained of her husband's wealth and an orphaned child behind. The people of Halvern had taken Darvan in as their own, placing him in the care of old Widow Harris, who looked after the orphaned children of the Five Towns.

Tiran had joined the Widow's charges soon after and the pair had been the fastest of friends ever since. Close in age, the boys had grown up together in the sleepy streets of Halvern. As children they had been inseparable, the quick-witted and energetic pair running wild through the town. Parentless and alone, the two boys had discovered a common kinship in one another. For each man the other was family as well as a friend. Tiran had his friendship with Shiera, and Morin had always looked out for him, but for Darvan, Tiran was everything. Since Tiran had joined the Ghosts nearly five years ago, Darvan was often away on business in Edden, but they'd remained as close as ever.

"Damn, but I'm glad you're back," Darvan said with feeling, his tone becoming slightly more serious. "Things can be painfully dull around here when you're gone. Edden is interesting

in a knife in your back kind of way, but there's only so much to be done around the Towns. My games with Gregor help to pass the time but there's a limit to how much he can take."

"Good to hear you're putting your time to constructive use," Tiran said approvingly.

Darvan shrugged. "It's a tradition by this point," he replied by way of explanation.

"You may have finally overdone," Tiran said wryly. "I just saw him and I think you've broken him."

"It was bound to happen eventually," Darvan said with a sigh of regret. "Oh well, he's earned some quiet, I suppose. I've been thinking it was time to refocus my energies. I could use a challenge. Perhaps I'll take on someone a bit more sinister."

"Who did you have in mind?" Tiran asked with a touch of apprehension.

"I was thinking maybe Vargen," Darvan said absently, running a hand through his hair, his expression distant and thoughtful.

Tiran nearly coughed in surprise. "The High Merchant?" he asked incredulously. "You're not serious?"

"Why not?" Darvan replied with a slight frown, his expression unexpectedly hard.

"Everyone knows the man is a snake. Some of the things you hear in the darker corners of Edden would freeze the blood in your veins." His voice low, Darvan added, "There's even whispers out of Entar that an assassin nearly got to King Edgan. It isn't hard to figure out who stands the most to gain from a weakened throne.

"Besides," he said in a louder voice, "it would be good to leave a mark on Cathal for when we finally decide to leave these backwoods behind." His cheerful expression was back like

it had never left.

“Don’t you think it’s a rather large jump from playing pranks on a garrison captain to bringing down the most powerful man in Cathal?” Tiran asked cautiously.

Darvan shrugged. “What can I say, Tiran, being friends with you inspires a man to aim high. Don’t worry,” he added with an ever so faint smile. “I’ll be certain to ask for your help if I need it.”

“Thanks for putting my mind at ease,” Tiran replied dryly, studying his friend. It was always difficult to know if Darvan was being serious. The idea was insane, but Tiran couldn’t quite dismiss his friend’s words out of hand. For all Darvan’s manner, Tiran knew better than to discount his friend. Darvan never lacked for confidence or ambition and when he decided to put his mind to something he was tenacious, using all of his charm and ingenuity to achieve his goal. Determined to get to the truth at a later time, Tiran decided to let the matter lie for now.

Darvan meanwhile seemed unperturbed by the path the conversation had taken. Clapping Tiran on the back, he said, “Come on, I know you wanted to talk to Haumen so let’s see what that wandering mountain is up to. I’ve been trying to help him today but strength isn’t the only thing the man has in common with an ox. Maybe you can talk some sense into him.” Not waiting for a response, Darvan slipped away, leaving Tiran to catch up as he bore down upon Haumen’s makeshift stand.

A pair of mercenaries were just moving away from the blacksmith’s stall when the two men reached the counter. Haumen glanced up at their approach. “Bless my eyes, but you’re a welcome sight, Tiran,” he rumbled in a deep powerful voice. When his gaze shifted to Darvan,

his expression darkened as he glowered at the smiling young man. “Doubly welcome,” he added grimly.

Tiran pretended not to notice their byplay. “It’s good to see you, Master Haumen,” he said politely, glancing over the impressively arranged and decorated stall. “I like what you’ve done here,” he added admiringly. “It looks very fine.”

“You do?” Darvan asked, his expression brightening visibly. “You see, Haumen,” he said accusingly. “If an unpolished lummoX like Tiran can appreciate what we’ve done then you know it’s having an effect. Just a few well-placed trappings and you’ve completely transformed yourself. I’m telling you, people are willing to pay more if they think they’re patronizing a proper establishment.”

