

ONE: Overheard

Yawning and scratching, I stumbled through the dark, a few weak lanterns and a waning moon providing diffuse light. Dirty red and white army tents blocked my way as I turned in confusion. Didn't I pass by here from my tent to get to the latrine? Loud snores and softly whispering voices were my only answer.

And then one whisper cut through the noise.

"I'll order Terin to do it."

The shock of hearing one's own name conspiratorially whispered is a great awakener. My heart attempted a rather elaborate escape.

Cautiously following the source brought me near one of the larger ornate pavilions of the Duke and his knights. A lit candle threw hugely disfigured shadows against the tent walls, and the subdued voice of Baron Frost Vardik became apparent. As always, it held a menace and a threat, even when ordering scrambled eggs for breakfast. A chill traversed my spine.

"... our land, not theirs. It may be the Vansir Reclaim, but it's within our borders."

"It is thiers by treaty," responded the second, who I did not recognize. "You can't just take it away."

"I don't plan on taking it away. I plan on ... *encouraging* them to leave." The voice of the Baron held a wicked smile.

"How?"

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not about to declare war on them. This new prophecy nonsense is exactly what I need," Frost continued. "The barbarians foolishly think

that Squire Terin is their leader. They have some silly prophecy about him and call him 'Bishortu.' I'll get Terin to convince them that they have to leave our lands."

"I'm not sure that will work, Your Excellency," the timid voice said. "They have been there for many years. It's the only land they know."

"Other places beyond our borders are far nicer," Frost replied. "Why they stay in that rocky mountainous area is a mystery. They are constantly foraging for food since little grows there, but they're too stupid to just leave and find some place with decent soil."

"I don't know where else would have them," the second replied. "They aren't welcome here in the duchy of Ashbury, after all."

"Well, that's not my problem!" Frost said too loudly, and then his shadow pulled back as the snoring that surrounded us dropped off a bit. Apparently catching himself, he continued much quieter, forcing me to move forward to hear.

"The superstitious barbarians won't leave because of the treasure buried beneath their lands — treasure they haven't been able to find in a hundred years! That treasure belongs to the barony of Blythedale, and if they are too ignorant to find it, they shouldn't be there anyway."

I involuntarily gasped, and Frost jerked his head around. His shadow danced wildly against the tent as he grabbed the lantern and headed for the opening. Thinking quickly, I cast a Silence spell around myself and ran from the scene, knowing that he would not hear the noise of my escape and hoping he would not see me in the darkness.

Twisting and turning finally brought me to my small tent, and I dived in, breathing heavily. Listening for the sounds of pursuit produced nothing — and then I slapped my head. Of course! The silence that surrounded me removed *all* noise. Pulling up my

blankets, I pretended to be asleep. Since I dared not open my eyes, I could not tell if anyone was even near. If they said anything to me, I would not be able to hear it, and hoped they would just think I was a very sound sleeper.

After ten minutes or so, the chirping of crickets announced that the spell had expired. I glanced out of the corner of my eye, half worried that Frost would be standing there waiting for me.

TWO: Bishortu

“Bishortu!” sneezed Rendal.

I ignored him. He had been doing this for days now, and the humor of it had worn off almost immediately. I suspected that my dislike of it was the reason he continued, for he seemed immensely pleased with himself each time.

Hlafweard also did not seem amused by the constant insulting use of the great barbarian hero's name. The fact that I, and everyone with me, insisted that I was no great barbarian hero made little difference. The barbarian chieftain observed my sigh and moved his horse closer, crowding my own steed who whinnied her disapproval.

“You may think that it was just a coincidence that you were there to teach our ancestors about the power of magic,” Hlafweard said, “but these things do not happen by chance. You are Bishortu, and the prophecy said that you would return, and here you are. See?”

His backwards logic frustrated me. “I met your ancestors after being mistakenly sent back in time against my will,” I once more explained. “I used the disarming spell against your ancestors to protect myself, not because I was trying to teach anyone anything. And as I left, I jokingly said ‘Be sure to tip your waitress.’ Trust me, I wasn't introducing myself as ‘Bishortu T'Porway Triz.’”

“That's true,” Rendal added. “Terin says it all the time. I guess he thought some day he would be a bard and use it when he performs.”

“I *am* a bard!” I countered sulkily. “You don't have to actually perform anywhere to be a bard.”

“Ah, my mistake,” Ren smiled. He turned to Hlafweard, placing the palm of his hand against his chest. “I myself am a tightrope walker.”

Rendal was, of course, not a tightrope walker of any type, but instead the bravest squire I had ever met. He sat tall on his steed, surveying the surrounding land for trouble while idly running his fingers through his sparse chin hairs. His dark eyes settled in his dark skin, and his handsome sharp features held an air of authority quite advanced for someone of his young age. His red belt, the symbol of the squire, showed signs of his many battles, his twin swords hanging from it on either side.

Squire Darlissa rode behind the three of us, preoccupied. Something bothered her, but I knew she would not reveal it until ready. Her brown hair and feathery eyebrows flowed in the slight summer breeze, and when she noticed me looking at her, she gave a slight smile, which I returned. She seemed extremely pretty to me that day, and as soon as I realized I thought that, I tried to dispel it. As a biata, the race that had been supposedly created by the gryphons, she had certain powers that never made me completely comfortable around her. While I had been told often that biata could not enter your mind and control your thoughts without touching you, it occurred to me that if they did do such a thing, they would be sure to remove the memory of them even doing so. However, the thought of Darlissa doing such a thing was so foreign that any suspicions dispelled themselves quickly.

Having been my closest companions and protectors over the past few months, the two were the only ones I really could confide in. I was aching to tell both of them what I had overheard the previous night, but no opportunity presented itself. Instead I just kept repeating the conversation in my mind, intent on memorizing it all.

The road to Blythedale, one of the three main baronies of the duchy of Ashbury, proved to be capable of handling the crowd that now traversed its length. When the barbarian leader Hlafweard insisted I travel to his lands as the prophesized Bishortu, I refused until His Grace, Duke Aramis Llyrr, took an interest.

“Another prophecy!” he had bellowed. “Terin, everything worked out so well with your last prophecy, I think you should go. It will help mend relationships with our barbarian friends, which have never been very good. I plan on changing that.”

Ignoring my pleas for time to recover, he continued, “As my squire, I give you this task. I believe the barbarians have been mistreated by Ashbury enough, and wish to start the process to make amends. Baron Frost will accompany us, since the Vansir Reclaim is in his lands.”

