And to my father, who taught me that if I was going to do something, I should take my time and do it right.

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The Four Corners of Civilization

Ceadl
- Ralien

Commonwealth
- Imre
- Tarbean
- The University
- Hallowfell
- The Reft

Yll

The Centre Sea
PROLOGUE

A Silence of Three Parts
IT WAS NIGHT AGAIN. The Waystone Inn lay in silence, and it was a silence of three parts.

The most obvious part was a hollow, echoing quiet, made by things that were lacking. If there had been a wind it would have sighed through the trees, set the inn’s sign creaking on its hooks, and brushed the silence down the road like trailing autumn leaves. If there had been a crowd, even a handful of men inside the inn, they would have filled the silence with conversation and laughter, the clatter and clamor one expects from a drinking house during the dark hours of night. If there had been music…but no, of course there was no music. In fact there were none of these things, and so the silence remained.

Inside the Waystone a pair of men huddled at one corner of the bar. They drank with quiet determination, avoiding serious discussions of troubling news. In doing this they added a small, sullen silence to the larger, hollow one. It made an alloy of sorts, a counterpoint.

The third silence was not an easy thing to notice. If you listened for an hour, you might begin to feel it in the wooden floor underfoot and in the rough, splintering barrels behind the bar. It was in the weight of the black stone hearth that held the heat of a long dead fire. It was in the slow back and forth of a white linen cloth rubbing along the grain of the bar. And it was in the hands of the man who stood there, polishing a stretch of mahogany that already gleamed in the lamplight.

The man had true-red hair, red as flame. His eyes were dark and distant, and he moved with the subtle certainty that comes from knowing many things.

The Waystone was his, just as the third silence was his. This was appropriate, as it was the greatest silence of the three, wrapping the others inside itself. It was deep and wide as autumn’s ending. It was heavy as a great river-smooth stone. It was the patient, cut-flower sound of a man who is waiting to die.

CHAPTER ONE

A Place for Demons

IT WAS FELLING NIGHT, and the usual crowd had gathered at the Waystone Inn. Five wasn’t much of a crowd, but five was as many as the Waystone ever saw these days, times being what they were.

Old Cob was filling his role as storyteller and advice dispensary. The men at the bar sipped their drinks and listened. In the back room a young innkeeper stood out of sight behind the door, smiling as he listened to the details of a familiar story.

“When he awoke, Taborlin the Great found himself locked in a high tower. They had taken his sword and stripped him of his tools: key, coin, and candle were all gone. But that weren’t even the worst of it, you see…” Cob paused for effect, “…cause the lamps on the wall were burning blue!”
Graham, Jake, and Shep nodded to themselves. The three friends had grown up together, listening to Cob’s stories and ignoring his advice.

Cob peered closely at the newer, more attentive member of his small audience, the smith’s prentice. “Do you know what that meant, boy?” Everyone called the smith’s prentice “boy” despite the fact that he was a hand taller than anyone there. Small towns being what they are, he would most likely remain “boy” until his beard filled out or he bloodied someone’s nose over the matter.

The boy gave a slow nod. “The Chandrian.”

“That’s right,” Cob said approvingly. “The Chandrian. Everyone knows that blue fire is one of their signs. Now he was—”

“But how’d they find him?” the boy interrupted. “And why din’t they kill him when they had the chance?”

“Hush now, you’ll get all the answers before the end,” Jake said. “Just let him tell it.”

“No need for all that, Jake,” Graham said. “Boy’s just curious. Drink your drink.”

“I drank me drink already,” Jake grumbled. “I need t’other but the innkeep’s still skinning rats in the back room.” He raised his voice and knocked his empty mug hollowly on the top of the mahogany bar. “Hoy! We’re thirsty men in here!”

The innkeeper appeared with five bowls of stew and two warm, round loaves of bread. He pulled more beer for Jake, Shep, and Old Cob, moving with an air of bustling efficiency.

The story was set aside while the men tended to their dinners. Old Cob tucked away his bowl of stew with the predatory efficiency of a lifetime bachelor. The others were still blowing steam off their bowls when he finished the last of his loaf and returned to his story.

“Now Taborlin needed to escape, but when he looked around, he saw his cell had no door. No windows. All around him was nothing but smooth, hard stone. It was a cell no man had ever escaped.

“But Taborlin knew the names of all things, and so all things were his to command. He said to the stone: ‘Break!’ and the stone broke. The wall tore like a piece of paper, and through that hole Taborlin could see the sky and breathe the sweet spring air. He stepped to the edge, looked down, and without a second thought he stepped out into the open air….”

The boy’s eyes went wide. “He didn’t!”

Cob nodded seriously. “So Taborlin fell, but he did not despair. For he knew the name of the wind, and so the wind obeyed him. He spoke to the wind and it cradled and caressed him. It bore him to the ground as gently as a puff of thistledown and set him on his feet softly as a mother’s kiss.