Haumen’s expression had soured further with each word out of Darvan’s mouth. “Don’t go encouraging him,” the massive blacksmith growled to Tiran. “He’s been hanging about all day waiting for you and making a nuisance of himself in the meanwhile. He offers to set up my stall while I gather up some of my work from the shop and when I come back he’s put together all this nonsense,” he said, gesturing at the subtle finery around him before casting his disparaging eye upon the fine black cloth that covered the rough surface of the counter. “This place is furnished better than my own home,” he said in disbelief.

“It’s about making an impression, Haumen,” Darvan explained patiently. “There’s so much more we could do if you’d just let me . . .”

“No,” Haumen said firmly, cutting him off. “You’ve done plenty enough already. The whole business is foolishness. None of this fancy rubbish makes one lick of difference to the

quality of my work.”

“I know that and you know that,” Darvan said with a hint of exasperation, “but your customers don’t. Why are you so against a little effort to put some extra coin in your purse?”

“I’m a blacksmith not some puffed up popinjay,” Haumen muttered blackly. “I sell good work at a fair price over rough wood with no deceptions in between. I don’t need a show to stand behind my craft.”

“It’s not as if you’re selling them a leaky bucket,” Darvan shot back. “It’s your work on display. If a touch of finery lets you sell to the merchants and mercenaries at a more worthy price then where’s the harm in that?”

“It’s not about merchants and mercenaries, there’s good townsfolk who’ve come to rely on my craft,” Haumen said gruffly. “What if they can’t afford my work all because I decided to bleed those richer than them. Life is tough enough in the Towns for me not to go adding to it.”

Spotting the gleam in Darvan’s eye, Tiran decided it was best to interject before the conversation deteriorated further. “How *is* business going?” he asked Haumen, quelling Darvan with a deliberate look.

“It’s going plenty well enough,” Haumen replied, glaring at Darvan who threw up his hands in disgust. Returning his attention to Tiran, Haumen’s expression brightened. “Those blades of yours have been quite the success. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, if you ever hang up the cloak you’d make a right fine bladesmith.”

“It’s only a hobby,” Tiran said with a laugh.

“Hobby my foot,” the blacksmith replied gruffly. “I know a thing or two about forging

steel and working iron. These blades of yours are some of the finest work I've seen, my own included. You've a feel for the metal, Lad. Why if we could find you some high quality ore I'd bet you could craft a sword fit for the King himself. If only you'd learn to forge something without an edge. Knives and swords are fine work but I'm not certain Captain Gregor would approve of us arming the mercenaries with finer blades than the King's own soldiers."

Tiran shook his head. "I've told you it doesn't work like that. When I craft a blade it's as if an image forms in my mind. I can sense what to do in a way, but if I try something different the picture fragments before I can even begin."

Haumen shrugged. "It makes no sense to me. Either you can forge metal or you can't. Still, you'd best not speak that tale too loud. If those words ever reach the Wise, the Magaerin will be here to cart you off within a fortnight."

Tiran looked uncomfortable and Haumen barked a laugh that could have been mistaken for a toll of thunder. "I'm just having a bit of fun with you, Lad. It's impressive, however it's done. The work is damned fine and I'll not be complaining to sell it alongside my own for as long as you wish."

Darvan had recovered his composure and a calculating look filled his eyes as he studied Haumen. "So Tiran's work is something special then?"

"Aye," Haumen replied with poorly disguised suspicion. "I've been shaping the metal for over thirty years and I don't mind saying his blades are more than better than my own."

"Well, you can't believe these mercenaries appreciate the quality of his blades?"

"Of course not," Haumen snorted dismissively. "Those louts know just enough about

steel to cut themselves and not much else.”

“Humor me for one moment,” Darvan said, his eyes alight. “Which here are the finest of the lot?” Haumen frowned, but after a brief hesitation he began sorting through the knives, Tiran nodding with each selection.

“That’s enough,” Darvan said after a half-dozen blades had been removed. “Stow the rest behind the counter and might I have that box you’ve been using to hold your coin?”

Haumen’s expression reflected his puzzlement but he removed the blades and poured the assorted coins into his purse before wordlessly handing Darvan the empty chest.

“Yes, this will do,” Darvan said with a nod of approval. Removing the handkerchief from his pocket, he lined the interior of the box, deftly placing the knives within the open container so that they were prominently displayed. After they’d been carefully arranged, he set the box on the counter with the lid open. “Now, do you have any knives of your own?” he asked the smith carefully.

“Aye, some,” Haumen answered slowly. “They’re not so fine as Tiran’s work but they’re good sturdy blades that’ll keep their edge better than most.”

“Good enough,” Darvan replied. “Let’s have them, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Tiran had been following the exchange with interest and as Haumen fetched the blades he began to nod, seeing where Darvan was headed.