Frost, another biata, did not seem pleased to once again appear to be my babysitter, and I overheard him commenting the same along the way. Although not about to disagree with his liege’s orders, he kept his distance and rarely looked in my direction, which suited me just fine. A large and muscular man, Frost held a perpetually annoyed expression, as if merely having to deal with other beings was beneath him. His red and black feathers tended to shake slightly when angry, and his shaved head only emphasized their presence. Fortunately he had been consoled by the fact that Duke Aramis had decided to travel with us and this kept his attention away from me.

The soft breeze made riding a pleasant activity that morning, and after some time, in an attempt to distract my worries, I turned to Hlafweard and said, “Let’s discuss exactly what is going to happen.”

He smiled, pleased to be in the presence of the Great Bishortu. "I do not know," he grinned.

I tried not to let my frustration show. Hlafweard had impressed me with his intelligence, something I did not expect to find in a barbarian, and he even seemed cleaner than the others I had met. Perhaps that was why he had been made chieftain. His status as leader was doubly assured when he was allowed to ride with us, near the front, while the rest of his entourage took up the rear, after His Grace's most menial servants.

Like most Ashbans, my encounters with barbarians had been few and far between. I knew that they once roamed over vast areas of the Duchy of Ashbury, but had been pushed back farther and farther as more advanced and cultured humans had moved in, along with biata, elves and dwarves (forming the "Four Peoples of Ashbury" that the Duke is often referred to as Lord of). They now primarily resided in the Vansir Reclaim ("vansir" being the name they called themselves), far north at the border of the baronies of Nordenn and Blythedale yet belonging to neither. "Then let's discuss why Bishortu is important," I tried. "Why exactly is Bishortu needed?"

"It was foretold that Bishortu would be the one to bring together the three tribes who have been fighting with each other for many generations," Hlafweard said, somewhat sadly.

"The vansir have been fighting with themselves?" I asked, using the word for 'barbarian' that the tribes preferred.

"*Van-seer*," Hlafweard said, correcting my mispronunciation. "But yes." Glancing over at me with a very serious expression, he continued slowly, as if saying something forbidden. "Had we not been fighting for so many years, we would probably not be living in the Reclaim now."

His expression prevented me from inquiring more about the Reclaim. I knew from the overheard conversation of the previous night that it was once a part of the barony of Blythedale and that Baron Frost wanted it back, but I was not about to tell Hlafweard of this yet. I hastily tried to revive the subject.

“So what happened?” I prodded. “Who foretold this?”

“Well, that is the problem,” the barbarian said. “Many years after Bishortu showed and taught our people magic, our seers began having visions of Bishortu. Many of these visions were false, as fortunetellers do make up things to help them or their chieftain. Using false prophets to grow your own power is sometimes done among the vansir.”

My admiration of his intelligence increased quite a bit with that statement. I noted Rendal listening quietly, interested in learning more but unwilling to interfere with this serious discussion.

“But then something interesting happened,” he continued. “Some prophecies did not agree. The prophecies, uh, fought against each other ...” Frustrated, he stared at the ground.

“Contradicted?” ventured Darlissa.

“Yes, that is the word!” he beamed. “The prophecies contradicted each other. One prophecy said Bishortu would to bring peace to the warring tribes, which didn’t make sense because there were no warring tribes; just the one. Those of my ancestors who believed that particular prophecy began to fight with those who believed another. Soon, that prophecy was true, as we split into three tribes, each following what it believed to be the right prophecy, but no tribe saying what their own personal prophecy is.”

“Ah, Prophecy Boy,” Ren laughed. “Life is never boring around you.”

“And one prophecy is very bad,” Hlafweard continued, “because I think one tribe wants to kill you.”

“What?” I screamed, unnerving my mount. “Again? I thought that was behind me! Why is there always some stupid prophecy that involves me dying?”

“I do not think the prophecy says you must die,” counseled Hlafweard. “I think that the Hawk tribe does not want the prophecy to come true.”

Glancing at Ren, I was pleased to see that he took this piece of information very seriously. He opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by the barbarian.

“There is something else you should know,” Hlafweard said. “It has to do with the Wretched Axes...”

A loud crash from behind caused all to spin around. Barinor the dwarf had fallen off his carriage.

“I’m fine!” he bellowed. “Don’t ye worry about me!” Pulling himself up, he reached around for his jug, which he had apparently dropped and then followed in due course. Muted chuckling erupted from the guards riding nearby, but Barinor gave it no mind.

I was pleased he decided to come with us. His good humor and down-to-earth nature often provided just the right counter to the pessimism I felt while trying to avoid the necromantic biata assassins hunting me the last time I had been named in a prophecy. Barinor had shown great interest when magical axes were first mentioned a few days earlier, and was determined to come along and see for himself. “Ye may need me expertise,” he explained. “Besides, I got nowhere else to go.”

I looked back to Hlafweard to resume our conversation, but noting the number of guards nearby made me wary. This was something that probably should not be shared by everyone. "I want to know more about this dying prophecy," I whispered.

Dar also looked concerned. "You know, we probably should wait until later to ask this," she offered, noting all the guards and others nearby. I nodded sadly, while terrible visions of my death clouded my mind.

The rest of the morning passed just as uneasily, and when His Grace announced that we would be stopping for lunch, my aching bones did not object. No matter how much experience you have with horses, it never gets completely comfortable.

As guards and other workers went about setting up a small camp, starting fires and preparing meals, I sought out Rendal and Darlissa. Rendal stood bending his athletic body, stretching muscles, and gathering glances from many of the female members of our entourage. Nearby, Darlissa pulled at straps, removing the saddle from her mount.

"Is it always like this?" I asked. "People setting up camp for you, making you meals?"

"No, of course not," replied Ren. "As you are aware, many times we travel on our own and take care of ourselves. But His Grace has people working for him, and as his squires, we are not expected to do these sorts of mundane tasks."

"At least not where others of a lower station can see," Dar added. "If we were to do this sort of work, it would make it more difficult to do our jobs."

I furrowed my brow and tried to understand. "But... well, I feel kind of guilty. I should be helping, shouldn't I?"

Darlissa tossed her hair, which she had started growing longer, over her shoulder, and gave me a look I could not interpret. "It is important for there to be hierarchies," she

explained. “We obey the knights, who obey the duke, who obeys the king and queen. It’s part of the Code of Chivalry. We wouldn’t get far if everyone stopped to question those above them all the time.”

“It’s not a matter of questioning, it’s about...” — I struggled to find the word — “well, not taking advantage of people.”

“It’s their job, Terin,” Ren said. “Thank them for it and praise them for it and they will be very pleased, just as you are pleased when people appreciate the job you do...whatever that is.”

I considered. This nobility thing was still quite new to me. It was only a week or so ago that I had been made a squire, and although a squire is not an official nobleperson, it still carries with it the power to order guards and commoners.