“And when he got to the ground and felt his side where they’d stabbed him, he saw that it weren’t hardly a scratch. Now maybe it was just a piece of luck,” Cob
tapped the side of his nose knowingly. “Or maybe it had something to do with the amulet he was wearing under his shirt.”

“What amulet?” the boy asked eagerly through a mouthful of stew.

Old Cob leaned back on his stool, glad for the chance to elaborate. “A few days earlier, Taborlin had met a tinker on the road. And even though Taborlin didn’t have much to eat, he shared his dinner with the old man.”

“Right sensible thing to do,” Graham said quietly to the boy. “Everyone knows: ‘A tinker pays for kindness twice.’”

“No no,” Jake grumbled. “Get it right: ‘A tinker’s advice pays kindness twice.’”

The innkeeper spoke up for the first time that night. “Actually, you’re missing more than half,” he said, standing in the doorway behind the bar.

“A tinker’s debt is always paid:
Once for any simple trade.
Twice for freely-given aid.
Thrice for any insult made.”

The men at the bar seemed almost surprised to see Kote standing there. They’d been coming to the Waystone every Felling night for months and Kote had never interjected anything of his own before. Not that you could expect anything else, really. He’d only been in town for a year or so. He was still a stranger. The smith’s prentice had lived here since he was eleven, and he was still referred to as “that Rannish boy,” as if Rannish were some foreign country and not a town less than thirty miles away.

“Just something I heard once,” Kote said to fill the silence, obviously embarrassed.

Old Cob nodded before he cleared his throat and launched back into the story. “Now this amulet was worth a whole bucket of gold nobles, but on account of Taborlin’s kindness, the tinker sold it to him for nothing but an iron penny, a copper penny, and a silver penny. It was black as a winter night and cold as ice to touch, but so long as it was round his neck, Taborlin would be safe from the harm of evil things. Demons and such.”

“I’d give a good piece for such a thing these days,” Shep said darkly. He had drunk most and talked least over the course of the evening. Everyone knew that something bad had happened out on his farm last Cendling night, but since they were good friends they knew better than to press him for the details. At least not this early in the evening, not as sober as they were.

“Aye, who wouldn’t?” Old Cob said judiciously, taking a long drink.

“I din’t know the Chandrian were demons,” the boy said. “I’d heard—”

“They ain’t demons,” Jake said firmly. “They were the first six people to refuse Tehlu’s choice of the path, and he cursed them to wander the corners—”

“Are you telling this story, Jacob Walker?” Cob said sharply. “Cause if you are, I’ll just let you get on with it.”
The two men glared at each other for a long moment. Eventually Jake looked away, muttering something that could, conceivably, have been an apology.


The story fell further into bickering at this point, about the nature of the Chandrian, the signs that showed their presence to the wary, and whether the amulet would protect Taborlin from bandits, or mad dogs, or falling off a horse. Things were getting heated when the front door banged open.

Jake looked over. “It’s about time you got in, Carter. Tell this damn fool the difference between a demon and a dog. Everybody kn—” Jake stopped midsentence and rushed to the door. “God’s body, what happened to you?”

Carter stepped into the light, his face pale and smeared with blood. He clutched an old saddle blanket to his chest. It was an odd, awkward shape, as if it were wrapped around a tangle of kindling sticks.

His friends jumped off their stools and hurried over at the sight of him. “I’m fine,” he said as he made his slow way into the common room. His eyes were wild around the edges, like a skittish horse. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

He dropped the bundled blanket onto the nearest table where it knocked hard against the wood, as if it were full of stones. His clothes were crisscrossed with long, straight cuts. His grey shirt hung in loose tatters except where it was stuck to his body, stained a dark, sullen red.

Graham tried to ease him into a chair. “Mother of God. Sit down, Carter. What happened to you? Sit down.”

Carter shook his head stubbornly. “I told you, I’m fine. I’m not hurt that bad.”

“How many were there?” Graham said.

“One,” Carter said. “But it’s not what you think—”

“Goddammit. I told you, Carter,” Old Cob burst out with the sort of frightened anger only relatives and close friends can muster. “I told you for months now. You can’t go out alone. Not even as far as Baedn. It ain’t safe.” Jake laid a hand on the old man’s arm, quieting him.

“Just take a sit,” Graham said, still trying to steer Carter into a chair. “Let’s get that shirt off you and get you cleaned up.”

Carter shook his head. “I’m fine. I got cut up a little, but the blood is mostly Nelly’s. It jumped on her. Killed her about two miles outside town, past the Oldstone Bridge.”