“Excellent,” Darvan said, taking the knives and laying them neatly in front of the box. “Now you can sell Tiran’s work for as deserving a price as you can manage and the mercenaries will know full well they’re paying for quality. Nothing makes a mercenary appreciate something

better than spent coin. When the blades hold up, you can bet word will soon get around.

“Merely stock the chest with the best behind the counter and you can always claim in all honesty to sell the finest you have. Besides, too many lying about devalues the others. Customers want their purchase to feel exclusive after all. And you can sell your own worthy blades at your usual rate. It will only enhance your reputation as a man and craftsmen. The same arrangement might benefit your other work as well.”

Haumen was frowning but his expression was thoughtful as he studied the layout. “I’ll think about it,” he said after a long consideration.

“That’s all he asks,” Tiran interjected as Darvan started to open his mouth. “Come on,” he said to his friend, “I want to look through the merchants’ wares before dusk.” Grabbing Darvan by the arm, he dragged him away from the stall. “Take care, Haumen,” he called back over his shoulder. The blacksmith waved a distracted farewell in their direction, clearly lost in thought.

“You’ve already hooked him,” Tiran hissed to Darvan as he released his arm. “Don’t overdo it.”

Darvan glanced back to where Haumen was scratching his head, a slow smile starting to spread over the blacksmith’s face as he nodded thoughtfully. “Fair enough,” Darvan replied with a satisfied grin.

“Tiran, Darvan,” a voice called as they passed and the two men looked to where Avin was watching them from the far end of his father’s stall.

“What is it, Avin?” Tiran asked neutrally, Darvan’s expression darkening slightly.

Haumen’s son was a big man, nearly as large as his father and a few years older than the

two men but he looked away when faced with their eyes. “Thanks for helping my dad,” he said in a low voice. “He’s right proud of you, Tiran, and Darvan, that was amazing. You’re the only one who can talk him around once his mind is set. Not even Mum can manage it.”

“Don’t mention it, Avin,” Tiran replied a bit more cordially. “Your father was always good to us.” Darvan nodded in silent agreement as Avin ducked his head slightly. “He’s proud of you too, Avin,” Tiran added after a short pause. “He wouldn’t want you to know but he talks of you all the time.”

“Thanks, Tiran,” Avin muttered, his smile picking up as he raised his head. “I am getting better. I can’t see the blade like you do, but watching you shape the metal helps me understand how you do it, at least a little. Dad doesn’t say it, but I think I’ll be ready to turn journeyman in another year or two.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Tiran replied. “If I’m not forging a blade I can’t tell a hammer from a rock. It’s good to see someone make things for more than killing.”

“I know,” Alvin said, a small crossing his face. His expression grew more somber. “I’m glad you’re back. How long are you staying this time?”

“At least until the festival is over, maybe longer yet,” Tiran answered with a shrug.

“Oh,” Avin’s face fell slightly but he rallied with an effort. “That’s good to hear. If you stop by Baran’s maybe we can grab an ale.”

“We’ll make a point of it,” Tiran replied, the two men slipping away as Avin moved to greet a new customer.

“He seemed disappointed to learn I’d be around,” Tiran observed absently.

“Word has it he’s taken an interest in Amaliya,” Darvan said neutrally, a smile twitching his lips at Tiran’s groan of despair. “It’s your own fault,” Darvan continued mercilessly. “So long as you continue this lone wolf routine they all think they have a chance.”

Darvan’s smile threatened to split his face in half as Tiran glared at him. “You’re an evil man, Tiran,” he added with a chortle. “If you’d pick a girl it would settle down, but as is there’s no hope for anyone else. The face of every unmarried man plummets the moment you stroll into town. It’s no fun dancing with a girl knowing she plans to spend the whole evening gnawing on her own heart.”

“Maybe I’ll lose myself in the wilds after all,” Tiran said grimly. Glancing in resignation at Darvan’s gleeful expression, he scowled at his friend. “I don’t see you having any trouble,” he added dryly.

“I may not be a forest trudging hero with mud on my face and moss in my hair but at least I know how to step out of the way of my own tongue,” Darvan answered with a smug grin.

“Horseshit,” Tiran growled as Darvan chuckled darkly in open amusement.

They lapsed into silence for a time before Darvan finally broke the quiet. “Avin still can’t look you in the eye,” he observed, his voice marred by the faintest hint of malice.

“That was a long time ago, Darvan,” Tiran said with a sigh.

“Not long enough,” Darvan replied. “He deserved that thrashing you gave him and he knows it as well as everyone else.”

Tiran shrugged but didn’t respond. Darvan was always protective of him. There had been whispers about Tiran ever since the day Morin had found him alone in the wilds and returned to

Halvern with the year old boy in his arms. Bastard, mongrel, wood-spawn, he had heard them all at one time or another but they'd never bothered him much.

