

Retribution



In 476 BLW (Blood Line Wars), Lord Desmond lost the third War of Ascension. His sons, Alfred and Thomas were spared. In 489 Thomas usurped the throne with Alfred's assistance and began the fourth War of Ascension. Neither survived long. Thomas was defeated in 492 at the Battle of Twin Rivers, Heartwood Pines. The people rose up and slayed Alfred in his Keep, killing everyone, man, woman, and child, ending the BLW permanently.

—from “Blood Lines and Battle Fronts”

Mathius, scribe to Samson the Wise, 5th Season of the Council

The torch blazed a dragon tongue, lapping wood to ignite the thatch roof. Fire devoured dry straw and pitch. It roared into life, puffing up dark smoke, working its way down to the wooden walls. Startled cries came from within. The front door opened and a man stood in the frame of smoke and fire. An arrow struck him in the chest and he crumpled onto his stoop.

That man, Dinel, had a wife and how many daughters? Jarrod chewed his lip, watching the devastation. He had agreed to this night raid, but only to put a scare into the man. Killing people was not what he expected. Three harvests had passed since he'd last seen anyone killed and that'd been during the invasion of Heartwood Pines.

Except now we are the invaders.

“This is wrong,” Jarrod said, standing in the thicket beside the bonfire that was once a home. Red embers floated in the sky like the souls of those dying in the fire.

“Shut your mouth,” Kris said, punching him in the arm. Kris was taller, and a cruel grin on his twisted face, his nose mashed and his right cheek broken in the war. “You don't want to be heard saying things like that. They'll think you're a sympathizer, or worse. A supporter.”

How crazy has the world become when sympathy is looked on as near treason?

“Look.” Kris pointed at the back of the house. A small shape dropped outside a window. Jarrod heard harsh coughing and sobbing. Another shape fell out beside the first. Then a third. “We have some chickens trying to fly the coop. Time to round them up and put them back inside.”

Jarrod's stomach sank at the thought of putting the children, innocent young girls back into the house to burn alive. They had nothing to do with the war or those who deserted it.

“Come on, Jerky,” Kris said. “This is our part of the job.”

“They're just...” Jarrod tried to swallow. The thickening black cloud made it difficult. His eyes began to burn and tear up. “They're k...” He coughed, clearing his throat. “...kids.”

“That's what they said about Lord Desmond's brats,” Kris said. “And you know what they grew up to do.”

Jarrod nodded; they all knew what happened when the princes came back for retribution. Hesitant, he moved towards the girls as they crawled away from their burning home. As he approached, they stopped and one by one looked up at him with red rimmed, wet eyes. He had no idea what to do. Those innocent faces, marred with soot and tears, stared blankly at him. A high-pitched screech sounded from the window. “No! Leave my babies alone!”

Dinel's wife, Kera, straddled the sill, ignoring the flames that crackled behind her. “Not my babies!” She shouted, and tumbled from the window. Kris caught her under the arms and held her while she pounded on him with her fists, kicking her legs in a frantic struggle to get away. Her night shift tore down her right shoulder, exposing a white breast. Kris laughed, and pinched the breast.

“Look at this dug ripe for milking!”

“My babies,” Kera repeated, tracks marking her cheeks. “Let my babies go, please!”

“Beg all you want,” Kris said, gripping her by the hair and pulling her head back, “but those chicks are going to roast like you, mamma hen.”

Kris pulled a dagger from his belt. The blade moved swiftly across the woman’s throat and her cries turned into gurgles. Blood, dark red in the fire light, gushed over her white shift, splashed down her breast and covered Kris’s arm as he held her weak, struggling body. Her arms reached out for her children and she stared at them until life left her eyes dark and empty. She sagged in Kris’s grip.

“Hush little mommy say no more words,” Kris sang and chuckled. He lifted the limp body up and stuffed it back through the window.

Jarrold watched, horrified. His stomach tried to empty his supper, but he held it back, hiccupping up bile. One of the younger girls screamed, a sharp ear-splitting noise. The eldest held her sister as she tried to crawl towards her mother’s killer. The smallest sat there in a stupor, eyes wide and mouth gaping.

“What are you waiting for? Grab the little bitches by the scruff and toss them into the fire,” Kris said, grinning, and laughed a strange, high-pitched sound. “Their mamma’s waiting for them.”

“No,” Jarrold said, barely audible. He repeated the word stronger, wrinkling his nose in disgust. “No!”

“Fine, I’ll do it myself. You know Fraster’s going to hear about this cowardly breach,” Kris said.

He bent down for the small one and scooped her up.

She did not struggle any more than a sack of potatoes.

He took a couple of steps towards the house.

“Don’t, Kris. They’re children,” Jarrold said, grabbing him by the shoulder.

“There are no children in war,” Kris said, shrugging him off. He hefted the girl overhead and stopped. The girl slipped from his hands, tumbling to the ground.

Jarrold pulled his sword from Kris’s back, tipping him sideways so his body would not crush the child. Arms trembling, he sheathed his sword. *Oh gods, what have I done?* Silence responded, broken only by the snapping of the fire. The heat was so hot, sweat poured off his forehead, though he felt cold and icy. The two older girls stared at him, eyes wide in terror. The littlest one lay on her side, and Jarrold feared she was dead—the shock and horror of these events stopping her innocent heart.

“Jerky! Kris!” cried Fraster from the other side of the house.

Jarrold jumped and moved forward on stilted legs. He knelt, testing for life and the girl’s eyes fluttered as he brushed past them. Jarrold gently lifted her up, cradling her to his shoulder and walked quickly in the opposite direction of Fraster and the three other men he had with him. The two sisters remained still, so he stopped next to the oldest, and whispered, “Come on. They’ll kill you if you stay.”

The girl helped her sister up and they huddled together, following Jarrold like two wary mongrels. They had reached the edge of the thicket just before the line of weepers and creepers, when Jarrold heard the first curse.

“Jerky! You damn fool!” Fraster shouted. “You better run fast, because death is going to catch you.”

A whistle sounded a few yards behind. “I see them. Over there!”

“Run girls!” Jarrold clutched his bundle close to his chest and ran into the dark.

Large, twisted trees called weepers, because they had the appearance of a grieving person, loomed in the darkness, waiting for him to smash into their trunks. The weepers grew far enough apart for them to pass, but the creepers—long, thick vines that hung snake-like from the limbs—could lynch someone from their feet. Jarrold ducked under a creeper just before it caught around his neck. Unexpected holes, roots and hundreds of other obstacles tried to twist their ankles, catch their toes and trip them up. They ran, jumping over roots, breaking off branches that dug at their faces, and stumbled over unseen objects hidden by the night. Jarrold glanced over his shoulder to make certain the other two girls kept pace. Each time he saw his pursuers gaining

ground. His arms ached, his legs cramped, his chest heaved and his throat burned like he had swallowed cinders, but he kept running.

There's got to be a house. Gabriel's farm is somewhere close by. Or was that in the other direction? Panic gnawed at him. *We are running blind!*

A root caught his left foot, sending his shoulder smashing into a trunk. He spun in a circle, fighting for balance, and nearly dropped the girl. After shuffling her weight to his right side, he continued at a quick walk. His legs refused to do anymore.

"Why are you slowing down?" the eldest girl asked.

"I can't... I can't..." Jarrod heaved for breath, his chest heavy. "...go anymore."

Their pursuers had not given up. He heard their feet crashing through the brush.

"Take... take sister," Jarrod said, gulping in air. A stitch formed in his side, feeling like someone jabbed a knife into him. He handed the eldest the little one, now heavy as a rock in his trembling arms, and bent over, breathing heavily. "I'll hold them... I'll hold'em off."

The girl waited a moment. "Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For not being like them," the girl said. She carried the youngest, while holding the hand of the other, leading them into the dark woods.

Jarrold drew his sword and leaned back against a weeper. When it came to fighting, he was outmatched. They would slice him open like a ripe melon. He just had to hold them up, delay them so the girls might have a chance at escape. Escape to where? Three young girls, alone in the woods, lost without food or water or even shoes. Maybe they were better off burning with their parents. Slitting their throats may have been a mercy to what they might face.

No, Jarrod shook the thoughts away. They were alive and if the gods be good, they will find help.

Footsteps approached in the dark. Another whistle went out.

"I found one. It's Jerky!"

"Grist? Is that you?" Jarrod got his breathing under control, though his heart pounded and the sword felt really heavy in his hands. "Just go on home. Leave me be and... and you might live."

"You really are an ass, aren't you Jerky?" Grist said, stepping out from between two weepers. He was of equal height to Jarrod, tall and thin but with stronger arms from chopping wood and working the grinder at the mill. "The only way you killed Kris was because his back was to you, you coward."

"No one spoke of hurting children. Hurting children is coward's duty."

"How about you tell me where the girls went, and I will just let you walk away," Grist said in a friendly tone, as though asking Jarrod to get a pint of ale at the White Mule. "No one else needs to be hurt this night."

"You won't be hurting those girls, Grist. I'll run you through first."

"We both know that's not possible. Your scrawny arms can hardly hold that sword, farm boy. Besides, it's not like we get to make the decisions. We just follow orders like in the war," Grist said matter-of-factly. "Fraster will find them with or without you. Once he does, they are joining their parents in the Gods' Circle. That's what happens to traitors."

"Those girls are too young to be traitors."

"Their father was," Fraster said, appearing on the other side with, Arny and Belthoy, both flanking Jarrod. Fraster was much older, closing in on fifty name days. He sneered at Jarrod like he stepped in something nasty and had to scrape his boot. "And we learned our lessons about not striking down the saplings with the parent tree. Enough talking. Belthoy, kill this big bag of fertilizer and let's continue with the search. They couldn't have gone far."

"I'll put him down," Grist said.

“Fine. Catch up afterwards.” They slipped past, each giving Jarrod a hard stare.

“It didn’t have to end like this.” Grist drew his sword and frowned. “Sometimes life’s not fair. You just do as you’re told and you try to sleep at night.”

“No way was I going to kill those girls.” Jarrod replied, holding up his sword. Silently he prayed, *Blade's Man, just let me put up a good fight and die well.*

Grist jabbed at him. Jarrod deflected the blade, metal ringing in the night. He stepped away from the weeper, knowing he was trapped and would have a better chance on open ground. Another quick jab to his thigh that he easily pushed away. Grist was testing him, though he usually beat Jarrod soundly in the sparring circle. The next came in a series of three quick strokes. Jarrod stopped two, but was too slow. The third cut him down his left forearm.