A moment of serious silence followed the news. The smith’s prentice laid a sympathetic hand on Carter’s shoulder. “Damn. That’s hard. She was gentle as a lamb, too. Never tried to bite or kick when you brought her in for shoes. Best horse in

Cob finally managed to free himself from Jake. “I told you,” he repeated, shaking a finger in Carter’s direction. “There’s folks out lately that would kill you for a pair of pennies, let alone a horse and cart. What are you going to do now? Pull it yourself?”

There was a moment of uncomfortable quiet. Jake and Cob glared at each other while the rest seemed at a loss for words, unsure of how to comfort their friend.

The innkeeper moved carefully through the silence. Arms full, he stepped nimbly around Shep and began to arrange some items on a nearby table: a bowl of hot water, shears, some clean linen, a few glass bottles, needle and gut.

“This never would have happened if he’d listened to me in the first place,” Old Cob muttered. Jake tried to quiet him, but Cob brushed him aside. “I’m just tellin’ the truth. It’s a damn shame about Nelly, but he better listen now or he’ll end up dead. You don’t get lucky twice with those sort of men.”

Carter’s mouth made a thin line. He reached out and pulled the edge of the bloody blanket. Whatever was inside flipped over once and snagged on the cloth. Carter tugged harder and there was a clatter like a bag of flat river stones upended onto the tabletop.

It was a spider as large as a wagon wheel, black as slate.

The smith’s prentice jumped backward and hit a table, knocking it over and almost falling to the ground himself. Cob’s face went slack. Graham, Shep, and Jake made wordless, startled sounds and moved away, raising their hands to their faces. Carter took a step backward that was almost like a nervous twitch. Silence filled the room like a cold sweat.

The innkeeper frowned. “They can’t have made it this far west yet,” he said softly.

If not for the silence, it is unlikely anyone would have heard him. But they did. Their eyes pulled away from the thing on the table to stare mutely at the red-haired man.

Jake found his voice first. “You know what this is?”

The innkeeper’s eyes were distant. “Scrael,” he said distractedly. “I’d thought the mountains—”

“Scrael?” Jake broke in. “Blackened body of God, Kote. You’ve seen these things before?”

“What?” The red-haired innkeeper looked up sharply, as if suddenly remembering where he was. “Oh. No. No, of course not.” Seeing that he was the only one within arm’s length of the dark thing, he took a measured step away. “Just something I heard.” They stared at him. “Do you remember the trader that came through about two span ago?”
They all nodded. “Bastard tried to charge me ten pennies for a half-pound of salt,” Cob said reflexively, repeating the complaint for perhaps the hundredth time.

“Wish I’d bought some,” Jake mumbled. Graham nodded a silent agreement.

“He was a filthy shim,” Cob spat, seeming to find comfort in the familiar words. “I might pay two in a tight time, but ten is robbery.”

“Not if there are more of those on the road,” Shep said darkly.

All eyes went back to the thing on the table.

“He told me he’d heard of them over near Melcombe,” Kote said quickly, watching everyone’s faces as they studied the thing on the table. “I thought he was just trying to drive up his prices.”

“What else did he say?” Carter asked.

The innkeeper looked thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged. “I didn’t get the whole story. He was only in town for a couple hours.”

“I don’t like spiders,” the smith’s prentice said. He remained on the other side of a table some fifteen feet away. “Cover it up.”

“It’s not a spider,” Jake said. “It’s got no eyes.”

“It’s got no mouth either,” Carter pointed out. “How does it eat?”

“What does it eat?” Shep said darkly.

The innkeeper continued to eye the thing curiously. He leaned closer, stretching out a hand. Everyone edged even farther away from the table.

“Careful,” Carter said. “Its feet are sharp like knives.”

“More like razors,” Kote said. His long fingers brushed the thing’s black, featureless body. “It’s smooth and hard, like pottery.”

“Don’t go messing with it,” the smith’s prentice said.

Moving carefully, the innkeeper took one of the long, smooth legs and tried to break it with both hands like a stick. “Not pottery,” he amended. He set it against the edge of the table and leaned his weight against it. It broke with a sharp crack. “More like stone.” He looked up at Carter. “How did it get all these cracks?” He pointed at the thin fractures that crazed the smooth black surface of the body.

“Nelly fell on it,” Carter said. “It jumped out of a tree and started to climb all over her, cutting her up with its feet. It moved so fast. I didn’t even know what was going on.” Carter finally sank into the chair at Graham’s urging. “She got tangled in her harness and fell on it, broke some of its legs. Then it came after me, got on me, crawling all over.” He crossed his arms in front of his bloody chest and shuddered. “I managed to get it off me and stomped it hard as I could. Then it got on me again….” He trailed off, his face ashen.

The innkeeper nodded to himself as he continued to prod the thing. “There’s no blood. No organs. It’s just grey inside.” He poked it with a finger. “Like a mushroom.”