“Remember, working for the Duke is actually quite an honor,” Dar said, brushing her hands against her pants to reduce the road dust there. “The servants get paid very well. They live better than most people in the duchy.”

A plate of dried meats and cheeses appeared before me, and praise to the server resulted in a great smile of appreciation. I motioned Ren and Dar to follow me to a secluded area where we could not be overheard.

“Baron Frost has ulterior motives for going on this trip,” I started, but Darlissa rolled her eyes. “No, it’s true!” I protested. “Listen!”

I summarized the conversation I had heard the previous night, and for once was not interrupted. Both looked concerned.

“What is this treasure he is talking about?” Ren asked, turning to Darlissa.

She shook her head, feathers swaying in the breeze. “I do not know,” she replied, taking a slow bite from a piece of salty cheese. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“I thought you knew everything ...” I started, and then realized how ridiculous that sounded. “About ... other races...”

“In the past, you always asked me about biata history,” she grinned. “I am no expert in the ways of barbarians. Let’s begin by summarizing what we know.”

“Very well,” I said, brushing hair out of my face. The day was warm and pleasant, and the slight breeze made it difficult to be too concerned, but the seriousness of the situation kept me firmly planted. “The barbarians are split into three different tribes. One of the tribes is called the Hawk tribe, and they’re the ones who, of course, want to kill me.”

“A popular activity in Ashbury,” grinned Rendal.

I grimaced. “What’s the name of Hlafweard’s tribe?”

“Badger,” said Dar.

“*Badger?*” I laughed. “What kind of tribe name is that? Ooh, I’m so scared! Save me, save me, it’s the badger tribe!”

Ren held his hand over his mouth while pretending to be scratching at his beard in order to hide his grin as Dar hushed me. “Not so loud!” she warned. “They’re right behind us. Besides, have you ever fought a badger? They are very vicious little things.”

“Still ... *badger!* All right, so we have the mighty Hawk tribe and the vicious little Badger tribe. Who’s the third? Goat? Anteater?”

Ren shrugged with a smile while Dar sighed.

“Fine, we’ll ask later. I guess the names really don’t matter. Now, at one time they were all one tribe, and they had three different prophecies and split up because of it, right?”

They both nodded their approval. “The Badger prophecy is that you will reunite the three tribes,” Ren offered.

“And we don’t know what the other two have, do we?”

Dar shook her head, which made her hair fly around her face fetchingly. “Even Hlafweard doesn’t know.”

“That’s one of the first things we need to find out then,” Ren said. “Especially the Hawk prophecy — the one that makes them want to...”

“...kill me, yes I know,” I said. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“You really need to start your sword lessons soon,” Ren admonished. I tried to dispel that image from my mind and moved on.

“So now we have Duke Aramis’ order to travel to the Vansir Reclaim and try to bring peace to the people. Baron Frost, on the other hand, wants them off the land so he can get the treasure, whatever that is.”

Glancing around, I could see the Duke and Baron in the distance, talking among themselves between bites. “I should tell Duke Aramis what I heard last night.”

“Yes,” said Dar. “As much as I think you may have misunderstood or misheard the conversation, His Grace needs to investigate this.”

Pleased that she agreed with my suggestion, I considered how best to approach the Duke with this news. Would he think me out of line for suggesting that his new Baron seemed to be undermining his goal of bringing the barbarian tribes together, or would he be angry at me for eavesdropping? Would he say that as Baron, Frost had the right to decide these things? In my mind, I weighed the different approaches I could take, practicing the

best way to say them and cursing the fate that always places me in the middle of these things.

Those thoughts distracted me through the afternoon trek so that I hardly noticed when the caravan stopped for the night.

The horses were gathered and fed, and as soldiers argued over who would get the best sites for their tents, vassals prepared a meal of spiced chicken and potatoes. I stretched and yawned. I still felt a bit guilty for having all these people serve me, and tried not to make eye contact with the cooks and servers.

With so many nearby, we didn't dare speak of the things on our minds as we ate purposefully and quietly. However, one thought tugged incessantly at me and I managed to lean toward Ren and Dar at one point. "What did Hlafweard say about axes?"

Ren's mouth was too full to respond so he merely shrugged, eyebrows raised, while Dar answered, "We definitely need to ask him. Did you notice that he had a very large axe strapped to his back?"

"No," I replied. "Did he really?"

Dar rolled her eyes. "No, I am violating the most basic part of the Code of Chivalry and am lying to you. *Of course he did.* It was sheathed though so I couldn't see it."

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I didn't mean to imply..."

"That's fine, Terin," she said, waving me off. "But you do notice that he did mentioned axes — plural. The one he has may have nothing to do..."

A scream from ahead interrupted her. We looked up, confused. An arrow flying overhead struck a soldier standing behind and pulled us to our senses quick enough. He

cursed with pain, pulled the arrow from his shoulder and yelled out a healing spell while running toward the archer.

Ren jumped up and ran forward, grabbing his swords. Dar sprinted at his side. The screams of battle quickly surrounded me as I scrambled toward a wagon for cover.

From my hiding place I viewed the situation — a large group of barbarians had surrounded us while we rested. Many were on horseback, which gave a distinct advantage given that our horses had been taken aside. However, some of His Grace's knights were running toward their mounts and hopefully would help counter this.

The barbarians were making good use of their favorite disarming spell, and our soldiers often found themselves weaponless at the point when most needed. I cringed, recalling how they had learned that particular spell. Wizards on our side responded in kind, but were still at a disadvantage given the number of attackers and the surprise they had obtained.

A nudge at my side made me jump, and turning, found my hiding place crowded with the cooks, servants and other vassals of His Grace cowering beside me. They stared at me with concern and fear.

I clenched my teeth, embarrassed. No longer Terin the bard, I was now Terin the squire. To these people, I was the hero of the Arch Battle. Songs had been written about my adventure.

Without a word of explanation — partially because I had none but also because I was not about to lie to these people — I sprang from behind the wagon and ran forward, dagger in hand. I had absolutely no plan at all, and frantically searched the crowd for a sign of Darlissa or Rendal.

Battles are chaotic, no matter how heroic and organized the stories try to later make them. This is especially true in a surprise attack like this one. This was not an organized war where both sides meet on the field of battle, flags and insignia clearly identifying the participants, with rules of engagement to be followed. This was loud, fast, and confusing. Screams erupted from all around, spells and arrows flew overhead, and distinguishing friend from enemy proved a task.

A momentary confusion stopped me upon finding barbarians fighting each other until I realized that the Badger tribe had engaged these new attackers. I steered clear so as not to take action against the wrong ones.