“Should have paid more attention to your sword practice and less on fertilizing plants, farm boy.” Grist swung hard at Jarrod’s head. Jarrod caught it, the blow vibrating down the hilt and he lost his grip. The sword dropped and he threw himself to the left in time to miss a fatal thrust at his chest. He struck the ground, trying to cushion his fall with his left arm. Strings of fire blazed up and down the arm. He rolled over onto his back, biting back his scream of pain. Grist stood over him.

“Farewell, my friend.” Grist raised his sword arm.

Jarrod crossed both of his arms in a feeble warding attempt. Turning his head away, he squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth, awaiting the killing blow. *I tried.* He thought about the farm where he lived and raised crops, the war where he killed and razed camps. *Gods don't judge me too harsh, I tried. Let it be swift. Let it not hurt too much. Let it-* He heard a grunt. Something warm and wet splashed on his hands.

Peeking between his crossed hands, he saw Grist standing over him, a pain-filled, confused expression on his face. The sword tumbled from his hands. He coughed up dark blood and sagged forward. Jarrod saw the sword point jutting from Grist’s broad chest before it slipped away. Grist fell sideways, revealing a large man with graying hair standing in his place.

“Gabriel?” Jarrod asked in disbelief. “What are you doing out here at night?”

“Saw the fire and I thought there might be trouble.” Gabriel spat on the fallen body. “Guess I was right.”

Jarrod sat up quickly, wincing at the burning cut on his forearm. “There are three girls out there, Dinel’s daughters. Did you see them?”

“I did,” Gabriel said, wiping his blade on Grist’s trousers.

“Were they... are they... they weren’t—”

“Dead,” Gabriel finished, letting the word hang in the air as he stared down at Jarrod.

Jarrod winced. All that running and holding Fraster and the others off, served for nothing. The gods were not kind. They were cruel, sparing him and taking the three innocents. Life wasn’t fair, just as Grist said.

“No,” Gabriel continued. “They are safe.”

Jarrod breathed out a sigh of relief.

“What about the men? Fraster, Belthoy and Army chased after them.”

“Belthoy and Army won’t be running after anyone no more. Now,” Gabriel said, bending down and placing his sword point against Jarrod’s chest, “you are going to tell me what happened out at Dinel’s and why you are running around with his girls in the middle of the night.”

“I wanted no part of the killings,” Jarrod said, easing away from the sword point. Gabriel just pushed it harder, drawing a pin prick of blood to trickle down and wet his shirt. “I swear by the Mother, I wanted nothing to do with it. Oh gods! Kris was going to burn them up and I killed him because he wouldn’t stop. They wouldn’t stop. They just won’t stop.”

Gabriel studied him, searching his eyes. The sword point lifted.

“Hannah told me you saved them. I just had to be certain for myself.” He offered Jarrod a hand. “Come with me, we got more talking to do.”



The root cellar was cool and damp. It had the earthy smell of canned fruits and mushrooms stored by hard working hands. Hands that knew how to tend a field. Jarrod missed the sweet taste of the soil, the sweltering heat and sweet rains. He held his cup of tea, huddling in a chair in the corner as Mira, Gabriel’s wife brought another blanket to cover the sleeping girls. She was young looking, with the care folds around her eyes and mouth, like she smiled or laughed a lot in her blossoming days. She was pretty, in a simple way, full-bodied, not scrawny or overly ripe. Grey shimmered in her blond hair, tied back with a blue ribbon, and she wore a tight brown dress that showed her curves without revealing skin.

The poultice itched on his forearm. Mira said he had to wear it for the next day or so to keep it from going green and pus-filled. Fortunately for him, the cut wasn’t deep enough to sever muscle. He could flex his left hand with some great pain, but that was all. He wore a clean shirt from Ishmael, Gabriel’s eldest son. His own had been cut up to staunch the blood on the way to Gabriel’s home.

Gabriel filled him in on the details of the girls’ flight. He had seen the fire and roused his three boys. They each went armed with bows and spears left over from the war. Gabriel was the only one with a sword. From the scars on his hands and face, he had seen extensive action in battle during the Heartwood Pines invasion. They had found the girls running in from the direction of their home. Hannah, the eldest Dinel child of eleven name days, gave a brief, tearful account of what happened. He had his youngest escort the girls to the house, to lock them in the cellar with his own sister and mother, and to let no one in but Gabriel. With bows strung, arrows notched, they waited for Fraster and the others to blunder into them.

“That one was never a good woodsman. I could hear him breaking brush and snapping twigs well before their ugly faces showed up,” Gabriel said, shaking his head in disgust.

They had aimed true, killing Belthoy and Army with a single shot each, but Fraster spun away in time for the arrow to graze his shoulder. He had taken off running with Gabriel in pursuit.

“I heard the clash of your swords and that’s when I found you,” Gabriel said. “I remembered Hannah mentioning a rescuer and when I saw you, I was surprised. I knew you were no good with a sword. I swear, the Blade’s Man must have blessed, or pitied, you to keep you alive for so long. I had to save you.”

Watching the girls resting in blankets on the cellar floor, Jarrod couldn’t understand how they could sleep after such a horrific event. He was bone tired, but his eyes refused to close. Every time they did, he kept seeing Dinel’s wife’s throat being slashed and the blood flooding out in a dark, red river to drown him. *Kera. Her name was Kera.* Jarrod would hold her name in his memory for the rest of his days. He felt responsible for her death. Even if he hadn’t drawn the blade, he did nothing to stop it. All that blood. A rain bloated river of blood would haunt him until the end of his days.

“Poor babies,” Mira whispered, stroking the hair of the youngest. “So much sorrow.”

“How did you get them to pass out?” Jarrod asked

“Chamomile and weep bark,” she replied. “The same is in your tea.”

That explained his drowsiness.

“Then why am I not asleep?”

Mira smiled. It was a very pretty smile, one that could swallow his heart whole. It made his head fuzzy and his face feel hot, or maybe it was his head hot and his face all fuzzy. Ideas swam before him and his mind grasped at them like a child chasing butterflies. They fluttered just out of his reach. Mira unlatched the cellar door and disappeared up the stairs. Gabriel came down next with Ishmael. Ishmael was the same age as Jarrod

and had the strong jaw and sharp nose that Jarrod lacked. The girls would swoon for Ishmael, pushing past Jarrod just to gaze on Ishmael. *If I were a girl, I'd do the same*—the thought swam up from the surface of goo. They both had trained during the war at the Fox Den. Unlike Jarrod, Ishmael proved himself to be skilled with a sword, spear, and bow. Jarrod only found his usefulness the same as he was brought up; a simple farm boy who knew his way around racks, hoes, and shovels. Those were his tools and they had him tending the camp garden when he was not soldiering out in the yard.

“Ah, I see you are feeling lucid, like your thoughts are swimming through a bowl of warm milk,” Gabriel said. He pulled up a stool and sat in front of Jarrod and Ishmael stood behind, arms folded. “I apologize for this deception, but we need to be certain that what you tell us is the full-truth. No inconvenient omissions of information.”

“You didn’t need to poison me,” Jarrod said. He set his cup down before he threw it. Anger wanted to surface, but it slipped under waves of drowsiness. “I would have told you all I know.”

“It’s not poison, just a sedative. A kind of truth serum we used in the war for enemy spies,” Gabriel explained. “Three snippets of weeping bark put you in a deep, dreamless sleep. One snippet made you sleepy, and more cooperative. The only side effect you will have is nightmares. After what you went through, that is to be expected.”

“To be expected,” Jarrod agreed. The room faded in and out as his eyes drooped, then flashed open. *No more blood!* He wanted to scream, but only nodded. “Yes.”

“Good boy.” Gabriel patted his leg. “What foolishness did you get yourself involved with tonight? Why did Fraster want Dinel dead?”

“We were given a list of names,” Jarrod said. The words came from a distance. His mouth just worked on its own. “Names of those who fought against us in the war, but... but got pardoned. And those who did not fight us directly, they were on there, too. Those lot gave aid or information to the enemy. I think.” He scratched his chin, fighting for control of his words. “Fraster told us. Fraster was very clear that they were all traitors. They had to be punished for their crimes.”

“Is that what you believe?”

“Yes.” Jarrod looked at Gabriel, trying to see if he was serious. All he saw was a blurry face that cleared and went blurry again. “My father died fighting Desmond’s spoiled princes. Anyone who helped the enemy has to be a traitor.”

Gabriel frowned, that Jarrod saw plainly. His hands wrung together and he spoke in a measured tone. “In the waning days of the war, Dinel found a boy, a little younger than you. He was bleeding from a side wound and half-dead from starvation. Dinel bandaged his wounds, fed him and sent him on his way. It was only later he discovered the boy was a scout for Thomas’s main force— after the boy was captured and then strung up. Dinel said to me before the execution, ‘Enemy or not, he was a boy who needed help. Was I to let him die on my stoop because he served a different cause?’”

Gabriel leaned forward and the furrowed lines on his forehead matched his frown. “Dinel’s crime was human decency.”

“I didn’t know,” Jarrod spoke in a hushed voice. “I... I didn’t know.”

“Of course, you didn’t,” Gabriel said. “Else you wouldn’t have gone along. Then those girls sleeping there would be dead. Sometimes divine luck is required to stop evil from fulfilling its goal.”

Divine luck? Jarrod’s eyes burned and he squinted to keep the tears back. *Just another tool, again.*

“Do you know who else is on the list?” Gabriel asked.

“Just one other name. The one below Dinel was Jonial and his family.” Jarrod stopped and closed his eyes trying to remember what Fraster said. Again, he saw Kera’s throat slashed and a great flood of dark red rushed at him in a roar of pain. When he opened his eyes, he noticed Gabriel and Ishmael looking at him with concern.

Then he realized the roar was a scream he had let out. He looked at the girls, hoping he had not awakened them. They were sound asleep.

“I think that is enough for one night,” Gabriel said. “Get your mother and bring him a cup of full weeper bark.”

Ishmael left them alone.

“One more question,” Gabriel said. “Who gave you the list?”

“Captain Thramel. He formed us up and named us the Manus Poena. I don’t know what it means.”

“The hand of retribution,” Gabriel said. “Thramel hasn’t accepted that the war is over.”

Ishmael brought him the tea. Jarrod drank it down. Within moments he was fast asleep in the chair.