“Great Tehlu, just leave it alone,” the smith’s prentice begged. “Sometimes spiders twitch after you kill them.”
“Listen to yourselves,” Cob said scathingly. “Spiders don’t get big as pigs. You know what this is.” He looked around, making eye contact with each of them. “It’s a demon.”

They looked at the broken thing. “Oh, come on now,” Jake said, disagreeing mostly out of habit. “It’s not like…” He made an inarticulate gesture. “It can’t just…”

Everyone knew what he was thinking. Certainly there were demons in the world. But they were like Tehlu’s angels. They were like heroes and kings. They belonged in stories. They belonged out there. Taborlin the Great called up fire and lightning to destroy demons. Tehlu broke them in his hands and sent them howling into the nameless void. Your childhood friend didn’t stomp one to death on the road to Baedn-Bryt. It was ridiculous.

Kote ran his hand through his red hair, then broke the silence. “There’s one way to tell for sure,” he said, reaching into his pocket. “Iron or fire.” He brought out a bulging leather purse.

“And the name of God,” Graham pointed out. “Demons fear three things: cold iron, clean fire, and the holy name of God.”

The innkeeper’s mouth pressed itself into a straight line that was not quite a frown. “Of course,” he said as he emptied his purse onto the table then fingered through the jumbled coins: heavy silver talents and thin silver bits, copper jots, broken ha’pennies, and iron drabs. “Does anyone have a shim?”

“Just use a drab,” Jake said. “That’s good iron.”

“I don’t want good iron,” the innkeeper said. “A drab has too much carbon in it. It’s almost steel.”

“He’s right,” the smith’s prentice said. “Except it’s not carbon. You use coke to make steel. Coke and lime.”

The innkeeper nodded deferentially to the boy. “You’d know best, young master. It’s your business after all.” His long fingers finally found a shim in the pile of coins. He held it up. “Here we are.”

“What will it do?” Jake asked.

“Iron kills demons,” Cob’s voice was uncertain, “but this one’s already dead. It might not do anything.”

“One way to find out.” The innkeeper met each of their eyes briefly, as if measuring them. Then he turned purposefully back to the table, and they edged farther away.

Kote pressed the iron shim to the black side of the creature, and there was a short, sharp crackling sound, like a pine log snapping in a hot fire. Everyone startled, then relaxed when the black thing remained motionless. Cob and the others exchanged shaky smiles, like boys spooked by a ghost story. Their smiles went sour as the room filled with the sweet, acrid smell of rotting flowers and burning hair.
The innkeeper pressed the shim onto the table with a sharp *click*. “Well,” he said, brushing his hands against his apron. “I guess that settles that. What do we do now?”

Hours later, the innkeeper stood in the doorway of the Waystone and let his eyes relax to the darkness. Footprints of lamplight from the inn’s windows fell across the dirt road and the doors of the smithy across the way. It was not a large road, or well traveled. It didn’t seem to lead anywhere, as some roads do. The innkeeper drew a deep breath of autumn air and looked around restlessly, as if waiting for something to happen.

He called himself Kote. He had chosen the name carefully when he came to this place. He had taken a new name for most of the usual reasons, and for a few unusual ones as well, not the least of which was the fact that names were important to him.

Looking up, he saw a thousand stars glittering in the deep velvet of a night with no moon. He knew them all, their stories and their names. He knew them in a familiar way, the way he knew his own hands.

Looking down, Kote sighed without knowing it and went back inside. He locked the door and shuttered the wide windows of the inn, as if to distance himself from the stars and all their varied names.

He swept the floor methodically, catching all the corners. He washed the tables and the bar, moving with a patient efficiency. At the end of an hour’s work, the water in his bucket was still clean enough for a lady to wash her hands in.

Finally, he pulled a stool behind the bar and began to polish the vast array of bottles nestled between the two huge barrels. He wasn’t nearly as crisp and efficient about this chore as he had been with the others, and it soon became obvious the polishing was only an excuse to touch and hold. He even hummed a little, although he did not realize it, and would have stopped himself if he had known.

As he turned the bottles in his long, graceful hands the familiar motion eased a few tired lines from his face, making him seem younger, certainly not yet thirty. Not even near thirty. Young for an innkeeper. Young for a man with so many tired lines remaining on his face.

Kote came to the top of the stairs and opened the door. His room was austere, almost monkish. There was a black stone fireplace in the center of the room, a pair of chairs, and a small desk. The only other furniture was a narrow bed with a large, dark chest at its foot. Nothing decorated the walls or covered the wooden floor.

There were footsteps in the hall, and a young man stepped into the room carrying a bowl of stew that steamed and smelled of pepper. He was dark and charming, with a quick smile and cunning eyes. “You haven’t been this late in weeks,” he said as he handed over the bowl. “There must have been good stories tonight, Reshi.”
Reshi was another of the innkeeper’s names, a nickname almost. The sound of it tugged one corner of his mouth into a wry smile as he sank into the deep chair in front of the fire. “So, what did you learn today, Bast?”