Turning to my left produced a large barbarian with a mighty black beard grinning with a crazed look as he sliced at a young soldier nearby. The soldier blocked effectively but obviously did not have the skill to take advantage of the situation. Despite a stern expression, fear showed in her eyes. I tossed a disarming spell at the barbarian, who looked around in surprise as his weapon slipped from his hand as if coated in butter. His eyes passed by me quickly, as he apparently assumed another barbarian had cast that spell, and then locked back to me in shock. He had recognized Bishortu. His look was short-lived, however, as the soldier sliced through his chest and turned to face another.

I dashed on, searching for Ren and Dar. What were these barbarians doing? They had lived peacefully in the Reclaim for years. Why did they want to kill the Duke now?

I tripped over a stump and slid into the ground, scratching at my face as realization hit. They weren't here to kill the Duke.

They were here to kill *me*.

Three: Long Live the Duke

Why is everyone always trying to kill me?

Once more, I cursed prophecies, real and imagined, and wondered if I had somehow brought this on myself. Grumbling, I pulled myself up and summoned whatever bravery lay hidden within. Now was not the time for brooding introspection and pondering the meaning of life.

I had to help, for to do nothing would be to make a mockery of my squire title. Glancing down at my puny dagger hardly instilled enthusiasm for the project, and instead I called upon the power of the earth to rejuvenate me.

It had not been that long ago that Darlissa had taught me the basics of magic. By learning to feel the song of the earth — that constant ebb and flow of living and dying that exists within everything — I learned to shape it to my will, to perform magical healing, silencing spells, and the disarming spell that, unfortunately, ended up being taught to the barbarians in the past. There was still so much more to learn, but Dar had expressed surprise that I had accomplished so much in so little time. She may not have been as enthusiastic had she known that I had also cast a necromantic spell, even at a time when doing so most likely saved my life. Necromantic spells pulled from the power found in that area outside of the normal orderly living and dying process, where chaos and entropy rule. If used too much, they would destroy the surrounding area as well as the caster.

These spells were also highly illegal, quite immoral, and frowned upon in polite society.

The earth singing enveloped me and calmed me. Darlissa always laughed when I referred to it this way, but it seemed so obvious. Everything in the earth perfectly

harmonized to make one brilliant song, like an orchestra led by a master, not one note flat. I couldn't understand why others didn't experience it in the same way. Each instrument had something pleasing to offer, but when placed together, the whole was much more effective than the individual.

And that's when I realized that I could contribute to the battle in a different way. I would probably never be a warrior with Ren's skills, but I could use the magic I knew to heal the warriors and keep them alive, to turn the battle in ways other than by damaging the enemy.

Coming out of my thoughts, I quickly glanced around and found a soldier on the ground, gripping at his ankle and trying to heal himself through the pain. Blood stained his boots and sweat dripped from his brow as he bravely struggled. While he was in no fear of dying from his wound, every soldier was needed, so I ran to his side and calmly spoke the words of healing. His eyes widened upon seeing me, and then he nodded a thanks. Running off to see who else I could help, I could hear him casting further healing spells, unencumbered by the gripping pain of the initial injury.

I continued on like this for many minutes, finding wounded soldiers and bringing them back the best I could. Fortunately, the barbarians did not seem interested in killing them, but only to incapacitate, since these soldiers were not their target. Doing my best to block the reason why from my mind, I stormed ahead, wearying from the effort of constant spellcasting, but buoyed by the pounding of my heart from the sounds and smells of battle.

Only weeks ago, Dar and Ren would have been at my side, their orders to protect me at all cost paramount in their squire minds. Now I had no idea where they were, but

knew they considered the job of protecting the Duke and Baron more important than saving a mere squire, even if crazy barbarians did think I was some sort of prophesized leader.

It was at that thought I noticed a fight before me in which two barbarians swung massive weapons at each other with apparent glee at the thrill of combat. A large brute with coarse red hair flying about his head like a lion's mane hefted a gigantic hammer at the head of his rival, a shorter, darker barbarian wearing patchwork leather, who easily ducked under the weapon but had trouble jabbing his spear at his opponent due to the weapon's size. A dagger would really be useful there, I thought, but held back assistance upon realization that I did not know which of these two were on my side. Unlike the soldiers and squires wearing ducal insignia, the barbarians wore no identifying markings — or at least none that I could recognize. Still, they seemed to know friend from foe.

Weak from my inexperienced yet constant use of magic, I moved away to find more soldiers to heal, only to turn back upon hearing a very unpleasant crunch as the hammer found a home. The small barbarian was on the ground, apparently dead from a massive head wound, as the victor stood over, breathing heavily and watching his prey to assure himself of the completion of the task. Looking up, he met my eyes.

It was suddenly clear that this was not a barbarian from Hlafweard's tribe, as his eyes widened. "Bishortu!" he whispered, staring at me.

I swallowed and started to back up, imagining this vansir thrilled at the thought of being the hero of his tribe who actually killed the prophesized enemy of his people. Instead I stood confused as his expression changed to one of apparent fear, and he turned and ran, soon to be lost in the battle.

Admittedly I remained still for quite some time after that when I could have been assisting the battle, but the fight in my mind took precedence. Was this attack from the tribe that wanted to kill me or not? I struggled to recall what Hlafweard had said. There were two other tribes and the Hawk tribe wished to kill me because of something in their own personal prophecy. Was this then the third unnamed tribe? They obviously did not wish to kill me or even capture me. What was their goal?

A familiar voice yelling for aid broke my thoughts and I sprinted toward it. Turning at the edge of a small copse hidden from view of the rest of the battle, Duke Aramis's magical sword arced across the chest of a barbarian, leaving a trace of glowing light in its wake. Its target gurgled unpleasantly and fell back to the ground, unmoving. A second glance at the situation revealed the area littered with the bodies of both Ashban soldiers and barbarians, with only His Grace and three barbarians remaining. Apparently Duke Aramis had been led into an ambush, but his skill and talent had prevailed so far against overwhelming odds.

I started to yell for more help but fear gripped me, as I did not wish to make my presence known to provide a new target. Instead I crouched down and aimed a disarming spell at one of the barbarians, who cursed in his own language as his weapon slid from his fingers. Aramis took the opportunity immediately to dispatch his enemy and I marveled at his skill and effort under such trying conditions. I wondered if other help would arrive and why these barbarians were trying to kill the Duke.

Two barbarians remained, and one barked orders I could not understand. He was muscular and clean-shaven, with a strange bluish tattoo upon his cheek of a design I could not discern from my distance. His rugged face held a powerful grin accentuating a strong chin, and his long braided blonde hair swung behind him like a whip. His leather armor,

adorned with an ornate decoration of a hawk in flight, accentuated his muscles and apparently identified his rank.

The second barbarian, a burly giant with a ridiculously large black moustache, backed up, leaving his superior to face Aramis alone. His Grace smiled, looking not at all worried. He had fought many an honor combat in the past.