He'd never felt alone. Morin had always been there, taking an interest in the strange child he had found whenever he was back from his travels. Morin had taken him in once Tiran was old enough to fend for himself, teaching him to fight and track and hunt like a true master, showing him the secrets of the wilds. He'd had a better father than anyone had a right to ask for, while Darvan had been both brother and friend. And then there was Shiera and the unique bond they shared. They might not be bound by blood but he had a family. He'd always figured he had it better than most.

Still there had been times where the words had been more than whispers and on one occasion the small seed of anger he carried deep within had sprouted into fire.

He could see Avin standing before him with several of his friends. Avin had always been big and strong for his age. At two years older he'd towered over Tiran and Darvan. Tiran knew now that Avin had been angry, jealous that his father had allowed Tiran to work a small scrap of iron under careful guidance, and from that thin piece of metal Tiran had hammered out a blade without pause or hesitation. It had been a puny little thing but smooth and sharp enough to cut, but most of all it had earned Haumen's praise.

At the time, however, Tiran had no awareness of what had provoked Avin. The older boy had been known to use his size to bully the other children but he'd mostly left Tiran and Darvan alone, somewhat unnerved by the wild pair. This time, however, he was spoiling for a fight, cornering the boys in one of the village's side streets. "What do we have here?" he asked loudly

to his friends, *“A pair of wild animals wandering the village. Maybe we should put them down before they hurt anyone.”*

“We were drawn by the scent of blundering bore,” Darvan replied, baring his teeth viciously. “He’s loud, lumbering and none too bright.” Looking over Avin critically, Darvan’s tone was dismissive yet cutting, “Shove off, Avin. Go pick on cradlelings, that’s more your style.” Tiran hadn’t said anything while Darvan talked, merely watching the older boys who shifted uneasily beneath his fierce green eyes.

“Shut up!” Avin shouted, his face contorted with rage.

“Come on, Avin,” Gamis, the baker’s boy, said warily. “I don’t want no trouble with the bastard.”

“You’re afraid of the wood-spawn, Gamis?” he asked contemptuously, taking a step forward. “He’s just an animal, a rabid little beast. He doesn’t belong here with decent people. You hear me, Mongrel? Your mother should have had the spine to kill you off instead of dumping you in the woods for the beasts to feed on.” A cruel smile had spread over Avin’s face and he laughed loudly, “Look, he’s shaking,” he called to his friends. “I always thought you were tough, Tiran, but you’re a coward aren’t you? Just like your mum. What are you going to do now, cry?”

Tiran felt the words strike him like a flurry of blows. He was used to the names but the mention of his mother unexpectedly struck home and roused something within him. Anger burned through him like a wildfire. He shuddered as the strange feeling filled him, the blood rushing in his ears, drowning out the world around him.

He saw Darvan, his face dark with anger, step forward and saw his mouth move. Tiran

couldn't hear the words but he saw the gleam in Darvan's eye and the bite with which the words were delivered. He saw the shocked reaction in the other boys' faces and the blind fury that swept across Avin's features as he stepped forward and struck Darvan with a balled fist, knocking him to the earth.

The world vanished. A flash of white filled his vision and when it passed he was on top of Avin, his fists driving down upon the larger boy in a rain of blows. He could sense fingers clutching at him, trying to pull him off but all he could feel was the fire still raging through him as he continued to pound the battered form that struggled feebly beneath him. Suddenly, Morin was there, striding quickly forward. The terrified boys scattered at his approach and with sure hands he lifted Tiran off the battered and senseless form of Avin. Tiran felt the fire fade to be replaced by a bone-aching weariness, causing him to slump in exhaustion.

Morin had set Tiran to the side and crossed hastily to where Avin lay, feeling his pulse with a low sigh of relief before turning on the two boys. Recognizing that he would get nothing from Tiran, he'd focused on the shaken figure of Darvan, a nasty bruise already blossoming on his face. "What happened here, Darvan?" he asked forcefully. "And Darvan," he cautioned, "only the truth." For once Darvan had stuck mostly to the facts while Morin listened gravely. When Darvan finished, he nodded slowly. His expression was hard and angry but he kept his voice even. "Take Tiran home, Darvan," he had said with deceptive calm. "I'll deal with this."

Tiran had little knowledge of what had happened after that but Morin had scooped Avin in his arms and left them. He knew only that Morin had spoken with the villagers and whatever he'd said had made an impact. Ever since, all but the faintest whispers had died and none of the

other children had ever mentioned his mother again.