Gentle rocking slowly dragged Jarrod from the depth of sleep. His eyes opened; a small, blurry face filled his vision. He blinked several times and he saw the youngest Dinel daughter. Her sad expression looked out of place for one so young. Jarrod guessed she had four name days at most. The girl climbed up onto his lap and nestled into him, resting her head on his good arm. He was careful not to move his left arm, fearing that the numbness would give way to the embers of pain. Listening to the easy, smooth sounds of the girl sleeping, Jarrod drifted off.

The next time he woke it was to the sound of Gabriel clomping down the cellar stairs. “Up, up, up,” he said in a loud, deep voice, “everyone up.”

Jarrod recognized the soldier’s urgency.

“Is’t an attack?” He tried to stand, but there was a weight on his legs. The Dinel girl was still there in his lap. She yawned and stretched like a cat before sliding down to the floor.

“Would I be the one down here waking you up?” Gabriel asked. The answer was obvious to Jarrod, it would most likely be Mira or their daughter. “You get upstairs while the children get ready to travel.”

The cellar door opened into a small kitchen. The smell of kettle cakes and frits was so strong it made his stomach ache with hunger. The light coming in from the window was a warm white chasing away the gray residuals of night. Jarrod moved a little slowly, still under the effects of the tea. His arm throbbed beneath the poultice and he collapsed into a chair beside the table.

“Once these frits are done, I’ll take a look at your arm,” Mira said, sparing him a quick glance. She stirred a metal skillet atop an iron wood burner stove.

“Thank you,” Jarrod replied.

“Elly, set the plates around the table,” Mira said to a girl about the age of Hannah. She had long blonde hair like her mother, but done up in a braid.

“Yes, ma,” she said, eyeing Jarrod curiously.

“I can help,” Jarrod said, rising groggily from the chair.

“No, sir. You are a guest,” Elly said. “Besides, I don’t think you can do much with your left arm.”

The cellar door opened again as Gabriel entered. He kissed Mira on the back of her neck, grabbed a cake and spooned some frits onto it. “Make sure they get ready fast,” he said to Mira. “I’m going to relieve Ishmael.”

“Be careful out there,” Mira said, and smacked him lightly with the rag she’d used to move the iron skillet off the stove. “Next time, wash your paws before grabbing food.”

“I’ll make sure Ishmael washes before he comes in.” He stuffed the cake and frit in his mouth, chewing a little as he went out the door.

“Men are never civilized without a woman. You would eat off the ground like dogs if we didn’t make you sit at a table,” Mira said. She smiled, but it seemed strained. Under the circumstances, Jarrod sympathized. If it

weren't for me, they might be having a nice family breakfast, sitting around the table and planning for the day. Instead, they have four extra mouths to feed and to keep watch for an attack. He slouched in his chair, wanting to slip away into the dirt between the floorboards.

Mira set aside her pans and knelt beside Jarrod. She gently peeled the poultice back. It felt like a scab being lifted. The wound was red and puckered. No sign of green, or worse, red spider webbing up his arm that meant blood poisoning.

"You seem to be doing just fine," Mira said, placing the old poultice on a metal tray. She opened a jar of something that smelled bitter, stuck a stick into it and stirred it around until it thickened like butter. Elly watched over her shoulder. "I worked at the healing stations during the war. Saw hundreds of cuts, bruises, scrapes. Had to help take off a few legs and arms, too." She talked as she spread the bitter butter on his arm. It was cold at first, a cold that burned deep to the bone. Jarrod bit his lip to keep from crying out. The burning faded, leaving him more awake. "Never thought I'd have to treat another sword wound again in this life."

She wrapped his arm up in a bandage.

"All you men want is to kill each other. We women just have to patch you back up again so you can do more fighting." She packed her supplies into a satchel. "It just isn't right."

"Thank you... I'm sorry," Jarrod said, uncertain of what else to say.

The cellar door opened again. Hannah helped her younger sisters up the stairs. They mirrored each other with broken innocence on somber faces. The middle one's eyes were still red and puffy. She rubbed them as though she could squeeze the tears out without having them reach her cheeks. They wore simple dresses, a bit loose on them, and it looked as though Hannah had tried to brush her sisters' hair with a half-hearted attempt. They all reminded him of refugees from the war. Their bare, dirty feet added to the pitiful picture.

"Elly, get them the shoes," Mira said. "They may not be an exact fit, girls, but it's the best we have on short notice. Come on up to the table. Breakfast is ready."

"Thank you, ma'am," the girls said in hushed voices. Heads down, they moved to the empty chairs. The youngest sat in Hannah's lap, refusing to move.

"Lily, stop fidgeting," Hannah said in a quiet, stern voice.

Lily settled in and was still.

All three of them picked at the breakfast, eating more out of politeness than hunger. Jarrod's appetite was not as strong as it was earlier. He chewed and swallowed because chewing and swallowing gave him something to do other than think about the girls and the situation he helped cause.

Ishmael came in, wearily setting his strung bow at the door with the quiver of arrows. He nodded at those sitting at the table, and then took the plate his mother offered.

"Still quiet out there," he said to her inquisitive look.

Mira smiled at him and left the kitchen.

"Do you think..." Jarrod began, but stopped because the girls were in hearing. Jarrod stood up and walked towards the window. Ishmael followed. "Do you think Thramel will come today?"

"I don't know," Ishmael said. "He was an unpredictable one when it came to tactical maneuvers. I remember sitting all day and night on a hill as the enemy set up pickets below. I thought we would strike as soon as the prince's men dropped gear, but Thramel stayed us. As the enemy slept comfortably, we kept watch all night until day. While they went about preparing for a morning excursion, a separate company of our unit struck them from behind. In the confusion, Thramel had us attack. It's hard to say what Thramel has planned. If we knew more of those on the list, we could better prepare."

"Did he ask you to be a part of Manus Poena?"

"Never heard of it until last night."

“By the Blade's Man! Why did he want me?”

“My guess is he wanted people who'd lost family during the war. People who wouldn't mind a little retribution.”

This made sense. Arrny had lost a brother, Desmond had lost cousins and a nephew, Grist's father was killed, and Fraster... well Fraster had a bad case of blood lust. Jarrod's entire family was murdered at a night raid on his farm, while his father and himself had been out at a war camp. His father died shortly after in the battle of Twin Rivers. The only reason Jarrod was alive was the fact that he'd been training at the Fox Den.

Loud thumping came from the front porch just before the door burst open. Gabriel stumbled in, half dragging, half carrying a bloody Jonial into the house. Blood caked the right side of his head where an ear used to be and his shirt was cut open in several places along the sides and sleeves. Those too were stiff with dried blood. Ishmael went to Jonial's other side and helped his father carry the man into another room.

Soft weeping was heard at the table.

“Shhh, little Buttercup,” Hannah said, holding and stroking the middle child's hair. Lily sat on the floor, hiding her face in Hannah's dress.

Elly entered, holding three pairs of shoes. She looked to Jarrod, who was flabbergasted by what was happening. The world seemed to be bending in on itself, crushing anyone with whom he made any contact. Madness. Everything was madness. He noticed a trail of red left by Jonial across the floor. Jarrod closed his eyes, trying to shut everything out. A red curtain closed behind the eyes. He took a deep gulp of air and released it.

“Here now, let me help you,” Elly said to Hannah who was drowning in her own form of misery with two others clinging to her. Elly took the middle girl by the hand, leading her gently off her older sister. “Hey there Buttercup, that is a sweet name.”

“It's what my sister calls me. My name is Kellen.”

“See here what I have for you, Kellen, and Lily.” She held out the shoes. Kellen wiped her face and sat next to Elly on the floor. Lily refused to move, shaking her head still buried in her sister's dress.

Exasperation read on Hannah's face. She tried cajoling her out, but Lily remained stubborn, crawling under her sister's dress. Hannah just sat back in her chair, folding her arms, and blowing a string of hair that covered her face. “You cannot stay there forever, Lily-pad.”

“Yes,” came her muffled reply.

“You don't want to try on the shoes?” Elly asked.

“No.”

“May I see the shoes?” Jarrod asked.

Elly handed them to him. Jarrod sat on the floor, bent his right leg in so he could take his boot off. It was awkward using only one arm, but he managed to pull it off. He held the small shoe up—he could fit a thumb and finger in it. He held it over his big toe and said, “I don't know, Elly. They don't fit me at all.”

Lily peeked from under her sister's dress. She giggled, watching Jarrod set the shoe on his toe where it dangled.

“Do you have nine more so I can walk around in them?” He wiggled his toes. “This isn't working so well.”

Lily crawled towards Jarrod and stole the shoe from his toe.

“Not for you. It's for me,” she said and slid her bare foot into the shoe. The fit was loose, but it stayed on as Lily held her foot up and waggled it at Jarrod. “See.”

“Yes. It looks great on you.” He handed her the second shoe and she put it on.

Hannah gave him a relieved expression.

“She likes you,” Elly said.

“Only because I’m silly,” Jarrod said, struggling with his own boot. Putting it on one-handed proved more difficult than taking it off. Elly helped him.

A sharp cry came from the other room where they others had taken Jonial.

“I’m going to see if they need help,” Jarrod said. “You are all right with the rest of this?”

“Yes,” Elly replied.

A wall divided the sitting room from the kitchen space. Jonial sat in a chair, shirt off and half-dazed. Mira probed the wounds. Lots of cuts opened in mouths to tell the tale of a bloody fight. Gabriel and Ishmael stood out of Mira’s way as she examined each cut thoroughly. Jonial moaned, crying out and hissing as Mira pulled back scabbed flesh.

Mira moved away to get her satchel.

“I’m going to run out of bandages at this rate,” she grumbled, passing Jarrod.

“Thramel?” Jarrod asked. Guilt sank in his belly like a stone.

“Aye, the bastard came in the early morning,” Jonial said, bent over, looking at his feet, eyes squinted closed. A strange gurgle came from his throat. Jarrod recognized it as agony. Jonial clenched his fists and opened his mouth. The gurgle became a screech and a sharp intake of air.

“He burned them all. All! I was in the privy when I smelled the smoke and heard his men shouting, laughing like they was at a bonfire celebrating All Shadow’s Eve. I found one of ’em and bashed his head in with a rock. Others came and started cutting me up. I ran, oh gods, I ran! My children, my wife, my home all burned while I ran.” Jonial heaved a wet cry. “I should’a died with ‘em.”

Gabriel looked up at Jarrod.

“Jonial found one of our soldiers trying to rape his daughter during the war. He killed the boy and was acquitted in front of a tribunal.”