Without a word, the tattooed barbarian pounced, his large axe blocked by Aramis' magical shield. Aramis' sword feinted toward the vansir, who backed up reflexively and changed his stance. Weapons collided in mid-air to slide down to the ground unharmed. It was clear that the magic in His Grace's sword was evenly matched by the axe being wielded by the barbarian.

The fight continued on for a few minutes like this as I crouched behind a tree, admiring my liege's great skill. In fact, the barbarian was obviously becoming quite aware that he was outclassed and showed signs of worry, especially after receiving quite a few serious cuts. I knew it would take but a short time for this fight to end, His Grace victorious.

The blade protruding from his chest brought all those thoughts to a resounding halt. The honor combat had not been followed, and the mustached barbarian twisted his weapon sharply from behind while the other laughed. Duke Aramis' look of surprise and disbelief remained frozen as a kick from behind slowly pushed him forward off the blade and he landed face first into the dirt.

"No!" I screamed involuntarily.

The barbarians whipped around, weapons raised, but halted immediately upon recognition of Bishortu. After a slight pause, and without a word between them or any indication of fear, they turned and ran, yelling to their fellows.

I screamed for help and jumped to Aramis' aid, calling out a healing spell.

Aramis lay on his stomach, a pool of blood growing from his back, painting the small stones beneath. I knelt and touched him, willing my spell to be so powerful that it would make everything fine again. Aramis coughed uneasily but his wounds were past my meager skills, and when he looked up, it was with resignation.

"I am pleased to see you, Squire," he managed to say as I told him to just be quiet and rest. I attempted another spell, yelled again for help, and started crying while holding on to the great hero as if he was about to get up and walk away against my will. My tears would not stop and I could barely breathe. Aramis, however, seemed quite calm.

"You did fine, Terin," he managed to say. "I am proud of you once again. You did what you could."

"No, no, I didn't!" I sobbed. "I didn't! I just stood and watched! I could have cast spells or run for help, or at least kept an eye on that other barbarian..."

"Stop that, Terin," His Grace said with a halting whisper. "Every battle is a learning experience, and you are still young. You will make mistakes. But listen to me now — I don't have much time. There is something I must tell you..."

And with his last words, he gave me an order I did not wish to follow.

Four: Orders

Cheering echoed in the distance, hollow and empty. Figures moved but tears clouded my vision. Time stopped until a scream burst through the mists, and I found myself surrounded with concerns and questions. Healers made vain attempts while the wailing found itself joined by others, and it was not until I was pulled up to stare directly into Baron Frost's face that the fog lifted.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“The barbarians killed him,” I said needlessly. “I tried... I tried...”

Frost loosened his grip and stared. A few seconds later, with a wave of his hand, he ordered all away except the Duke's personal healers and the other nobles. The crowd broke its wake and walked slowly away, finding no comfort. Words of respect for the fallen hero mingled with anger at the barbarians who, goal met, had retreated without challenge.

“Had we known, they would not have been allowed to leave alive,” a familiar voice said, and I turned to see Ren, covered in blood and dirt. He placed a hand on my shoulder, and then realizing my concern, said, “Dar is fine; she is seeing to the injured.” I nodded my thanks.

Wordlessly, some healers began wrapping Duke Aramis' body in a shroud, as if by hidden signal. I could not tear away my view, remembering how the great man had trusted me and indeed encouraged me to try to give up my previous habit of lying and deceit, instead to embrace a higher ideal. He had shown faith in me while I had none, and had seen something in me I did not know was there.

The tears on the faces were soon joined by slight raindrops, as if the earth had felt the loss of a part of itself and held back no longer. As the still body was slowly moved to the Duke's wagon, the rest of us silently wandered almost aimlessly toward shelter under trees, each lost in our own thoughts. I am uncertain as to how much time had elapsed before I noticed that Baron Frost had ordered the rest of the tents erected. Pleased to have the opportunity to separate myself more from the crowd, I sloshed to my tent and crawled in. My small trunk had been placed inside and I had hardly time to change to dry clothes when word came that Frost wished to see me.

Summoning the song of the earth calmed me as I dutifully trudged to the same tent I had eavesdropped upon not much earlier. The steady rain created numerous puddles I avoided, so reaching my destination was like traversing a labyrinth with the knowledge that the fierce minotaur hidden within anxiously awaited its next victim. The Baron's large pavilion could hold a small crowd, and as I neared, I saw from the shadows within that it

fulfilled its potential. Guards stood glumly outside, soaked to the skin, and nodded me in somberly.

Baron Frost sat at a small table, surrounded by approximately a dozen others: knights, important wizards, and squires, including Darlissa and Rendal. A low discussion stopped when I entered.

“Ah, good, Terin. Then we are all here and accounted for,” Frost said, motioning for me to rise from my kneeling position. As the most senior noble present, it became his duty to assume command, and he did so quickly, forcefully, and with a presence that said there was to be no questioning of his authority.

“This is indeed a terrible situation,” he began. “Although the loss of His Grace is most unfortunate, we must at least be comforted by the thought that the death count was small and did not include any of us present.”

“I would have gladly laid down my life to save His Grace!” bellowed Sir Polycarus, one of the Duke’s Paladins. A general murmur of assent filled the tent as Baron Frost nodded grimly.

“As would all of us, Polycarus,” he said. “I am merely stating...”

“And the loss of some of our guards and members of the army are just as devastating to their families and friends,” interrupted the Paladin. “Their lives are also important. We may all serve different functions in this duchy, but...”

“But yet you yourself agree that some lives are worth more than others,” Frost said, “since you were willing to trade yours for His Grace’s.”

Polycarus furrowed his brow and breathed deep, puffing himself up a bit. “I do not mean to lecture Your Excellency, but that is not what I meant. I point out only that you seem to be treating the loss of the commoners as something less than serious.”

“I do no such thing,” Frost replied, calmly. “You misinterpret my words and my intent.” His tone was direct and steady. Astounded at how a knight was allowed to question a Baron in this way, I vowed to ask Dar about such things at the earliest opportunity.

The tense silence in the room was broken by Dame Alyssa, a thin elven woman who normally sported a broad smile but who that day looked as if such an accomplishment was impossible. She had been one of Duke Aramis’ knights for only a few years, but had easily become one of the most popular in the capital city, known for her charity work and love of horse racing. “So who were they and why did they want the Duke killed?” she asked.

Blank looks traveled around the room until an unreasonably tall and unbelievably elderly wizard known as Tiriflorn spoke up. “Well, we can be pretty sure they weren’t from Hlafweard’s Badger tribe,” he offered with a shrug.