Tiran also knew he had broken something in Avin that day. The boy had never been the same, his confidence and boldness irreversibly shattered. Even after all this time Tiran was still uncertain how he felt about it, haunted by an uncertain ambivalence and the vaguest pangs of guilt when he encountered the soft spoken and nervous man Avin had become. Whatever his feelings, something had changed that day.

Lapsing into easy, comfortable quiet, Tiran and Darvan made their way along the streets of Halvern towards the fairground where the visiting merchants were stationed. Exchanging a slow stream of humorous observations and friendly barbs, they wove casually among the stalls, poking through the assembled wares. For the most part, Tiran kept his purchases practical and few, a fresh whetstone, a well-stitched waterskin and a choice selection of dried herbs.

Waiting for Darvan, who was rooting among the richer contents of a well-dressed trader's wagon, Tiran drifted away distractedly. Finding himself in front of a sweets vendor, a small smile fled across his face. On a whim, he approached, buying a bulging pouch of the small hard candies on display. Shiera had always liked them and it would be good to bring her something from the festival.

He was turning from the counter when Darvan walked up with a neatly tied bundle in his arms. "Somehow I don't see you exercising your sweet tooth," Darvan observed wryly. "So what are those, a bribe for the girls if you get cornered?"

"Something like that," Tiran replied noncommittally, pocketing the pouch without further comment.

Tiran thought he'd kept his voice even but something in his tone made Darvan glance at him in puzzlement. "I wouldn't have suspected you would stoop to such tactics," he accused humorously, a small thread of curiosity lurking behind the words.

"What can I say," Tiran replied. "Being friends with you makes a man devious and underhanded."

"Well, it's good to see I'm having a positive impact on you at last," Darvan rejoined easily. "I used to despair of ever correcting that trusting and honorable nature of yours."

"I'm sure," Tiran said wryly. "What do you have there?" he asked, changing the subject as he indicated the bundle in Darvan's arms.

"Some odds and ends," Darvan replied carelessly, although the gleam in his eyes belied his words. "If you're finished let's make for my house and drop this off. Then we'll see if we can't find some excitement. It looks as if things are dying down around here."

Tiran could see Darvan was right. Dusk had begun to fall and the crowds were growing thin as the merchants began closing up their wagons for the evening. Not bothering to answer, Tiran merely nodded in belated agreement, and falling in beside his friend, the pair made their way toward Darvan's home.

Situated on the eastern edge of Halvern, Darvan's house was a modest, well-built structure that blended quietly into the surrounding homes. Darvan had built the residence several summers back after leaving the Widow's care. It was a known secret in Halvern that Darvan had coins aplenty, having multiplied his parents' modest leavings with his own efforts in Edden, but there was little wealth on display. Tiran knew enough to suspect that Darvan had far more coin

than anyone imagined, but he also knew that his friend viewed money as largely unimportant and easy to come by. Perhaps it was for him. Regardless, what Darvan truly valued was knowledge, excitement and a challenge, and he pursued them all fervently.

Entering Darvan's home was always a rather disorienting experience, as if two different worlds were forced to inhabit the same space. The furnishings were fine and almost elegant. Well-crafted chairs sat around heavy oaken tables, thick brocade curtains hung in the windows, and silver candlesticks spotted the room. Yet among the finery, the spectre of chaos reigned unchecked. Assorted maps hung from the walls, their contents marked and written upon in a manner that had meaning only to Darvan. Piles of detailed lists and notes were strewn across the tabletops while tightly bound books dotted every visible surface.

More recent additions had also been made seemingly at random, without consideration to what stood around them. A richly upholstered chair had been ripped apart and left where it stood, its cushions now decorating a battered seat in the study. A dented desk had been positioned in the center of what had once been the dining room, its scarred surface showing traces of burns and the lingering residue of unknown substances. At the end of a hall, a roughly hewn wooden target had been nailed haphazardly in place with a half-dozen knives still sunk firmly into the wood.

"You've tidied up since I was here last," Tiran observed brightly, surveying the carnage.

"Hmm?" Darvan said distractedly. Glancing critically over the room, he nodded in apparent satisfaction. "Well, it was getting a bit cluttered," he said, gesturing carelessly. "There is only so much space after all." Crossing to a covered table, he set down his parcel and scooped up a pile of books and notes. Searching briefly, he bundled them carelessly into a set of shelves with

several others.

Returning to his package, Darvan placed it on the cleared portion of table and without warning a knife suddenly materialized in his hand. With a pair of clean efficient cuts he sliced away the cord, the knife vanishing back into his sleeve as the wrapping fell away. A pair of tightly bound books and a folded sheet of parchment lay within and Darvan lifted them out carefully. “Can you believe I found these lying among the rest of that trader’s rubbish?” Darvan exclaimed, his eyes alight.