“Today, master, I learned why great lovers have better eyesight than great scholars.”

“And why is that, Bast?” Kote asked, amusement touching the edges of his voice.

Bast closed the door and returned to sit in the second chair, turning it to face his teacher and the fire. He moved with a strange delicacy and grace, as if he were close to dancing. “Well Reshi, all the rich books are found inside where the light is bad. But lovely girls tend to be out in the sunshine and therefore much easier to study without risk of injuring one’s eyes.”

Kote nodded. “But an exceptionally clever student could take a book out-side, thus bettering himself without fear of lessening his much-loved faculty of sight.”

“I thought the same thing, Reshi. Being, of course, an exceptionally clever student.”

“Of course.”

“But when I found a place in the sun where I could read, a beautiful girl came along and kept me from doing anything of the sort,” Bast finished with a flourish.

Kote sighed. “Am I correct in assuming you didn’t manage to read any of Celum Tinture today?”

Bast managed to look somewhat ashamed.

Looking into the fire, Kote tried to assume a stern face and failed. “Ah Bast, I hope she was lovely as a warm wind in the shade. I’m a bad teacher to say it, but I’m glad. I don’t feel up to a long bout of lessons right now.” There was a moment of silence. “Carter was attacked by a scraeling tonight.”

Bast’s easy smile fell away like a cracked mask, leaving his face stricken and pale. “The scrael?” He came halfway to his feet as if he would bolt from the room, then gave an embarrassed frown and forced himself back down into his chair. “How do you know? Who found his body?”

“He’s still alive, Bast. He brought it back. There was only one.”

“There’s no such thing as one scraeling,” Bast said flatly. “You know that.”

“I know,” Kote said. “The fact remains there was only one.”

“And he killed it?” Bast said. “It couldn’t have been a scraeling. Maybe—”

“Bast, it was one of the scrael. I saw it.” Kote gave him a serious look. “He was lucky, that’s all. Even so he was badly hurt. Forty-eight stitches. I used up nearly all my gut.” Kote picked up his bowl of stew. “If anyone asks, tell them my grandfather was a caravan guard who taught me how to clean and stitch a wound. They were too shocked to ask about it tonight, but tomorrow some of them might get curious. I don’t want that.” He blew into his bowl, raising a cloud of steam around his face.

“What did you do with the body?”
“I didn’t do anything with it,” Kote said pointedly. “I am just an innkeeper. This sort of thing is quite beyond me.”

“Reshi, you can’t just let them muddle through this on their own.”
Kote sighed. “They took it to the priest. He did all the right things for all the wrong reasons.”

Bast opened his mouth, but Kote continued before he could say anything. “Yes, I made sure the pit was deep enough. Yes, I made sure there was rowan wood in the fire. Yes, I made sure it burned long and hot before they buried it. And yes, I made sure that no one kept a piece of it as a souvenir.” He scowled, his eyebrows drawing together. “I’m not an idiot, you know.”

Bast visibly relaxed, settling back into his chair. “I know you’re not, Reshi. But I wouldn’t trust half these people to piss leeward without help.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “I can’t imagine why there was only one.”

“Maybe they died coming over the mountains,” Kote suggested. “All but this one.”

“It’s possible,” Bast admitted reluctantly.

“Maybe it was that storm from a couple days back,” Kote pointed out. “A real wagon-tipper, as we used to say back in the troupe. All the wind and rain might have scattered one loose from the pack.”

“I like your first idea better, Reshi,” Bast said uncomfortably. “Three or four scrael would go through this town like…like…”

“Like a hot knife through butter?”

“More like several hot knives through several dozen farmers,” Bast said dryly. “These people can’t defend themselves. I bet there aren’t six swords in this whole town. Not that swords would do much good against the scrael.”

There was a long moment of thoughtful silence. After a moment Bast began to fidget. “Any news?”

Kote shook his head. “They didn’t get to the news tonight. Carter disrupted things while they were still telling stories. That’s something, I suppose. They’ll be back tomorrow night. It’ll give me something to do.”

Kote poked his spoon idly into the stew. “I should have bought the scraeling from Carter,” he mused. “He could’ve used the money for a new horse. People would have come from all over to see it. We could have had some business for a change.”

Bast gave him a speechless, horrified look.

Kote made a pacifying gesture with the hand that held the spoon. “I’m joking, Bast.” He gave a weak smile. “Still, it would have been nice.”

“No Reshi, it most certainly would not have been nice,” Bast said emphatically. “People would have come from all over to see it,” he repeated derisively. “Indeed.”