“Damn right, I killed him! I would do it again ten thousand times!” Jonial said. “The boy’s father was there with that wretched lot, holding a torch to my house. When I catch ‘em, I’m going to hold one to his balls!”

“Manus Poena,” Jarrod said.

“The hand never stops, but keeps on destroying everything until nothing is left,” Gabriel said. “We need to cut the hand off at the wrist.”

Dinel, Kera, Hannah, Kellen, Lily, Jonial and his family. Gods! He didn’t know all their names. It was more to add to an increasing list of misery. How many before it all stopped?

“He’s got dozens of men, all former soldiers,” Jarrod said. “They don’t have a base of operation either. They just move around from place to place.”

“What’s he nannering on about?” Jonial asked.

Gods strike me, I am a fool. Chattering on and on without thinking that he knows nothing of my involvement. Jonial will kill me now.

“Jarrod infiltrated Thramel’s group of thieves and murderers,” Gabriel said, covering Jarrod’s mistake. “You weren’t the only ones attacked. Dinel and Kera are dead. The girls would be too, if Jarrod hadn’t saved them.”

“Shadeslayer! Not Dinel and Kera, too!” Jonial shook his head. Pain crumpled his face, withering it into old, hard leather, cracked by the harsh sun. “Such good people. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“He’s on some sort of campaign to wipe out war criminals,” Gabriel said.

“War criminals?” Jonial asked. “My Bessy wasn’t even born until after the war was over. He should hang himself. I’ve seen what Thramel done in the war. I turned a blind eye because we needed his leadership to win. Now I see that was a mistake.”

Mira returned with a warm kettle of water and her satchel of salves. She washed the bloody wounds, placed the bitter butter on them and wrapped his head and torso. Gabriel gave Jonial an old shirt. The house had a

somber silence, one of waiting and expectation. Jarrod realized no one was watching for an attack. He started for the front, when a sweaty, out of breath boy entered the room.

“Da, Thramel is moving,” Michael said, excitement and fear on his face.

“Where?”

“Here!”



Smoke rose to the south. Jarrod observed how Mira made a concerted effort not to look back. Determination masked the sadness visible in her slumped shoulders. The family home was gone. Their little band of walking wounded and children marched west with the sun high overhead and arching down. They had two pack horses among them. Jonial rode the one and Elly the other, holding Lily in the saddle with her. Ishmael took point while Michael, Gabriel’s middle boy, scouted ahead. Jarrod walked beside Hannah and Kellen. Mira and her youngest boy, Azriel, were ahead of them. Jonial rode behind with Gabriel covering their rear.

“We have a quarter day’s lead, thanks to Michael,” Gabriel told Jarrod and Ishmael as the others readied to leave. Michael was sent to watch Jonial’s house at dusk. He was the one who had instructed the wounded Jonial to go to their home. Then Michael trailed Thramel, and overheard their plans for the next attack. “It’s not enough, I don’t think, unless we push hard to the Barracks.” He laid a hand on his eldest’s shoulder. “Ishmael, when we get to the Twin River’s ford, you will head east and get Harmen, his brothers, and their boys. Tell them Thramel’s gone rogue and we require his assistance at the Barracks.”

“Yes, Da,” Ishmael said. “Why don’t we send Michael now?”

“Because I am sending him with Azriel and the girls off to the Yellow Valley,” Gabriel said.

“That leaves three of you against a dozen,” Ishmael said. “Honestly, only you are capable of defending. I don’t like that, Da. With me we can hold longer—”

“You will do as I say, boy,” Gabriel said. “Without Harmen’s assistance we will all be as good as dead. Then who will stop Thramel from slaughtering innocent families?”

Ishmael tightened his jaw, displaying his dismay with the arraignment.

They walked in relative silence, listening for the sounds of pursuit. Thramel preferred moving on foot, and kept to that preference. Jarrod figured if Thramel had horses, they would have known by midday. Shadows lengthened and warm midday light thinned by the needled branches of Pine Groves. Jarrod heard the first sounds of water as the Twin Rivers rushed away from the crossroads ford to join the Sapphire Sea. Soon their little party would break up into smaller groups hoping for survival.

The pine trees thinned into clearings of sandy rock. The Twin Rivers intersected at this point and moved off east and west. Signs of the war were prevalent. Rusty helmets, broken spears, swords and odd pieces of armor scattered the ground. Where the swelling of the river did not carry them away, they could be seen sticking out of the shoal—the lingering bones, after the flesh of war melted away. They had to step carefully to avoid being cut or tripping over the battle refuse. The water was hardly ankle deep and they could travel across easily. In three or four moons the rains would come and swell it so the only passable points were the bridges a league apart.

It was here that Jarrod’s father had died. Any of the debris could have belonged to him—the hilt of the sword or the tattered leather grieves. At the rivers’ twining, they had successfully halted Thomas’s excursion and turned the tide of the war in their favor. Tales were told of the water turning red for half a season, as though the rivers themselves bled.

Ishmael stopped the party at the edge of the water.

“Where is Michael?” he asked. “Wasn’t he supposed to meet us here?”

“Maybe he crossed over?” Jarrod asked.

The strain on Gabriel’s face as he stared across the ford told that he believed a different story. The crossing was less than twenty yards and the pine forest picked back up on the other side. Dark shadows permeated through the trees.

“What do we do now?” Ishmael asked.

“You go east,” Gabriel said. “We will wait for Michael.”

“Da, they’ll be on you soon.”

“Do as you are told. We won’t wait long,” Gabriel said. “Your mother knows the way. She could lead them and Michael will catch up later.”

“Da—”

“Go on, boy,” Gabriel said, embracing his son. “Don’t turn back without their help.”

“I won’t,” Ishmael said, “Even if I have to drag them kicking and screaming.”

“You’re a good son.” Gabriel patted him on the cheek.

Ishmael hugged his siblings and mother.

“Godspeed,” Mira said, kissing him on the forehead.

“Take the horse,” Jonial said. “I can walk the rest of the way.”

Ishmael tried to protest, but Jonial had already climbed off. He handed Ishmael the reins. “Make sure to tell Harmen he owes me nothing for the field work this past spring if he takes the bastard’s head off.”

Jarrod watched Ishmael ride down the river, climbing out once the bank rose. He was out of sight in a matter of moments.

“Where do you think Michael went?”

Gabriel shrugged and moved away. “Mira. I need you to take Azriel and the girls to the place we had set our hearts on when we were younger. When I find him, Michael will follow.”

“I will not,” Mira said. “Send Jarrod. I refuse to leave you alone with none but the walking wounded.”

“Stubborn woman,” Gabriel griped. “There’s no time to explain. Jarrod has no idea where to go and neither Elly nor Azriel know the area.”

Jarrod moved away from the argument. Once more he felt helpless, like a rake when a hoe was needed. He saw movement up at the pines beyond the crossing. A single person walked down the path. It was Michael.

“There he is,” Jarrod pointed.

Gabriel and Mira quit bickering and looked up hopefully at their boy. Jonial stood up and started towards the river ford. Elly waved her left arm over her head excitedly while holding onto Lily. The figure waved back with his right hand.

“That’s not him,” Gabriel said. He quickly strung his bow. “Mira. Take the girls and Azriel, now! Go!”

“How do you know?” Jarrod asked.

“Michael waves with his left. He is left-handed.”

Behind the waving figure, six other men came rushing out.

“Ride to Ishmael, Elly,” Mira said, grabbing a bow and quiver from the saddle. “Hannah, take Kellen and Azriel. Find somewhere to hide in the woods.”

The first arrow struck the ground near the horse. The horse reared back, whinnying and Elly gripped the saddle tightly. Another arrow flew over their heads. Just as she settled the horse, a last arrow struck him in the haunch. Elly grabbed hold of Lily, as their horse bolted in the opposite direction. Jarrod heard the girls scream as they were swept away in a panic. Gabriel cursed and let loose an arrow. It came up short of his target. The men sprinted across the ground, closing the range. Two broke off to give chase to the horse.

Hannah took Kellen's and Azriel's hands and hurried back into the pines. Azriel pulled away just as she reached the tree line, running back to his mother. He clung to her leg as she worked to string a small bow.

"Azriel, come here!" Hannah cried.

He shook his head and held tighter onto his mother's leg.

"Run, child," Mira said, trying to pry him loose.

A second arrow thrummed over Mira's head. She ducked, knocking Azriel to the ground. Jarrod picked him up in his right arm and the boy started to wail.

"Hide with Hannah," Jarrod said, setting him down. "You'll be safe."

Azriel stood for a moment, looked at his mother, who nodded at him, and back to Jarrod. Then he ran to Hannah. They slipped away into the woods.

Jonial stood at the water's edge, spear in hand. "Come on! Try and finish what you started!"

Gabriel stood at his side, sighting one of the runners. His arrow took the man in the chest, knocking him off his feet. Mira shot at the flank and missed.

"Jarrod," Gabriel said, loosening another arrow. "Go after Elly. Make sure they don't get her."

Jarrod started running. He heard a scream and turned to see Mira hunched over, gripping a shaft that jutted from her side. A second one struck her chest with a thump. Mira crumpled to the ground. Gabriel struck one assailant in the head with his shot. Two of the men crossed the ford, followed by the third who had a shaft sticking out of his shoulder.

Jonial met them, spearing the lead man through the gut. The man gave a grunt and slackened. Jonial kicked the body off the spear and looked up. The one impersonating Michael sliced at him with a long sword. Jonial lifted his spear and the blade shattered the wood. Then the man swung his blade around, slicing Jonial's head off his shoulders. Jarrod watched it spin and fall into the water leaving a spray of blood in its wake. Gabriel dropped his bow and met Jonial's killer in the water. Their swords collided with a loud, metallic clang. The wounded man joined the other in attacking Gabriel.

Unable to watch the results of the combat, Jarrod turned and ran. He could not help his friends at the ford anymore. *Blade's Man, bless me with your luck once more to aid Elly and Lily.*

They were specks in the distance. With the sun sinking towards the horizon, Jarrod saw shadows trailing the inclined embankment. The horse with Elly and Lily left the river and rode up the western bank, slowing as it climbed uphill along a thicket of pines. The soldiers appeared to be gaining ground. Jarrod ran as fast as he could, knowing that he might be too late. They had a long lead on him.

An idea occurred to him. He stopped running, took in a deep breath, cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted. It echoed up the river bank.

"Hola you... you cowardly bastards! Stop chasing children and come for me!"