“Come on, Darvan, you can look at those later,” Tiran said impatiently. “I haven’t eaten since midday and that was hardly a meal. Let’s grab some hot food and ale at Baran’s before the place is crammed to the rafters.”

Setting the book down, Darvan turned from the table. “No such luxuries for us,” he called back as he disappeared into the pantry. “Bread and cheese will have to do,” he declared as he reemerged, tossing a loaf and wedge at Tiran, who caught them casually, examining the simple fare before looking at his friend skeptically.

“I promised you excitement, not a feast,” Darvan replied, unabashed. He rummaged briefly through a heavy-looking rucksack that rested against the wall before slinging it across his shoulders. Adjusting the pack, Darvan snagged a covered lantern from near the door and looking back at Tiran, he said, “Let’s move, you can eat on the way.”

“Where are we going?” Tiran asked suspiciously.

Darvan seemed to debate before answering. “I found something,” he said after a brief hesitation. “It turned up during a little project of mine, something I’ve been pursuing when

you're off with Morin." Eyeing Tiran thoughtfully, Darvan shook his head. "I think it's better to show you. I don't think you'd believe it otherwise. I hardly believe it myself."

Tiran considered Darvan briefly. His friend seemed strangely serious but there was an excitement and intensity in his eyes as well. Finally Tiran shrugged and drew the knife from his belt, expertly cutting a thick slice from the wedge of cheese. Tearing a piece from the loaf of bread, he casually took a bite, munching thoroughly before gesturing at Darvan with the broken loaf. "All right," he said between mouthfuls. "Let's go."

Darvan scowled at him, causing Tiran to spread his hands innocently. Feigning a long suffering sigh and muttering something under his breath, Darvan swung open the door and led them out into the deepening dusk. Tiran had expected to head back toward the lights of Halvern but instead Darvan led eastward along a faded path. Tiran ate methodically as he walked and shared the meal with Darvan, taking the occasional swig from his waterskin.

For all his casual manner, Tiran kept an alert eye on his surroundings. The forests east of Halvern were of a darker and wilder sort and it was easy for the careless to be caught unawares. Already, the faint path they'd followed had faded into obscurity. The trees around them grew massive and gnarled, wooden giants surging violently from the earth, almost as if they were attempting to escape from their roots in the faint moonlight. He could feel the moment when the woods changed, a sudden strangeness pervading the unsettled gloom.

Tiran knew instantly where they were. This place was a part of him and the feel of these woods was unmistakable, but why had they come here? As the strange yet familiar sensation of the boundary struck him, Tiran halted and looked at Darvan, who slowed beside him. "Darvan,

where are we going?" he asked quietly. "I've played along, but even I need a reason to enter the Whisperwood at night."

The Whisperwood had always been a source of wariness and rumor for the people of the Five Towns. The dark wilderness lay some distance east of Halvern but the woods were never far from the minds of those who lived upon its outskirts. It was spoken of in hushed tones when it was mentioned at all. A place out of step with time, "where the woods did not quite sleep," as the locals would say. Ancient, dark and untamed, something about the land here changed things, twisting and darkening them.

Within the Whisperwood, the trees grew strange and large. Its black interior was a maze of thick knotted trunks, dense undergrowth, brambles and bogs. Wilder and far more dangerous, the unfamiliar beasts of the Whisperwood had a foulness to them, only vaguely resembling their distant kin, as if they had been marred by some dark taint that clung to the land. The Whisperwood was not a place to visit lightly, even for him.

They stood on the very edge of the fringe, where the feel in the air was still faint and the land had only begun to change. The fouler creatures of the wood seldom ventured to the fringe, and never traveled beyond its boundaries. Fortunately for the people of Halvern, it seemed that something about the forest was vital to its inhabitants, it drew them and they were loath to leave its depths.

Beyond the fringe, however, the strangeness grew increasingly thick the deeper one went. The inner heart of the Whisperwood was a place seldom visited even by the bravest of those who wore the gray. It was a place of black tales where myths lurked. The "Dark Wanderer," the "Lady

of the Wood,” and the “Forgotten Child,” were only some of the names given to the beings that supposedly haunted its depths, luring those who trespassed to an untimely death. It was mostly nonsense, but Tiran knew that in this case even the strangest of stories had their portions of truth.

He had probably journeyed inside the Whisperwood more than any other man, but even he seldom ventured much beyond the fringe, especially after nightfall. Under cover of night the forest was transformed from a dangerous, tangled woodland into a killing field where creatures preyed mercilessly on one another.