“The business would have been nice,” Kote clarified. “Busy-ness would be nice.” He jabbed his spoon into the stew again. “Anything would be nice.”
They sat for a long moment. Kote scowling down into the bowl of stew in his hands, his eyes far away. “It must be awful for you here, Bast,” he said at last. “You must be numb with boredom.”

Bast shrugged. “There are a few young wives in town. A scattering of daughters.” He grinned like a child. “I tend to make my own fun.”

“That’s good, Bast.” There was another silence. Kote took another spoonful, chewed, swallowed. “They thought it was a demon, you know.”

Bast shrugged. “It might as well be, Reshi. It’s probably the best thing for them to think.”

“I know. I encouraged them, in fact. But you know what that means.” He met Bast’s eyes. “The blacksmith is going to be doing a brisk business in the next couple days.”

Bast’s expression went carefully blank. “Oh.”

Kote nodded. “I won’t blame you if you want to leave, Bast. You have better places to be than this.”

Bast’s expression was shocked. “I couldn’t leave, Reshi.” He opened and closed his mouth a few times, at a loss for words. “Who else would teach me?”

Kote grinned, and for a moment his face showed how truly young he was. Behind the weary lines and the placid innkeeper’s expression he looked no older than his dark-haired companion. “Who indeed?” He gestured toward the door with his spoon. “Go do your reading then, or bother someone’s daughter. I’m sure you have better things to do than watch me eat.”

“Actually…”

“Begone demon!” Kote said, switching to a thickly accented Temic through half a mouthful of stew. “Tehus antausa eha!”

Bast burst into startled laughter and made an obscene gesture with one hand. Kote swallowed and changed languages. “Aroi te denna-leyan!”

“Oh come now,” Bast reproached, his smile falling away. “That’s just insulting.”

“By earth and stone, I abjure you!” Kote dipped his fingers into the cup by his side and flicked droplets casually in Bast’s direction. “Glamour be banished!”

“With cider?” Bast managed to look amused and annoyed at the same time as he daubed a bead of liquid from the front of his shirt. “This better not stain.”

Kote took another bite of his dinner. “Go soak it. If the situation becomes desperate, I recommend you avail yourself of the numerous solvent formulae extant in Celum Tinture. Chapter thirteen, I believe.”

“Fine.” Bast stood and walked to the door, stepping with his strange, casual grace. “Call if you need anything.” He closed the door behind himself.

Kote ate slowly, mopping up the last of the stew with a piece of bread. He looked out the window as he ate, or tried to, as the lamplight turned its surface mirrorlike against the dark behind it.
His eyes wandered the room restlessly. The fireplace was made of the same black rock as the one downstairs. It stood in the center of the room, a minor feat of engineering of which Kote was rather proud. The bed was small, little more than a cot, and if you were to touch it you would find the mattress almost nonexistent.

A skilled observer might notice there was something his gaze avoided. The same way you avoid meeting the eye of an old lover at a formal dinner, or that of an old enemy sitting across the room in a crowded alehouse late at night.

Kote tried to relax, failed, fidgeted, sighed, shifted in his seat, and without willing it his eyes fell on the chest at the foot of the bed.

It was made of roah, a rare, heavy wood, dark as coal and smooth as polished glass. Prized by perfumers and alchemists, a piece the size of your thumb was easily worth gold. To have a chest made of it went far beyond extravagance.

The chest was sealed three times. It had a lock of iron, a lock of copper, and a lock that could not be seen. Tonight the wood filled the room with the almost imperceptible aroma of citrus and quenching iron.

When Kote’s eyes fell on the chest they did not dart quickly away. They did not slide slyly to the side as if he would pretend it wasn’t there at all. But in a moment of looking, his face regained all the lines the simple pleasures of the day had slowly smoothed away. The comfort of his bottles and books was erased in a second, leaving nothing behind his eyes but emptiness and ache. For a moment fierce longing and regret warred across his face.

Then they were gone, replaced by the weary face of an innkeeper, a man who called himself Kote. He sighed again without knowing it and pushed himself to his feet.

It was a long time before he walked past the chest to bed. Once in bed, it was a long time before he slept.

As Kote had guessed, they came back to the Waystone the next night for dinner and drinks. There were a few half-hearted attempts at stories, but they died out quickly. No one was really in the mood.

So it was still early in the evening when the discussion turned to matters of greater import. They chewed over the rumors that had come into town, most of them troubling. The Penitent King was having a difficult time with the rebels in Resavek. This caused some concern, but only in a general way. Resavek was a long way off, and even Cob, the most worldly of them, would be hard pressed to find it on a map.

They discussed the war in their own terms. Cob predicted a third levy tax after the harvests were in. No one argued, though there hadn’t been a three-bleeder year in living memory.