The soldiers both glanced back. There was a moment of hesitation.

"That's right, I killed Kris and... and Gris. I helped the Dinel children escape, too."

It's working.

"Gods-blasted-slink," one shouted back. Jarrod recognized the voice immediately. It was Fraster. "Jerky, I'm coming to kill you myself."

"Oh Gods, not again," Jarrod said, as Fraster started down the bank followed by the second soldier, a man he did not know. Shuffling backwards, Jarrod drew his sword. *I am going to die.* He saw Elly and Lily dismount the horse and sneak off into the pines.

"Don't run off like the dog you are," Fraster said. "I don't want to stab you in the back like you did to Kris."

"Two against one is not even odds," Jarrod yelled. He took a couple steps back, preparing to run away, allowing the girls more time to hide in the woods. "I guess you don't mind, since you like picking on little girls and killing defenseless people."

The distance between them was close to two hundred yards, and closing. Jarrod glanced over his shoulder, taking another step back. The Twin Rivers were too wide to cross here, not without being swept up in the current and bashed against rocks. He would have to retrace his steps. Looking back, he gave a surprised cry at how quickly Fraster ran. They were nearly a hundred yards away. Heart beating rapidly, he spun around and started to run. He took a few steps and stopped. Run? Where? Thramel and his men? Jonial was dead, Mira was down and Gabriel was probably dead as well.

There's nowhere left to go. The weight of impending doom grew heavy on his shoulders. No one left to help me. I am alone and must help myself.

Jarrodd turned, and drew his sword.

"I guess you don't want to die with a sword in your back after all," Fraster said. The other soldier approached Jarrod, grinning eagerly, but Fraster grabbed him by the collar and yanked him back.

"I'm going to finish what I should have last night." Fraster unsheathed a long sword strapped to his back and planted it point down into the river sand. "Shadeslayer! I am going to even the odds and make it fair." He lifted the chainmail over his head, and handed it to the soldier. Then he laughed. "I guess I would have to tie my arm behind my back to really make it fair. I'm surprised you even know how to hold a sword, and not just scratch at dirt with it."

"I guess I surprised Gris as well," Jarrod said, brandishing his sword in one hand.

"You are not deceiving anyone, but yourself. Gabriel killed Gris. Otherwise, you wouldn't be a thorn in my foot today." Fraster took up his long sword. "Too bad we had to kill his son. They were such a nice family."

Michael! Another name for the list. It has to stop here. Jarrod lunged at Fraster. Fraster turned him aside with a flick of his wrist.

"I don't understand," Jarrod said. "Why do you have to kill children?"

"Aren't we all somebody's child?" Fraster laughed and sliced at Jarrod's sword arm. Jarrod deflected the blade, and stumbled to the side. "Killing the parent does no good if the child lives. Retribution. Revenge. It's a vicious circle that we prevent by killing the entire family. These people you want to protect all committed treasonous acts that harmed us in the war."

Two quick slashes and Jarrod stopped one. His left thigh burned. The first trickles of blood dripped down his leg.

"I thought you, of all our people, understood, Jarrod," Fraster said, circling around to his left side. "Did your father die in vain, like his son? We will not let these crimes go unpunished." Fraster swiped at Jarrod, who flailed at it, barely knocking the blade away. "I am disappointed in you. That you allow more of our people to die because you sympathize with these traitors."

"You are wrong, Fraster," Jarrod said, limping as his leg burned under his weight. "You can justify murder all you want. Taking a life, the life of an innocent, is worse than murder. It's a massacre. The gods damn you for it!"

"Thank you for that clarification," Fraster said. "I will be certain to write it on your statue."

The long sword cut down at his left shoulder. Jarrod parried, swung around to deflect a second blow and brought the sword up to push off a third attack aimed at his head. Overwhelmed, Jarrod stepped back on his injured leg and it bent under the pain. Fraster cut down again, knocking Jarrod off balance. It was like he was reliving his experience from the prior night. Fraster raised his sword—no long speech, no words of regret. Just death coming from above. Jarrod found a fist sized rock and threw it at Fraster. It struck him square in the forehead, gashing the skin and releasing a trickle of blood. Fraster's swing went wide cutting through Jarrod's baggy shirt, leaving him an opening. *For all the people you hurt!* Jarrod jabbed low with his sword, cutting through boot and tendon. Fraster let out a cry of anger and pain. He dropped to one knee, grabbing at his severed ankle.

Jarrold kicked back out of sword reach and had just gotten to his feet when a large body collided with him, sending him skidding across the rocky shoal.

“Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!” Fraster yelled.

Jarrold got to his hands and knees. Viewing from between his legs, he watched the soldier come at him with his sword drawn. Jarrold’s own weapon was nowhere around. Just as the man got within striking range, an arrow sprouted out of his chest. He stopped, and looked at it, dumbfounded. Another arrow took him in the throat.

Gabriel, bow raised, arrow notched, limped along the water’s edge.

“That’s two I owe you,” Jarrold said. He got up and went to help Gabriel. Gabriel pushed past him, his arrow trained on Fraster, who held up both hands.

“I yield!” He tried to crawl away. Gabriel released and the arrow pierced Fraster’s hand. As he dropped it, Gabriel loosened another, shattering his forearm. Fraster screamed.

“Where is Thramel’s striking point?” Gabriel’s last arrow aimed at Fraster’s face.

“Nowhere. He moves about!”

“Where is it?”

“I will tell you if you let me live,” Fraster said.

“Done. Tell me where it is.”

“Watch Tower Hill.”

Gabriel lowered the bow, and released the last arrow into Fraster’s groin. Fraster grunted and doubled over.

“That’s for Michael,” Gabriel said. “The Mother grant you never have children.”

They left Fraster screaming on the river bank and moved up the slope. Jarrold stopped Gabriel. “Is there anyone else? Mira? Is Mira...?”

Gabriel just shook his head.



At the Fox Den they had laughed and called him Jerky. Unlike the other boys who had learned to use swords and spears swiftly, Jarrold found himself hesitating. His swings were unsure as he thought through every little movement. Fraster was the one who gave him the name, saying he looked like a corpse spasming in its death throes.

“And you will be a corpse if you keep jerking that sword around,” Fraster would say, and then send Jarrold back to the vegetable garden. Jarrold saw battle once. After his father was killed, he volunteered to join the cleanup forces to push the Prince’s army out of Heartwood Pines. He killed for the first time there, not thinking about his movements, just seeking revenge for his father’s death. He found a soldier hiding in a thicket. Without thinking, Jarrold hacked the man up as he screamed until only blood bubbled from his mouth. The brutal act did not bring him solace, his father was still dead—it only brought him misery at the idea the he could do that to a person

Jarrold thought about that as he and Gabriel searched for Elly and Lily.

When he asked about Hannah, Kellen and Azriel, he just tossed him a shoe, covered in dirt with pine needles stuck to the bottom. Jarrold did not know who it belonged to, but from Gabriel’s reaction to Fraster, the children were alive.

Thramel had them.



Heavy orange light darkened the pines before they discovered the girls' hiding place. A small white shoe lay on its side, caught in spider webs and wispy thickets, just outside a dark, damp hole leading beneath a great pine over a hundred hands tall. The girls refused to come out. Jarrod finally convinced them, saying, "The shoe I found out here doesn't fit me. Do you have nine more, Elly?"

The girls climbed out, dirt covered and scraped up knees. Elly wrapped her arms around Gabriel, and cried into his neck. Lily clung onto Jarrod, burying her face into his shirt. She whimpered a couple times, her little fists balled up around his arm. He had to carry her out of the woods because she would not let go. They found the horse cropping flower tops. Elly and Lily were still able to ride her, making the next part of their journey less painful.

Stars occupied the sky, twinkling around a horn-shaped moon as they made their way to the Barracks. Their wounds forced them to move slowly. Jarrod had the cut on his thigh and Gabriel was covered in bloody, ragged bandages. They arrived to find several campfires burning. Dozens of shadows flickered in the lights. Ishmael ran out to meet them. "Where is everyone?" Ishmael asked.

"Take your sister," Gabriel said, lifting Elly off the horse.

"Da, where is Ma, Michael, and Azriel?" Ishmael asked again, holding Elly who was nearly too large to be carried. She was in a stupor and refused to move on her own. "What happened?"

"We were ambushed," Jarrod said, taking Lily from the saddle and holding her against his shoulder. "Thramel took Hannah, Kellen, and... and Azriel."

The worry on Ishmael's face turned into grief.

"So Ma and Michael?" his lip trembled like a little boy's.

"We will mourn them after we get the children back," Gabriel said, mounting the horse.

"Where are you going?" Ishmael asked.

"I'll be back before first light." Then he was gone. Lost in the darkness with only the sound of dissipating hooves to mark his existence.

Harmen and about thirty of his relatives and neighbors joined the resistance against Thramel. Many were war veterans, bearing their swords, spears and makeshift armor. They sat around the fires, solemn after the ill-tidings that night. A few voiced that they should strike the Watch Tower Hill, tonight, before Thramel knew what was coming.

"Not until my father returns," Ishmael said.

"How do we know he is returning and not seeking his death?" Leven asked. He was a short man, balding and missing a tooth in a row of crooked ones. "We don't know if Thramel is really at Watch Tower, or out raiding another home."

"He took my brother for a reason," Ishmael said.

"It's to lure your father out," Harmen said. He reminded Jarrod of a bear. Large, tall, and had brown hair that covered his head and chin. He also smelled of wet fur and horses. "I know Gabriel is not a fool to go get himself killed for reasons of revenge, but rescuing his child, he would risk much. I would do the same for any of my children. Throwing his life away heedlessly does not help his boy."

"Grief does a strange thing to a man," Leven said. "Clouds his thoughts."

"We wait until his return," Ishmael said, ending the conversation.

"From what I learned these past two nights," Jarrod said, "that man will turn up. I don't think anything can kill him."

He left the men silent in wonderment at his words.

Jarrod found an empty room with a row of straw beds in the Barracks. The straw didn't smell too moldy, and there were a few old sheets he shook out. Lily clung to Jarrod until he sat down with her on the bed.

“I need to help find your sisters,” he said. “So, I need you to be strong and brave, to stay here where you are safe. Elly will help you.”

Lily kissed him on the cheek and said, “Bring back ‘annah. Bring back Buttercup.”

“We will, Sweetie,” Jarrod said. He lingered a moment longer, watching Lily curl up next to Elly.