Frost looked upset at himself. “Yes, the barbarian chief should be here. I’m sure he has some answers, or at least some ideas.” He glanced at me meaningfully and I nodded with understanding, jumping out of the tent and racing through the rain toward the vansir encampment. As the newest squire and lowest in rank, those menial tasks fell to me.

The rain splashing against my face combined with the pounding of my chest freed me from my somberness. I ironically felt pleased that, in all of the confusion, no one had doubted me when I told them what happened. Found alone with His Grace, I surely could have been his murderer — such things had been known to happen, of course — yet no one questioned my version of events. Either I had gained a reputation for truth after confessing

my part in the Arch prophecy at my squiring ceremony, or else it was just assumed that anyone who becomes a squire is beyond question, for to tell a lie would be a blatant violation of the Code of Chivalry. Then again, it may just have been that no one could conceive that I might beat the Duke in battle.

That sudden realization deflated my pride rapidly, and I trudged on gloomily.

The barbarians were immersed in their own sorrows, mourning their losses and healing those who could still be helped. Hlafweard smiled sadly upon seeing me. His axe was nowhere to be seen.

“The Baron wishes to speak with you,” I panted.

“Of course,” he replied, head bowing slightly.

Without another word, he ran off, and I followed close behind. Upon reaching Frost’s tent, he held his hand out, indicating, and I entered, announcing, “Your Excellency, here is Chief Hlafweard.”

Hlafweard entered and bowed appropriately, dropping to one knee.

“Please rise, Chief Hlafweard,” Frost said. “I hope you can shed some light on these attackers.”

“I believe they are from the Hawk tribe,” Hlafweard replied, after a second taken to survey his surroundings. “They are the most aggressive tribe, and they have always hated Ashbury.”

“Why?” asked one of the squires, who then looked embarrassed for speaking out of turn.

Hlafweard, surprised at the question, took a second before answering. “Well, because of our history. We once roamed the entire duchy and are now...” — he struggled

for the right word, still unsure of the language — “in a prison in a small ‘reclaim’ which is not a nice place.”

“We graciously allowed you to remain in that land despite the fact that the land belongs to Ashbury...” Baron Frost began.

“*Allowed* us?” grinned Hlafweard, keeping his voice low. “The land belongs to no one, and you forced us back to a place that you do not want.”

“Ancient history,” Frost dismissed with a wave of his hand. “Do you believe that the Hawk tribe thinks that by killing our Duke, that will somehow help? That such an act of war will be met by our surrender, so that the barbarians can roam freely again like their ancestors?”

“I do not know that they were from the Hawk tribe,” Hlafweard corrected. “And your guess about their reason is as good as mine. Do not blame me for their actions. I lost many of my own people fighting against them, as you know.”

Frost calmed a bit and said, with apparent sincerity, “I am sorry for your losses and am appreciative for your aid when the attack came. Your people fought bravely. Please let me know if there is anything we can do to help.”

“Some of your healers have already helped and still help,” Hlafweard responded. “We are grateful.”

A short silence filled the room and then Frost sighed and said, “We must now decide what to do. We are technically leaderless at the moment. I may be the highest ranking noble here, but the other barons have more seniority than I, so I can make no orders concerning, for instance, a declaration of war against the Hawk tribe.”

“Who is His Grace’s heir?” asked Dame Alyssa. “He was unmarried and had no children...”

“There is no heir,” sighed Lord Alan, Duke Aramis’ seneschal. A mousy little man, Alan often was touted as the person who really ran the duchy, overseeing all of the menial day-to-day tasks that should never bother a Duke. Alan made sure all arrangements were prepared before a journey, reviewed the tax collections, hired court staff such as cooks and cleaners, and guaranteed everything ran smoothly. It was said that if a table setting on the other side of the castle had the fork on the wrong side, Lord Alan would notice, and his meticulous attention to detail helped keep the duchy in line. Now, however, he seemed as disheveled and unorganized as an early morning victim of the previous night’s drinking contest.

“I had always begged His Grace to write a will, but he constantly put it off. I believe he did not wish to face his own mortality, and, as you all know, when he makes his mind up not to do something...” He left the rest of the sentence incomplete, as nods and looks of understanding filled everyone’s face.

“Then we must petition the King to name a new Duke,” Frost sighed.

“No,” I said softly.

All heads turned in my direction, as Dar gave me a ‘shut up’ look.

“No?” asked Baron Frost.

“As he was dying,” I replied, “His Grace named his heir.” The gasps that followed were immediately covered by questions and comments from all sides at once.

“Impossible!”

“He was still alive and you didn’t heal him?”

“Why should we believe you?”

“Silence!” The last was from Baron Frost. After a few seconds of quiet, he turned to me with a skeptical look and said, “Very well, Terin, tell us what happened.”

I took a deep breath. “I came upon His Grace fighting an honor combat with a barb —” Catching the eye of Hlafweard, I corrected myself. “...a vansir. I didn’t wish to interrupt the battle, but then another one came from behind and ran his sword through the Duke.” I shook slightly upon reliving the experience. I wasn’t even making an attempt at telling a good bard-like tale, as my mind just couldn’t handle the concept of this story as being entertaining. Instead, I rambled on. “Duke Aramis fought with honor and the coward struck him from behind! They then saw me and ran off, and I yelled for help but no one came. I tried to heal him but his wounds were too deep. I am not that powerful...”

“It’s fine, Terin,” Frost said with sincerity. No one is questioning your actions.”

“I am!” I shouted. “I could have gone for help when I saw His Grace fighting alone. I could have fought, too. I could have cast some spells...”

“You are hardly trained in combat and have only been a squire for a few weeks,” Polycarus said. “You are to serve the Code of Chivalry to the best of your ability, which will improve over time.” As one of the Paladins, Sir Polycarus’ responsibilities included training and testing squires, and I had already met with him quite a few times to discuss my future. His words did calm me a bit, but I still chided myself on still being such an inept coward. Why couldn’t life be like the bard stories?

“And what happened next?” asked Frost, with slight impatience.

“He named his heir,” I replied. “He ordered me to tell everyone and to make sure it happened.”

“And there were no witnesses to this?” asked the seneschal.

“No,” I replied quietly. “None.”

“I’m not sure of the legality of it, then,” he pouted. “A will must be witnessed...”

“This was his last order, though,” said Sir Polycarus. “Are you telling me that if the Duke were to name his heir, you wouldn’t accept that unless he signed an actual will and had it witnessed?”

“The proper paperwork must always be done,” the seneschal chided. “That’s the law.”

“He’s the bloody Duke!” Polycarus laughed without humor. “Whatever he says is the law.”

“Baroness Glenduria is my guess,” said Dame Alyssa, looking thoughtful. “She has seniority.”