Darvan seemed unperturbed by his friend’s unease, glancing around in feigned surprise. “Why, I believe it *is* the Whisperwood,” he exclaimed in mock astonishment. “Not to worry,” he added confidently. “We’ll be all right. While you’ve been chasing bandits about the wilds, I’ve been mapping the depths of the Whisperwood. It seemed a diverting enough challenge for when I’m away from Edden. There’s plenty to discover and it’s never been done, so far as I know. Besides, I was curious if there was anything to the tales. I’ll admit, your own history with this place was an interest of mine.”

Not sure how to respond, Tiran studied his friend. Darvan could take care of himself. Beyond his intellect and cunning he was exceptionally fit and agile. Tiran had taught him a trick or two over the years and his time in Edden had toughened him. With a knife he was better than good and he had worked long and hard enough to hold his own in most circumstances. That said, Darvan was hardly to the standards of the Eastland Ghosts. The Whisperwood seemed far beyond his talents.

Ignoring Tiran’s scrutiny, Darvan unslung the heavy pack and rummaged through it

briefly before triumphantly extracting a large earthen jar. While Tiran looked on, Darvan held the container away from him before unstopping the jar and, bracing himself, dipped his fingers deep inside. He withdrew a dark syrup like substance, which he proceeded to dab liberally on his skin and clothes. When he was finally done, he tossed the jar to Tiran who caught it easily, looking questioningly at his friend.

Holding the open jar, Tiran's nose was abruptly assaulted by a horrible stench, and nearly gagging, he held the jar as far away from himself as he could manage. "My word, Darvan, that is foul," he gasped in a choked voice. "What is this awful stuff?"

Darvan shot his friend a vicious grin. "You hardly smell of rose petals, Tiran my friend, a little Grul blood might liven up your social life."

Tiran could not quite hide his surprise. While not the most dangerous inhabitant of the Whisperwood, Grul were definitely creatures to avoid. Somewhat resembling a large bear, the Grul possessed a thick leathery hide and a long vicious jaw that sported an impressive array of jagged teeth. Grul were solitary and hostile beasts, difficult to kill and easy to aggravate. The Ghosts were happy to follow the example of the forest's inhabitants and leave the dangerous creatures alone.

Tiran coughed to keep from retching and shot his friend a dark look, replying, "While I do enjoy mingling with the more exciting elements of Whisperwood society, I think I'll pass unless you can give me a damn good reason. Where did you get this?" he added incredulously. "There's excitement and then there's stupidity. I don't have to think long to decide which category wrestling a Grul falls under."

Raising his eyebrows, Darvan's grin widened at his friend's concern. "I didn't fight it, you idiot, I found it dead and untouched by scavengers. Apparently everything avoids the Grul. It's too feisty and costly to be worth a confrontation. A little of that on your skin and clothes," Darvan said, pointing at the jar, "and you practically have free run of the woods. The smell is certainly strong enough that everything knows you're coming. Although, whether it's fear of the Grul or the stench that clears them out I couldn't say. Now foul yourself up already and let's go."

"I think you smell foul enough for both of us," Tiran said firmly. Gingerly stoppering the jar, he tossed it back to Darvan. "Don't worry," he said brightly, "I'll stay close. Though not too close," he added, wrinkling his nose.

Darvan opened his mouth to reply but closed it again without saying a word. Glancing down at himself ruefully, he sighed heavily. "I really should have thought of that," he said in disgust, stuffing the jar back in his pack.

"You can't win them all," Tiran said philosophically, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"I really wish I'd won that one though," Darvan said mournfully. His eyes had already reddened and were starting to water as he looked at himself critically. "I can practically see the stench on me."

"I can assure you that I'm happy with how things turned out," Tiran offered helpfully.

Darvan scowled at him. "A good friend would have shown some solidarity," he accused, but Tiran's grin only widened. Shouldering his pack, Darvan started forward, muttering darkly under his breath as he vanished into the enveloping darkness ahead. Unable to shake the feeling

that he was walking headlong into trouble, Tiran nevertheless slipped after his friend. Darvan had succeeded in intriguing him and there was something thrilling about the risk they were taking. A wild part of him relished the danger more than he would care to admit.

Tiran could feel the eerie sensation growing stronger the deeper they went, a faint sense of something foul sliding across his skin. Darvan led through the maze of trees and brambles with the calm assurance of a path well traveled, yet still they moved with a deliberate air. Aside from whispered consultations, they stayed silent, their light-hearted banter giving way to the seriousness of their surroundings.