Elly gazed up at him with eyes glassy with tears.

“Azriel, too,” she said in a hushed voice. “Keep... keep my Da safe.”

Jarrod nodded and left them in the room alone.

Gabriel returned in the gray haze of dawn. Jarrod was on watch with one of Harmen’s sons, Carmen, when the horse clomped slowly up the hill to the Barracks with Gabriel swaying on its back.

Thank you, Father, for watching over him, Jarrod prayed.

He smiled and hailed Gabriel.

Gabriel did not return the friendly gesture. Behind him were tied two neatly wrapped bodies. He rode silently through the pickets into the Barracks. Inside, he dismounted, and removed each body with care, refusing assistance.

“Wake everyone up,” he said.

“Gabriel,” Jarrod said. “You need to rest. You haven’t slept and the fighting—”

“They have my son,” Gabriel said, turning sharply on Jarrod. “I will not allow them to hurt him anymore.”

Jarrod shrank back, feeling the guilt rise once more. Mira and Michael added to an ever-growing list of dead. More weight for him to shoulder. He promised Elly he would watch out for her father. He did as he was instructed, going to each room and waking those who slept. Elly and Lily looked at him, expectantly.

“Soon we will get them,” he said. Their disappointment was like salt in his wound.

In the courtyard of the Barracks, Gabriel was giving instructions.

“Two of us will need to scout the Watch Tower. Make certain they are where Fraster said they would be. One reports back while the other follows their movement. Our main force will split. I will lead four of us into the Watch Tower to rescue the children. Harmen will lead the rest on a front assault to distract Thramel.”

“I will go inside with you,” Ishmael said. Gabriel shook his head.

“You will take Elly and Lily down to the Yellow Valley as planned.”

“I am more than an errand boy, Father,” Ishmael said, “Let me fight!”

Gabriel continued, ignoring his son.

“Who are my scouts?”

“If I had been at the ford when you were attacked, instead of playing messenger boy,” Ishmael said, interrupting. “The children may not be lost and Ma may still be alive.”

Harmen turned and grabbed Ishmael by the ear.

“Now you listen up, boy. I will not stand here listening to you disrespect your father—”

“It’s alright,” Gabriel said. Pain crumpled his face. “Let him go.”

Ishmael stalked off into the Barracks.

“Who are my scouts?”

“Me,” Jarrod said. When the fighting began, he knew he would not be of much use.

Gabriel studied him for a moment. Jarrod saw him gauge his trust.

“Fine, you take Nell. Stay outside the perimeter. Observe their movements and report back. Both of you come back if Thramel is not there. At midday we approach the tower. Nell will remain to observe movement.” Gabriel clenched his fists. “Do not draw attention. I want the children back unharmed.”



Watch Tower Hill was the tallest point in Heart Wood. Prince Thomas' invasion of the west was observed from that tower. The diligence of the handful of soldiers alerted Thramel of the invasion, allowing for a hasty defense that prevented Thomas from conquering Heartwood in one day. Although Thomas had burned it after three days of tough battle, the stone foundation remained and it had been re-built at the request of the High Scribe.

Thramel must have influenced that decision, Jarrod marveled at the forethought of the man, plotting revenge before the last bodies cooled from the war.

Half a league from the tower they dismounted and proceeded on foot. The pines thinned south of Watch Tower Hill, giving way to more weepers and creepers. Nell, a short, pudgy fellow with long shaggy hair moved deftly through the terrain. Jarrod tried desperately not to make a sound, but every twig he stepped on seemed loud enough to echo off Watch Tower. Nell stopped often and hissed, grumbling about Jarrod being like bears and pottery shops. Jarrod would apologize quietly. That seemed to set the man off worse.

Weepers and creepers dissipated, becoming tall grass that they crept through, crouched so low that Jarrod's lower back ached. His left arm joined his lower back with burning and itching complaints of its own. Nell held up his hand, motioning for a halt. They had reached the edge of the road. Nell remained still for a long time, head cocked and ear turned to the east.

"What is it?" Jarrod asked, quietly.

Nell glared at him.

After a moment, Jarrod heard the crunch of boots on the dirt road. Nell held up all five fingers, and then added a closed fist with his thumb pointing down. Five soldiers. One scout. How the man knew without being able to see baffled Jarrod. Nell lowered slowly to the ground, until his belly was flat. Jarrod copied him. As soon as he settled down, he heard the footsteps of one person moving along at a deliberate pace. The footfalls stopped right in front of them.

Jarrod still couldn't see anyone.

Please let that mean he cannot see us.

The sound of grass rustling told him the man left the road. Then that ceased. It was silent, except for the crunch of approaching boots further away. Jarrod squeezed his eyes shut and willed his heart to beat slower, it sounded loud enough to alert the scout. He imagined his body sinking into the ground so only dirt and grass covered the mound where he lay. Certain that they had been discovered, Jarrod resisted reaching for his sword a moment longer, letting heart beats pass in long stretches. Grass rustled again, the footfalls moving back onto the road. They retreated, sound dissipating up Watch Tower Hill.

Nell climbed onto his hands and knees, peeking over the tall grass. Jarrod crawled towards him, and Nell motioned for him to move to the left. They sat down in the grass. Nell cupped his hand and held it to Jarrod's ear.

"Good news. Someone is home," Nell said, mouth pressed to his cupped hands. "Bad news is there's no way in, except for the front door. Report to Gabriel. Tell him that he needs to reconsider his secondary plan on infiltrating Watch Tower."

Jarrod pressed his own cupped hands to Nell's ear.

"What about the other side?"

Nell shook his head.

Hannah, Kellen, and Azriel were in there. Jarrod considered the spiraling stone structure. It had to be thirty or forty spans up, with at least four floors.

"What can we do?"

Nell moved Jarrod's hand away and repeated the precaution.

“On the other side of the road everything is cleared. No place to hide an attack. They will pick us apart with bows if we try mounting an assault up the hill. During the war, it took an entire army three days to dig the defenders out. We are only a handful in comparison. There won’t be anyone left to rescue the children. It’s the perfect honey pot to kill a charging bear.”

No one can get in. The idea made his heart sink. Gabriel won’t stop until they kill him or he gets his son back. Keep my Da safe, Elly had pleaded last night. There was no way he could stop him. None he could think of, except to-

“No way would he listen to me,” Jarrod said into cupped hands against Nell’s ear. “You need to tell him. Convince him that he needs a new plan. I will watch the army. If they move, I will follow and report back to the Barracks once I know their new destination.”

Nell squinted one eye and his mouth puckered in distaste of the idea.

“I know, it’s not a part of the plan. The plan has changed, don’t you agree?”

Nell thought for a moment. He nodded. Jabbing a finger in Jarrod’s chest, he then pointed to the very spot he sat. The message was clear. Stay put. Jarrod nodded, watching Nell slip away as silent as a breeze.

Jarrod plucked at a loose piece of grass and looked at the sky. Gabriel said the assault would begin at midday. He wrapped the blade of grass around his finger. The sun was a quarter of the way to its zenith. He doubted Nell or anyone could convince Gabriel to abandon the attack. In the blackened stone rising from the hilltop, the children awaited their fate. They had to be in there to lure Gabriel here. Some of the blame was on Jarrod. He could have done something to prevent it, if he hadn’t been blinded by hate and sorrow.

I can do something now, he dropped the grass and stood up, dusting the dirt from his trousers.

“Manus Poena,” he said, and began walking up the hill. No challenge was given, no arrow struck him down. He reached the front gate before being stopped.

“Look at who we got here,” Yarl said, prodding Jarrod with the shaft of his spear. “Jerky’s come home to roost.”

Most of Yarl’s teeth were missing or broken: a result of taking a mace to the chin. Scars puckered up and down his jaw line, leaving trails where a beard refused to grow. When he smiled at Jarrod, the cruelty and disgust were emphasized by the scars the way big teeth made a dog’s snarl more frightening. Jarrod refused to back down. He shoved the spear shaft out of the way.

“I’m not some trapped hare you got to poke to see if it still lives,” Jarrod said. “I have a report for Thramel.”

“Oh, do you now?” Yarl asked. “You mean to tell him why you turned traitor on us? To beg for a swift ax to the neck? Why don’t you confess to me and I’ll go get Stump with his ax.”

“You were never a smart one, were you Yarl?” Jarrod said. “I have a report on Gabriel.”

“Hey, you watch your tongue before I make it wag on both ends, dirty worm,” Yarl said, bringing his spear point up for emphasis. “You ain’t getting in without a good reason. If I was you, I would run afore he gets whiff of your smell. You’re not on his good list, exactly.”

“I made a mistake,” Jarrod said. “I’m here to correct it. Whatever punishment he wants to deal out to me, I’ll take it.”

Yarl hesitated, considered Jarrod and lowered the spear. He retreated back inside the tower’s entryway and shouted, “Marly, I got something important down here. I need your orders.”

Heavy footfalls approached with the clinking of metal.

“What do you want?” A heavy-set man in an oversized mail shirt asked, lumbering behind Yarl. He stopped upon seeing Jarrod, his mouth dropping open in a stupor. Marly recovered from his surprise and smacked the back of Yarl’s head. “Is your head full of dough? Take him in.”

“Shouldn’t we remove his weapons?”

Marly rolled his eyes, hands clenched to strike again. Yarl cringed. Marly used his thick arm to push Yarl out of the way.

“Hand over your sword belt,” Marly said.

Jarrod unbuckled it and gave it to Marly, who tossed it at Yarl. Yarl dropped his spear, catching the sword, but not before the scabbard thumped him on the forehead. He glared at Marly. Marly proceeded to pat Jarrod down. Jarrod cringed as Marly squeezed his injured thigh.

“Hold your hands out,” Marly said. He tied a thick twine around Jarrod’s wrists. The fibers scratched against his skin. “Now follow Yarl. Careful he don’t trip you with his stupidity. Gods’ own luck he hasn’t run himself through on that spear he carries.”

They climbed a spiraling staircase, Yarl in the lead and Marly taking up the rear. On the second floor, Yarl walked into a small room with a square table and three chairs. The walls were bare except for steel plates with hinges that opened up murder holes, places for archers to launch arrows, drop stones, or other projectiles in relative safety. A half-eaten meal of bread and pine nut paste sat in a wooden bowl on the table. Jarrod’s stomach rumbled at the sight of it. To make matters worse, Marly sat Jarrod down on the opposite side of the bowl.

“You two get comfortable, while I report to the General,” Marly said, lumbering up the spiral staircase.