“No,” I said quietly.

“No? Not Glen? Let me guess,” said Frost with a sneer. “He named *you*.”

“No, Your Excellency,” I said, just as quietly. “He named you.”

Surprise filled everyone’s face. Ren looked positively angry, and Frost himself was taken aback as if struck by a blow. “Me?” he asked. “But I have been a Baron only a few weeks...”

“Why would I lie about this?” I said, a bit louder this time.

Frost gave me a look and then said, “Why indeed. No, I feel confident that I would not be your choice for a new Duke. Nor do I think you would take the oath to the Code of Chivalry and then lie, especially about something this important. Still, this is unexpected. And the other Barons may object.”

“We will need to contact His Majesty the King to come to Ashbury for the ceremony,” said Lord Alan.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Frost said, still distracted. “He will probably be here for the funeral in any event. We must return Duke Aramis’ body to the capital city for the burial, and we must notify all of this tragedy. I think our trip to the vansir reclaim will have to be postponed for now, as more important things have arisen.”

He stood, and all others did as well, acknowledging their acceptance of the one who would become their new Duke. “Prepare to return,” he told everyone. “Go now.”

Gathering themselves, the crowd made to leave. I started for the tent opening, but Frost’s voice called me back. “Terin, Darlissa, Rendal, stay here.”

We three exchanged glances as everyone else left, and then Frost motioned for us to sit. None of us spoke, curious as to Frost’s desires. He exchanged no pleasantries.

“I wish for you three to continue on with Hlafweard to the Vansir Reclaim.” He spoke as if there would be no question that this was the right decision. “I give you all a very important task, Terin especially.” He paused to collect his thoughts and then spoke quickly, as if he wanted to get it all out before we could object.

“The barbarians have occupied that land for too long and have contributed nothing to Ashbury. Some of them have openly declared war on us by killing our Duke. Even if this is just one tribe, it may embolden the others to join them. We cannot tolerate this. Once I am Duke, I could easily order the army into the Vansir Reclaim to kill every last one of them, and we have the numbers to carry that out very easily, but instead I give you this task, Terin: You are to get the barbarians out of the Vansir Reclaim by any means necessary.”

“*What?*” I cried. “How?”

“I don’t know,” Frost said dismissively. “You’re the bloody Bishortu, I’m sure you can think of something. Order them off, wave your arms and scare them, I don’t care. But this is your task. I don’t want any barbarians in Ashbury.”

“All of them?” asked Darlissa. “Even the Badger tribe?”

“Yes, was I unclear? All of them. You have my permission to do whatever it takes. Do you understand? *Whatever it takes*. Now go. You have your orders.”

We slowly stepped out of the tent and into the rain, standing there together, getting soaked, as the enormity of our task faced us.

“Well,” said Ren finally, with a slight chuckle. “Life sure became a lot more interesting since you came along, Prophecy Boy.”

Five: Planning for Disaster

The rain combined with the loss of the beloved Duke to put everyone in a melancholy mood as preparations were made to reverse direction and head to the capital city. Frost's tent, which had hastily been erected for his meeting, had to be drawn and packed again, much to the distress of the vassals assigned the job, and as I watched them from a spot beneath a tree which provided little protection, a girl approached.

Her hair plastered against her head combined with her prominent nose made her look slightly comical, but when she smiled, it countered the image and made everything well.

"Squire Terin?" she asked with a nervous giggle. "Hi. Uh, I am Nira, Olrick's daughter? Oh, but you wouldn't know Olrick, but he knows you! Well, everyone knows you, don't they? I mean, what with the Arch and everything..."

I smiled without effort. "What can I do for you, Nira?"

She laughed and turned a delightful shade of red. "Oh, listen to me babble like that! I am sorry! Baron Frost asked me to make sure you had all the provisions you need for your journey, so...well, actually he didn't ask, he asked my father and he told me to ... well, actually, he didn't tell me, I just kind of volunteered and ran to see you before..." She blushed again.

"Provisions? That's wonderful," I said. "Frost said that?"

"Oh yes," she gushed. "He told father to give you anything you wanted!"

"Ah, and who might this young lass be?" asked Barinor, sloshing through the mud, accompanied by my very wet and dour-looking fellow squires.

“Squire Darlissa! Squire Rendal!” gasped Nira. “And Barinor! It’s an honor to meet you all. Really, I’ve almost memorized the song already! Wait until I tell Binnie that I met all of you, she’ll never believe me.”

“This is Nira,” I introduced, noting the slight smile on the faces of my companions. “She has been given the very important job of making sure we have provisions.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Barinor, before the squires could respond. “That’s great, lad! Dar and Ren were just tellin’ me about it, and I volunteered to come with ye, and that way we can use me wagon to hold plenty o’ food. And ale, right, lass? Ale is a provision, ain’t it?”

Nira nodded, eyes wide.

“Well, let’s get to it, then, shall we?” He held out an arm and Nira, after one last glance at us, ran off, with Barinor following close behind.

“Does that happen all the time?” I asked.

Ren smiled. “People often tend to be awed by the famous. I see it when commoners get to meet the nobility. It doesn’t happen to squires, though, but you are a bit well-known now.”

“I am not sure I will ever get used to it,” I said.

“Good,” Dar said. “You shouldn’t, because then you might start believing it.” She glanced at the gray sky, which was slowly relenting in its attack.

“Believing what?”

“Believing what they believe – that you are better than them. That what you do as a squire is more important than what they do.”

My brow furrowed. “Isn’t that true, though? Isn’t what the nobles do more important?”

“When you’re starving, you won’t think so,” Ren grinned. Seeing my confused expression compelled him to continue. “We each have our jobs in this world, Terin. To be a member of the nobility, you will need certain skills – bravery, honesty, leadership – but they won’t help you shoe a horse or till a field.”

“The problem is in seeing the skills it takes to be a squire as more important than the skills it takes to be a farmer, or a miller, or a lens crafter, or a cooper...” added Dar. “True, a squire’s skills may be more difficult to obtain, but that doesn’t make them more important.”

I nodded with a frown. “I understand the concept of humility,” I said, “but at the same time, I can’t deny that I always wanted to be well-known.”

“As a bard,” Ren added.

“Well, yes. Is that bad?”

“No, not as a bard,” he smiled. “But if you want to serve the people as a knight someday, you will have to always remember that your needs and wants are secondary to the needs and wants of the people as a whole. A bard doesn’t need to care about anyone but himself.”

Lost in my thoughts, I didn’t respond.

* * *

Unwilling to travel at night and in no rush, we remained in the muddy field, protected only by the thin tents. By the time the morning sun was low in the sky, trying to force its way through thick, obstinate clouds, we were feeling even more depressed and uncomfortable.