Jake guessed the harvest would be good enough so the third levy wouldn’t break most families. Except the Bentley, who were on hard times anyway. And the Orissons, whose sheep kept disappearing. And Crazy Martin, who had planted all
barley this year. Every farmer with half a brain had planted beans. That was one good thing about all the fighting—soldiers ate beans, and prices would be high.

After a few more drinks, deeper concerns were voiced. Deserter soldiers and other opportunists were thick on the roads, making even short trips risky. The roads were always bad, of course, in the same way that winter was always cold. You complained, took sensible precautions, and got on with the business of living your life.

But this was different. Over the last two months the roads had become so bad that people had stopped complaining. The last caravan had two wagons and four guards. The merchant had been asking ten pennies for half a pound of salt, fifteen for a loaf of sugar. He didn’t have any pepper, or cinnamon, or chocolate. He did have one small sack of coffee, but he wanted two silver talents for that. At first people had laughed at his prices. Then, when he held firm, folk had spat and cursed at him.

That had been two span ago: twenty-two days. There had not been another serious trader since, even though this was the season for it. So despite the third levy tax looming large in everyone’s minds, people were looking in their purses and wishing they’d bought a little something, just in case the snow came early.

No one spoke of the previous night, of the thing they had burned and buried. Other folk were talking, of course. The town was alive with gossip. Carter’s wounds ensured that the stories were taken half seriously, but not much more than half. The word “demon” was being spoken, but it was with smiles half-hidden behind raised hands.

Only the six friends had seen the thing before it was burned. One of them had been wounded and the others had been drinking. The priest had seen it too, but it was his job to see demons. Demons were good for his business.

The innkeeper had seen it too, apparently. But he wasn’t from around here. He couldn’t know the truth that was so apparent to everyone born and raised in this little town: stories were told here, but they happened somewhere else. This was not a place for demons.

Besides, things were bad enough without borrowing trouble. Cob and the rest knew there was no sense talking about it. Trying to convince folk would only make them a laughingstock, like Crazy Martin, who had been trying to dig a well inside his own house for years now.

Still, each of them bought a piece of cold-wrought iron from the smith, heavy as they could swing, and none of them said what they were thinking. Instead they complained that the roads were bad and getting worse. They talked about merchants, and deserters, and levies, and not enough salt to last the winter. They reminisced that three years ago no one would have even thought of locking their doors at night, let alone barring them.
The conversation took a downward turn from there, and even though none of them said what they were thinking, the evening ended on a grim note. Most evenings did these days, times being what they were.

CHAPTER TWO

A Beautiful Day

IT WAS ONE OF those perfect autumn days so common in stories and so rare in the real world. The weather was warm and dry, ideal for ripening a field of wheat or corn. On both sides of the road the trees were changing color. Tall poplars had gone a buttery yellow while the shrubby sumac encroaching on the road was tinged a violent red. Only the old oaks seemed reluctant to give up the summer, and their leaves remained an even mingling of gold and green.

Everything said, you couldn’t hope for a nicer day to have a half dozen ex-soldiers with hunting bows relieve you of everything you owned.

“She’s not much of a horse, sir,” Chronicler said. “One small step above a dray, and when it rains she—”

The man cut him off with a sharp gesture. “Listen friend, the king’s army is paying good money for anything with four legs and at least one eye. If you were stark mad and riding a hobbyhorse down the road, I’d still take it off you.”

Their leader had an air of command about him. Chronicler guessed he had been a low ranking officer not long ago. “Just hop down,” he said seriously. “We’ll get this done with and you can be on your way.”

Chronicler climbed down from his horse. He had been robbed before and knew when there was nothing to be gained by discussion. These fellows knew their business. No energy was wasted on bravado or idle threats. One of them looked over the horse, checking hooves, teeth, and harness. Two others went through his saddlebags with a military efficiency, laying all his worldly possessions out on the ground. Two blankets, a hooded cloak, the flat leather satchel, and his heavy, well-stocked travelsack.

“That’s all of it, Commander,” one of the men said. “Except for about twenty pounds of oats.”

The commander knelt down and opened the flat leather satchel, peering inside. “There’s nothing but paper and pens in there,” Chronicler said.

The commander turned to look backward over his shoulder. “You a scribe then?”

Chronicler nodded. “It’s my livelihood, sir. And no real use to you.”

The man looked through the satchel, found it to be true, and set it aside. Then he upended the travelsack onto Chronicler’s spread cloak and poked idly through the contents.
He took most of Chronicler’s salt and a pair of bootlaces. Then, much to the scribe’s dismay, he picked up the shirt Chronicler had bought back in Linwood. It was fine linen dyed a deep, royal blue, too nice for traveling. Chronicler hadn’t even had the chance to wear it yet. He sighed.

The commander left everything else lying on the cloak and got to his feet. The others took turns going through Chronicler’s things.

The commander spoke up, “You only have one blanket, don’t you Janns?” One of the men nodded. “Take one of his then, you’ll need a second before winter’s through.”