“General?” Jarrod asked.

“Thramel got promoted,” Yarl said.

“From who? He was the highest-ranking officer left alive,” Jarrod said. “Did he self-promote his title?”

Yarl sneered. “Why are you really here?”

“I told you already.”

“Yeah, but you know what I think.” Yarl’s sneer became a twisted smile, more horrific than the sneer. “I think you are here for the sweet, pretty flesh we took away. I can see why. Thramel promised us a turn with her, or the younger girl... even the boy.”

Jarrod gave him a disgusted look, hoping it hid the relief he felt. At least I know they are here.

“Desires of the flesh,” Yarl said and laughed. “You’re no different. Why else would you throw away what you had with us, if not for the girl? I don’t blame you. Ripe flesh ready for plucking.” He leaned in close so Jarrod could smell the rot off his teeth.

“How did she feel? All smooth and tight, I say.”

Jarrod turned his face away.

Yarl’s mouth formed into an O and his eyes widened in a comical expression of surprise. “Oooo, oh ho ho, you didn’t. Did you? They say I’m stupid. You, my friend, have showed me up with your sympathizer’s soft heart. Soft heart, soft head.”

Marly reappeared, wheezing as he climbed off the last step. “Officer on Deck,” he said, and then stood at attention.

Yarl jumped up from his chair, snapping off a salute.

Thramel entered the room. Black armor bearing the arms of a hand crushing a serpent on his broad chest made him larger than last Jarrod remembered. A red cape hung off his right shoulder, and a gold emblazoned sword pommel stuck out on his left hip. Thramel had a long, sharp nose and solid blue eyes the color of a sky after a storm. Black gauntlets covered both hands and glistening black boots covered his feet as he stood, filling the room with his greatness.

Jarrod rose. “I would salute, but...” he held up his tied hands.

Yarl hissed. “Show some respect.”

“It’s fine, Worm. I wouldn’t expect anything less from this one,” Thramel said. His voice was the deep, rumble of thunder. He moved closer to Jarrod. “Sympathizer, Traitor, why have you returned back to the Manus? Speak wisely your last words, or so they may be as I deem.”

“I... I have come to make amends for a mistake I made,” Jarrod said. He couldn’t keep the tremble out of his voice. He felt the awe of this man to his very core.

Thramel studied him. Jarrod felt sweat drip down the back of his neck. The man’s gaze could melt iron.

“Continue,” Thramel said.

“I should have... have never strayed from your designs,” Jarrod said. “I was wrong in helping the brats escape. I am to blame for our brothers-in-arms losing their lives. It’s my fault your plans have been disrupted. As part of my penance, I have information for you.”

Jarrod paused, trying to gauge Thramel’s expression. He could glean more emotion from a stone.

“What information?”

“Gabriel intends an attack in the early hours of the morning. He believes his son is here and he has the assistance of Harmen to aid in retrieving the boy.”

“I have deduced as much. Your information is worthless to me, as are you,” Thramel said and began to turn away.

“I will make whatever amends you require to return to the Manus,” Jarrod said. Desperation flooded him. He had to keep delaying the inevitability of his death. That was the only way to keep the children alive.

Thramel turned. “You truly desire to return to the Manus?”

“Yes.”

“As verification of this, I declare you complete the mission you failed,” Thramel said. He signaled to Marly. Marly stood up and disappeared down the stairs. “Upon completion, your reinstatement will be provisional. You will be assigned a Master soldier, whom you will serve for six full moon tides. After that, your actions during this tenure will be reevaluated based on your performance of service. If performed at a satisfactory level, you will be a full member of the Manus and rewarded according to your rank. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Jarrod said. Resentment rose and he bit it back.

Marly returned, hauling someone behind him. As he stepped aside, Hannah stood there, angrily fighting her bonds. Upon seeing Jarrod, she stopped, and looked questioningly at him.

“You failed once to kill this girl,” Thramel said, he pulled his dagger and cut Jarrod’s bonds. Taking Jarrod’s sword from the scabbard Yarl held, he gave it to Jarrod, hilt first. If Jarrod had been quick and strong like other men, he would have jammed the sword point straight through Thramel’s armor. “Finish the task you were assigned.”

Jarrod took the sword hilt. He looked at Hannah who realized that Thramel assigned her an executioner. She began to whimper, “No,” over and over and “Please” in a child’s voice.

“Strike the heart,” Thramel said over his shoulder, speaking directly in his ear. “Death is easiest there.”

The sword felt like an immovable weight in his hands. The tip pointed at the floor as he watched the tears course down Hannah’s cheeks. Marly had a difficult time holding her in place, until he gripped the girl around her

midsection and held her head clamped to his chest, leaving a perfect opening where Jarrod could slide the sword into her heart, ending her struggles and misery. If Gabriel failed in the attack, she was dead anyways. From what Yarl told him, her death would not be easy, her body and spirit tortured. Jarrod held the power to end it quickly, almost painlessly. At least she would not be raped by dozens of men.

“Finish what you started,” Thramel urged. “She will die, eventually. Release her from the pains of worry, despair, and torment.”

Why not sacrifice her? Maybe I could save Kellen and Azriel.

What about my promise to Lily?

“Do it!” Thramel said, sharply. “Or die with her!”

Jarrood lifted the sword. It was a great, heavy, and encumbering weight. An immovable object. The point touched Hannah's right breast, slicing the fabric where it made contact. She closed her eyes, head shaking, still mouthing no. Jarrood's arm tensed, a simple thrust and it would be over. She would be released.

A horn bleated from the top of the Tower.

Gabriel! His arm relaxed.

Thramel glared at Jarrood.

"Make certain he kills her," Thramel said to Yarl, "If he doesn't, kill them both."

Marly gave Hannah over to Yarl, who grinned, squeezing her young body and grinding his hips into her backside. "Consider it done," he said.

Thramel and Marly hurried down the spiraling stairs. More men followed, metal clanking, curses shouting. Overhead, men began shouting orders. The horn bleated twice more and then stopped. Jarrood wanted desperately to open a murder hole to watch the events unfolding. Hannah whimpered and squirmed.

"Hurry up and stick your sword into this sweet piece of flesh," Yarl said. "There are men out there needing killing."

Jarrood lifted the sword from her chest, looking directly into Hannah's fright filled eyes. She shook her head and moaned "No." Jarrood lined the blade with her chest. Yarl watched eagerly, smiling with hungry delight.

"Forgive me," he said and thrust the sword forward. Hannah screamed. Blood ran down his blade. Yarl gurgled, bloody frothing from his mouth as he stared stupidly at Jared.

Jarrood grabbed Hannah as Yarl's body slumped backwards, sword embedded in his throat. She hugged him, crying against his chest. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"Where are your sister and Azriel?"

"Below, in some dark room."

Jarrood took Hannah's hand and led her down the stairs, moving quickly, but alert for soldiers. Before they reached the bottom, Marly came back through the door. He looked at Jarrood and opened his mouth to speak. Then he saw Hannah behind him.

"Should have killed you the moment I laid eyes on you," he said.

"Back up the stairs," Jarrood told Hannah.

Marly lunged at Jarrood, using his bulk to drive his sword. Jarrood blocked him. He retreated up the steps, fending off each powerful blow. The ring of metal echoed off the stone. Finally, Jarrood pinned Marly's sword against the wall and used his right leg to kick the large man, who tumbled down five steps. Jarrood's injured thigh caused him to slip on the stair, striking his tail bone and clicking his teeth together. He stood up just as Marly regained his feet. Jarrood hurried up the stairs, a fire spreading across his leg and hip. They passed men shooting out of murder holes on the third floor. None paid them any attention, engaged in the task at hand.

"In here," Hannah said on the fourth floor. She had entered a small room with a door that opened inward. After Jarrood entered, she shut it.

"There's no way to lock it!" Jarrood searched the room and noticed a desk at the back window. It was made of dense heartwood. He dragged one corner free, digging his heels in as it scraped on the stone. Hannah shoved the other end to help position it faster. Jarrood's back, thigh and tailbone ached and his eyes stung with the salt of his sweat dripping from his forehead by the time it was in place. He saw a fresh bloody bloom on the bandage around his forearm.

Marly bounced off the door, causing the desk to shift. Jarrood braced it with his body, gritting his teeth with each jolt. One of the drawers had opened in the move, and it crashed to the floor next to him. Two parchments bearing broken wax seals slipped to the floor. One seal had part of a snake crushed in a hand—Thramel's arms. The other seal looked to be a halfmoon, or a sun, not one Jarrood recognized. He snatched both parchments up and slipped them into his boot.

The desk jumped again and the door gave a tell-tale groan. It wouldn't hold up much longer.

"Hannah," Jarrod said, "pick up that drawer. I have to move because the door will splinter in half. Step over there, clear of the desk and door. Throw it with all your strength at the first person you see coming in through the door."

Jarrod gritted his teeth against another jolt.

Hannah had the drawer in her hands, standing in the center of the room. She raised it over her head.

"Ready?" She nodded.

Jarrod rolled away from the desk, gathering his feet just as the Malty hit the door again. The frame splintered, driving the door inward, desk and all, until it thudded against the side wall. Red faced and sweaty, Malty righted himself, weapon in hand. The drawer struck him a glancing blow on the right side of his face. Malty had no time to react before Jarrod thrust his blade into the fat man's body, through the joint in the armor under his arm.

"We did it," Hannah said, near tears with fright. Then her eyes widened and she groaned, grasping at an arrow shaft in her side. She collapsed, whimpering.

No! The word screamed inside Jarrod's head. He jumped over Marly's body. At the top of the stairs, a second man was drawing his bow for another shot just as Jarrod, jammed his blade up to the hilt into the man's chest. He yanked the dead body out of the stairwell, hoping not to be noticed. He looked down the stairs for more of Thramel's soldiers to kill. No one else came.

Jarrod stepped over Marly again. Blood spread across the dirty white dress Hannah wore. She sat, holding the arrow shaft and cried. Jarrod knelt beside her.

"Let me see," he said, taking her hands gently off the shaft. It had missed her heart and from the length of the shaft it didn't look deep. She would still bleed out unless he took care of the wound. He needed a knife or something to cut around the arrow "Press here. I know it hurts, but we need to taper the blood flow."

Hannah whimpered, pressing her hands around the wound.

Jarrod found a dagger in Marly's boot. He used it to cut a ragged circle around the arrow shaft.

The tip of the arrow broke the skin on her side.