Dar, Ren and I were on our mounts, Barinor on his wagon, and about thirty stinking wet barbarians crowded behind, most on foot. I sighed and started down the mucky trail, and without a word, the drenched group followed.

There was much I wished to discuss, but the enormity of the situation, the sadness of the loss, and the blight of the dampness made it difficult. After an hour or so, however, my mind had run through so much that I felt that if I did not mention at least the most important things, I would forget the minor things, and both needed to be brought to light. Besides, I wanted to do something to stop Barinor from whistling out of tune.

“Why do you think Aramis chose Frost as his heir?”

Ren frowned, but had been waiting for that question. “He must see something in Frost we don’t.”

“Let’s not forget,” Dar added, “that it was Frost who saved Aramis and brought him to the Arch battle. I am sure the Duke was impressed by that action. You have to admit that showed real leadership and courage.” I nodded, recalling that even I had been impressed by Frost’s ability.

“Surely that can’t be all,” Ren responded.

“Well, who else would he choose?” Dar asked. “He didn’t have a wife or children. The other two Barons never really were very close to Aramis. Baroness Glen has been in charge of the Ash Forest almost as long as Aramis had been alive, and I think she always treated him like a child in some ways. Maybe he just didn’t like her.” I considered that. Although Glen has a wonderful reputation with the long-lived elves of the Ash Forest, the one time I had met her I also got that impression.

“And Baron Emery is a stuck up prat,” Barinor added. “Thinks he’s the greatest warrior in all of Fortannis.”

“Well, he is pretty amazing,” I said, recalling Emery’s heroics. “He is a good leader on the battlefield.”

“Prat,” Barinor repeated.

Ren looked to the sky for a few minutes, considering, and then nodded, with a resigned look. “The obvious choices were just not acceptable to His Grace, I guess,” he said.

“Did Aramis allow his nobles to argue with him the way Polycarus argued with Frost?” I asked, switching the subject.

“Oh, that wasn’t much of an argument,” Ren laughed. “You should see them when they really get going.”

“To answer your question, Terin, yes, of course,” Dar smiled. “Just because there is a hierarchy doesn’t mean we can’t disagree with those above us. In fact, disagreements often are needed. It is a poor leader who doesn’t take the advice of those beneath him.”

“Even if he doesn’t really want it,” Ren added, swatting at some stinging flies that had appeared after the rain.

“That’s different from disobeying them,” Dar added. “You may disagree with their decisions, but you still have to obey them.”

“Unless they’re illegal,” Ren yawned.

Dar sighed, rolling her eyes, “Shall we assume for the sake of argument that your liege won’t order you to steal or cast necromancy?”

“How about getting rid of people by ‘any means necessary’?” I sneered.

Ren and Dar exchanged glances while Barinor looked confused, which he temporarily banished through the judicious use of a massive swig from a colorful jug.

“I am sure he didn’t mean to break any laws...” Dar began.

“He considers us at war with them,” Ren interrupted. “Regular laws don’t really apply at a time like that. And the Vansir Reclaim isn’t actually a part of Ashbury, so our laws don’t apply there.”

“What are ye talkin’ about?” Barinor demanded. “What laws? Which people?”

“Frost ordered us ...” I began.

“Maybe we shouldn’t tell him,” Ren said. “It was a noble order.”

“Well, he didn’t order us not to tell anyone,” I growled. “I’m telling Barinor, he’s been with us when we needed him, and I trust him completely.” Seeing Barinor swell with pride, I added, “And he’s a member of the Order of the Arch.”

Catching Dar’s slight smile from the corner of my eye, I continued. “Frost ordered us to get rid of the barbarians by any means necessary.”

“Well, we ain’t at war with the ones behind us, are we?” Barinor bellowed, thumb pointing at the Badgers, as everyone motioned for him to keep quiet. The dwarf snorted but continued on at a lesser volume. “I can see tellin’ us to do somethin’ about the ones that killed Aramis, but not all o’ them.”

“I think there is another reason,” I said, as my steed whinnied impatiently at my constant turning to face others. “The attack on Aramis just provided a nice official reason.”

“Amazing coincidence,” Ren scoffed. Dar shot him an angry look.

“Surely you don’t think Frost has anything to do with Aramis’ death?” she asked. Ren clenched his teeth, but didn’t respond. “Oh come now,” she continued, “he was just as

surprised as anyone that he was named heir. I know you don't trust him, but to accuse him of murder!"

At this, Ren looked embarrassed. "I suppose you're right," he admitted. "That is a bit hard to believe." He scratched at his slight beard. "But it is a big coincidence, you have to admit."

Barinor gave a huge burp and then said with a yawn, "So what's the other reason, then?"

"The treasure."

Barinor's yawn stopped instantly as he became completely attentive. "Treasure?"

"Apparently there is some treasure buried under the Vansir Reclaim. No, I don't know what it is," I said, anticipating his next question. "But before the attack, I overheard him talking to someone about it, saying that the land and the treasure belong to us, not the barbarians."

"And that proves that he didn't plan Aramis' murder," Dar said with a nod, as if just convincing herself. "If Frost had planned the attack and knew he would be named heir, he wouldn't have been making those plans beforehand that Terin overheard. He would have just waited until after the Duke was killed, thus giving him a reason to attack the barbarians and take the treasure for himself." Ren gave a grunt and shrugged, his equivalent of acceptance.

"So that's why he wants them off the land, then?" Barinor asked. "So he can go lookin' for the treasure?"

"It certainly seems that way," I said, "although I can also believe that the attack on Aramis made him want to get revenge now, too."

“I want revenge,” added Ren. “I want to kill that Hawk leader myself, very slowly, and then all of the members of his tribe. Then their pets. Then I want to burn their bodies and...”

“We get it,” Dar said, and Ren bit his lip.

“But that’s just one tribe,” I said. “Obviously, we can’t destroy an entire tribe just by ourselves. And the order was to get rid of all of them.”

“The Badgers may help us,” Dar suggested, “but then afterwards we would have to ask them to leave too so we can obey our order.”

“I’m sure that will go over well,” Ren laughed, and then said in a comical voice, “Thanks for all your help, now get off this land and never come back.”

“I am at a loss,” I admitted. “I don’t have the slightest idea what to do.”

“We should continue on to the Reclaim,” Dar said, “but also talk to Hlafweard. Although I don’t think we should tell him what our orders are.”

“Aye,” Barinor agreed, “but can we ask him about the axes?”

“Yes, and probably we should ask about the treasure, too,” I said. “Maybe if we can get the treasure, that will satisfy Frost and he can take back his order.”

I considered that but it was difficult given Barinor’s whistling.

For the rest of the story, get “The Axes of Evil”

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