While Darvan guided them towards his mysterious goal, Tiran did not remain idle, often breaking into the darkness to check their path. The Grul's blood was a powerful tool, but some things in these woods would not simply flee before them. One of the few creatures without the sense to avoid a Grul was another Grul, and the prospect of coming across one of the enormous creatures in the night was not something he wished to experience. Yet for all his caution, Tiran's ranging revealed little, finding no evidence that any creature, Grul or otherwise, was taking an interest in their passage.

Guided by only the faint illumination of the small, covered lantern in Darvan's hand, they burrowed deeper into the black and treacherous woods. Several times it appeared their route was blocked by overgrown vines and thorns but on each occasion Darvan found a way around, until finally they stood before a seemingly impassible wall of bramble.

Darvan dimmed his lantern and motioned for Tiran to follow. He picked his way along the wall of thorns until suddenly he vanished. Tiran had to look closely to see the almost

invisible part in the thick briars, where the thorns seemed to fold back on themselves. Tiran felt his curiosity stir as he slipped after his friend. He was surprised at how wide the opening actually was and emerging from the obstacle, he tried to make sense of the scene before him.

They stood in an encircled enclave of sorts, bounded on all sides by the massive wall of bramble and thorn that rose almost to the foliage of the nearby trees. The ground here was cleared of undergrowth, with only the giant trunks and roots of trees to clutter the earth. A quiet brook ran through the glade, its soft murmurs carrying in the night's hush. The air seemed somehow warmer here, less oppressive. And set in the shadows of the massive trees was the sight that drew Tiran's gaze. For within the gloom, a house stood inexplicably in this forsaken place. It was small, little more than a cottage, surrounded by a low stone wall.

"I was always fascinated by the stories," Darvan said quietly. "The tales of the Wanderer and the Lady. Old Grudy Tallin swears to this day that he saw the Forgotten Child once, almost a dozen years ago, and Grudy never seemed the type to tell tales. Then there was you. I know you don't like to talk about it. Nobody mentions it much anymore. I know Morin has never breathed a word, but whispers travel. Morin was seen coming from the east on the day he found you, from the Whisperwood. Whatever happened that brought you to Halvern, it happened here.

"When Morin took you in, I decided to learn if there was any truth to the stories. I started to explore the fringe and discovered tricks like the Grul's blood to keep the beasts at bay. I was careful, learning the land until I was sure of myself and finally I starting going in deeper. I've searched through these woods for years on and off but something about this area puzzled me. It was as if the woods were trying to divert me or force me back. That's when I knew. If there was

something to hide, there was something to find.

“When I found this place a few days back I knew I had to bring you here. You deserve answers and maybe this is where we’ll find them. Besides,” Darvan added with an infectious grin, his eyes reflecting his excitement, “there’s no way I’m doing something this crazy without you. I came this far, so I guess I’m insane already, but I’m not going any further without you to watch my back.” They were both caught up in the mood now. Tiran could feel his heart pounding in his chest, although unease wound through his exhilaration now that he saw what they faced.

“Come on,” Darvan whispered. “There’s something more you need to see.” Tiran followed as Darvan approached the strange house, keeping to the trees. When they were only a hundred or so paces away, Darvan clamored nimbly up a massive tree. After a brief hesitation, Tiran climbed after him until they reached a niche formed by a maze of branches where Darvan settled down and Tiran slipped silently into place behind him.

“What are we looking for?” he asked Darvan warily, his voice hushed to the edge of silence.

“Just wait,” Darvan whispered back. “I’ve only been here once after all, but if we’re lucky you’ll see soon enough.”

The moments dragged on in silence except for the constant babble of the brook. The quiet gripped at Tiran, leaving him alone with the unease and excitement of his troubled thoughts. Before he could quite grow restless, however, the cottage door swung open. Tiran felt his breath catch as his gaze followed Darvan’s silent inexorable finger to where the figure stood calmly within the grounds of the encircling stone wall.

She looked as if she'd been carved from moonlight, her flawless skin closer to silver than white and suffused with a pale glow. Her hair was long, down to her shoulders and blacker than the darkest sky, while beneath the raven hair, pristine features gazed out into the night with soft pale-gray eyes.

She was slim and appeared young, near enough to their own age, of medium height and slender build. She had a presence to her as well, something subtle in her perfect face that hinted at a strong will behind those exquisite eyes. Strange, unique and beautiful, she was like no one else either man had ever seen. After a moment spent surveying the night, she walked to the edge of the low stone wall. Tilting her head slightly to the side, her expression grew intense, almost as if she was listening attentively for something.

“There she is,” Darvan breathed with an admiring sigh. “The Lady of the Wood.”

“Damn,” Tiran exhaled softly, the word too quiet for even his friend to hear. Leaning back against the tree, he wondered what he was going to do. He should have seen this coming, but there was no helping it now. Darvan had found Shiera.