Another finger length up and it would have hit a lung. Jarrod cut the bottom off her dress up to the knee and sliced it into four strips, creating makeshift bandages.

"This is going to hurt," Jarrod said. He handed a piece of wood he found on the floor. "Bite down on this. Put all the pain here."

As he pushed the arrow into her, Hannah gave a shriek, her jaw clamping down on the wood. Her eyes rolled up. Jarrod got the head of the arrow out enough and cut it off the shaft with the dagger. Carefully he pulled the shaft out from her body. Hannah slumped against his shoulder. Her breathing was shallow. Jarrod lifted the remains of her dress to bunch under her arms. He wrapped her with the strips of bandages, layering and tying them off as tightly as he dared to without cracking her ribs. Then he resettled her dress over her thighs. Blood seeped through the first few layers and continued to expand from a tiny spot to almost the size of his fist.

I need to close these wounds or she'll bleed to death. A large metal sconce stood by a window, but the tapers were unlit.

Jarrod moved to the window, to watch the progress of the battle below. Bodies scattered the ground below, many pierced with multiple arrows. Still objects projected from the murder holes a floor beneath him, striking Harmen's kin and neighbors. Dozens of skirmishes were spread out closer to the tower's base. Gabriel fought below, killing his man just before an arrow struck him in the shoulder. Harmen battled Thramel closer to the Keep's door.

They need my help. Those archers below are picking them apart. Once more he came to a difficult decision. He may not be much of a warrior, but he was all they had. *Blade's Man bless us that I am good enough.*

He checked on Hannah before he left. She was unconscious, but yet breathed. The red blossom grew slower on her bandages. Taking the bow from the dead body in the stairwell, he tested its draw. He pulled the string back to his shoulder, letting it thrum. It would work for him. Shouldering the quiver, he notched an arrow and crept down the stairs.

Six men worked three murder holes. One shot while the other reloaded. Each station had a wooden box with half a dozen full quivers to draw from. They were spaced twenty hands from each other. Jarrod had one shot before they knew he was there. One shot and no one to rescue him this time. Steadying his aim at the center group, he took in a deep breath. The bow shook slightly in his hand. As he released, he knew it was too high. Unexpectedly, the man moved directly into death's path. The arrow struck the base of his skull and he dropped forward with no more than a grunt. His partner turned with surprise. Jarrod had dropped the bow and was running at the soldier.

"Behind—" the man said, his words cut short along with his life. Blood sprayed off the edge of Jarrod's sword as the soldier's body crashed beside his partner's.

The same killer's calm came over him as it had after his father's death. In his mind he was striking down the weeds with his hoe, ripping them up by the roots. His body seemed possessed by someone, or something else. He did not fight it. *Relinquish control*, an inner voice said to him and so he did.

Jarrod swiveled, moving towards the team on his left. His sword knocked the first man's bow aside, causing the shot to go wild. Swinging his sword back around, he caught the man under the chin, driving the sword point through his skull. It stuck. Jarrod released the hilt and reached for the weapon at the man's hip. As he bent down, an arrow thrummed over his head from behind. He drew the sword and went after the soldier in front of him.

The soldier had abandoned his bow and held a dagger in his hand. Jarrod lunged at him and the man side-stepped, dragging the blade across Jarrod's exposed ribs. Jarrod felt a distant burn in his mind, but ignored it. He feigned his next attack and waited for the man to sidestep again. As he did, Jarrod's weapon took the man's hand off at the wrist. The man screamed, holding his bleeding stump.

A sharp pain bit into his right calf. Jarrod stumbled, knocking the wounded man over. Jarrod tried to get up, but the arrow in his calf stopped him from rising. Another thud and fire exploded into his left thigh. Jarrod pulled Marly's dagger. He threw it at the soldier in front, hitting him in the chest. He fell to the side, knocking his partner's aim. The arrow went stray, embedding into the corpse of the second man Jarrod had killed.

Jarrod forced himself to his feet, once more shoving the pain to the back of his mind. He hobbled towards the last of Thramel's soldiers standing in the room. The man swung at Jarrod with the bow. Jarrod cut the wood with his sword. Before he could draw another weapon, Jarrod fell on top of him.

"Blade's Man's fury! What are you?" The man's eyes were wide in awe.

"Manus Poena," Jarrod said, bringing his blade down into the man's chest.

He struggled to get up, and felt something thump into his back. Once more there was pain and a distant weight on his shoulders. A blade yanked free and Jarrod twisted away. He saw the one-handed man holding a blade ready to plunge it back into him.

"I got you now," the man said, laughing hysterically.

Jarrod took his sword from the corpse next to him, and as the one-handed man came down at him, the soldier drove himself onto the sharp point. Hot blood gushed out of the man's mouth, splashing Jarrod's face.

Before the room went dark, Jarrod thought, this was a good death.

"Death? You long for death now?" A strange voice asked, sounding close to mocking.

Jarrod squinted his eyes against a bright, white light. He saw a blurry shape of a man outlined by the light. The man approached, wearing black scaled armor emblazoned with two swords crossed at the midriff. A black helm covered his face, the visor closed. The hilts of two long swords stuck out from his left hip.

"N...no," Jarrod said. "I long for peace."

"I guess death is a long-term peace, unless you are called on to be my servant," the man said.

"Who are you?" Jarrod asked, although he had a good idea who this figure represented. "Why would I serve you?"

"Ingratitude is not good payment for one's assistance."



The white light faded, revealing a dark green glade in the middle of seven large stones. This was the Circle of Gods. This was where men or women sat in judgment once the spirit left the body. Jarrod noticed he sat in the Defendant's stone chair. It felt like a vivid dream, lucid as though he drank weeping bark. He could smell the sweet taint of death-bell blossoms and hear the buzz of carrion beetles flying outside the circle. The stone chair was hard against his flesh. Jarrod tried to stand up, but his body refused to obey his commands.

"Assistance?" Jarrod asked. He almost said, *I feel more like a prisoner*. He doubted it would aid his cause.

"How else do you think a gardener killed six armed men?"

"Desperation."

"Desperation." The man weighed the word, considering its value. "Yes, desperation does open the door for us to walk through."

"Once more I was only a tool," Jarrod said, unable to disguise his disgust.

"We are all tools. Some are better honed for specific tasks than others."

"Now my value is over, am I to be discarded?"

"No." The man laughed. "No more than a sword should be thrown away because a war ends. It can be reforged to suit the nature of the time. Besides, why assume your value is over?"

"I am here."

"Yes, you are here, but for a different reason than most," the man said. "Foremost, I must inform you that your decision to defend innocence is the reason I do not forsake you. You are not here to have your guilt judged. Nor are you released from the responsibility you shouldered."

"What do you mean?"

"You are yoked to your duty," the man said. "As am I. Hilt to blade."

"I don't understand."

"You shall," the man said. The bright, white light returned, enveloping the Circle of Gods. The man turned and walked towards the light. "Rest, Jarrod. Every warrior must heal before the waves of war crash upon him again."

"I am no warrior," Jarrod said, anger rising. *A tool, nothing more than a tool for gods and men*. "I am just a gardener." No reply came.

"I'm no warrior!" He shouted to white light, helplessly restrained in the stone chair. "I'm a gardener!"



Jarrod woke up in a place much different than he remembered. He had expected hard stone and green grass, or at least the stone walls of the Watch Tower. Instead, soft light shone through the canvas of a tent. He felt warm. Fur blankets covered him and he was nude beneath, except for the bandages that wrapped his body. He

tried to move, but his body ached all over. Pain was the body's way of reminding you that you still lived, his father often said before the war. What about misery? Was that the soul telling him he was still around, that his usefulness had yet expired?

Did I do any good at all?

Jarrold laid there in a heap, wallowing in sorrow.

"You're awake?" Gabriel asked.

"Either that or we are dead," Jarrold said. The dull ache in his back told him otherwise.

"Last time I thought you were awake, you screamed in my face and tried to claw my eyes out," Gabriel said, and laughed. "I learned my lesson."

"What about Hannah?" Jarrold asked. He remembered the red blossom spreading on her bandages and held little hope.

"She lives," Gabriel said. "Once again, because of you. Azriel and Kellen were found, too."

"So if I am here, alive, I guess Thramel was defeated."

"No."

"Where is he?"

"He ran off as soon as the battle turned against him. Whatever you did in Watch Tower, killing nine men on your own, it helped us outside. Once the arrows stopped falling, we overran Thramel's defenses. He took off running."

"I found some writings in the Tower. I think they were his."

"Yes, they were. We took them from your boot. Thramel was being paid by Joanna to sow dissent in Heartwood Pines."

"Who is Joanna?"

"Half-sister of Alfred and Thomas. She has an army ready to march on us and take our lands."

Jarrold closed his eyes. Another war. More fighting, more death.

Yoked, hilt to blade.

"What are the plans?" Jarrold tried to sit up.

Again, his body refused.

"No, my friend. Your part in this fight is over," Gabriel said, placing a cool hand on his chest to keep him from struggling. "Harmen is raising the cry for arms now. We will have plenty of defenders to beat back her assault. Even the pine bends in the fierce winds."

Jarrold wanted to tell him what he saw. Tell him all about the Blade's Man and his proclamation that Jarrold was not yet released from his duty. It sounded like a fever dream, but it was real, wasn't it?

"What am I to do?"

"You will join Ishmael with the children in Yellow Valley. We must persevere as a people."



A full moon passed as Jarrold and Hannah healed. Gabriel gave Jarrold a map and three horses. No protests, no more delays. Jarrold led the children in an exodus to Yellow Valley. The journey wasn't long and after four sun turns, they arrived at the place Gabriel had marked just as the sun was rising on the green grass and flowers.

"Jarwed! Jarwed!" Lily cried upon seeing him. She was outside playing in a field of yellow poppies, and white lilies. She ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him on the cheek. "You brought them! Annah and Buttercup!"

Her laughter and smiles lightened his heart so much he hadn't realized how the impending clouds of war darkened it.

"As promised," Jarrod said, hugging her back. Elly hugged him after Lily left to clamp onto Hannah and Kellen.

"Da?" she asked, trepidation in her voice and hope in her eyes.

"He is well," Jarrod said.

"Thank you," Elly replied, hugging him again.

Ishmael came out of the small house cut into the eaves of stone, a smile on his face.

"What news from my father?" he asked.

"We are to stay here," Jarrod said. He looked over the Yellow Valley, hidden between the Mountains of Dawn and Dusk. "We will persevere."