“His cloak is in better shape than mine, sir.”

“Take it, but leave yours. The same for you, Witkins. Leave your old tinderbox if you’re taking his.”

“I lost mine, sir,” Witkins said. “Else I would.”

The whole process was surprisingly civilized. Chronicler lost all of his needles but one, both extra pairs of socks, a bundle of dried fruit, a loaf of sugar, half a bottle of alcohol, and a pair of ivory dice. They left him the rest of his clothes, his dried meat, and a half-eaten loaf of incredibly stale rye bread. His flat leather satchel remained untouched.

While the men repacked his travelsack, the commander turned to Chronicler.

“Let’s have the purse then.”

Chronicler handed it over.

“And the ring.”

“There’s hardly any silver in it,” Chronicler mumbled as he unscrewed it from his finger.

“What’s that around your neck?”

Chronicler unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a dull ring of metal hanging from a leather cord. “Just iron, sir.”

The commander came close and rubbed it between his fingers before letting it fall back against Chronicler’s chest. “Keep it then. I’m not one to come between a man and his religion,” he said, then emptied the purse into one hand, making a pleasantly surprised noise as he prodded through the coins with his finger. “Scribing pays better than I thought,” he said as he began to count out shares to his men.

“I don’t suppose you could spare me a penny or two out of that?” Chronicler asked. “Just enough for a couple of hot meals?”

The six men turned to look at Chronicler, as if they couldn’t quite believe what they had heard.

The commander laughed. “God’s body, you certainly have a heavy pair, don’t you?” There was a grudging respect in his voice.

“You seem a reasonable fellow,” Chronicler said with a shrug. “And a man’s got to eat.”
Their leader smiled for the first time. “A sentiment I can agree with.” He took out two pennies and brandished them before putting them back into Chronicler’s purse. “Here’s a pair for your pair, then.” He tossed Chronicler the purse and stuffed the beautiful royal-blue shirt into his saddlebag.

“Thank you, sir,” Chronicler said. “You might want to know that that bottle one of your men took is wood alcohol I use for cleaning my pens. It’ll go badly if he drinks it.”

The commander smiled and nodded. “You see what comes of treating people well?” he said to his men as he pulled himself up onto his horse. “It’s been a pleasure, sir scribe. If you get on your way now, you can still make Abbot’s Ford by dark.”

When Chronicler could no longer hear their hoofbeats in the distance, he repacked his travelsack, making sure everything was well stowed. Then he tugged off one of his boots, stripped out the lining, and removed a tightly wrapped bundle of coins stuffed deep into the toe. He moved some of these into his purse, then unfastened his pants, produced another bundle of coins from underneath several layers of clothes, and moved some of that money into his purse as well.

The key was to keep the proper amount in your purse. Too little and they would be disappointed and prone to look for more. Too much and they would be excited and might get greedy.

There was a third bundle of coins baked into the stale loaf of bread that only the most desperate of criminals would be interested in. He left that alone for now, as well as the whole silver talent he had hidden in a jar of ink. Over the years he had come to think of the last as more of a luck piece. No one had ever found that.

He had to admit, it was probably the most civil robbery he’d ever been through. They had been genteel, efficient, and not terribly savvy. Losing the horse and saddle was hard, but he could buy another in Abbot’s Ford and still have enough money to live comfortably until he finished this foolishness and met up with Skarpi in Treya.

Feeling an urgent call of nature, Chronicler pushed his way through the bloodred sumac at the side of the road. As he was rebuttoning his pants, there was sudden motion in the underbrush as a dark shape thrashed its way free of some nearby bushes.

Chronicler staggered back, crying out in alarm before he realized it was nothing more than a crow beating its wings into flight. Chuckling at his own foolishness, he straightened his clothes and made his way back to the road through the sumac, brushing away invisible strands of spiderweb that clung tickling to his face.

As he shouldered his travelsack and satchel, Chronicler found himself feeling remarkably lighthearted. The worst had happened, and it hadn’t been that bad. A breeze tussled through the trees, sending poplar leaves spinning like golden coins down onto the rutted dirt road. It was a beautiful day.

CHAPTER THREE
KOTE WAS LEAFING IDLY through a book, trying to ignore the silence of the empty inn when the door opened and Graham backed into the room.

“Just got done with it.” Graham maneuvered through the maze of tables with exaggerated care. “I was gonna bring it in last night, but then I thought ‘one last coat of oil, rub it, and let dry.’ Can’t say I’m sorry I did. Lord and lady, it’s beautiful as anything these hands have ever made.”

A small line formed between the innkeeper’s eyebrows. Then, seeing the flat bundle in the man’s arms, he brightened. “Ahhh! The mounting board!” Kote smiled tiredly. “I’m sorry Graham. It’s been so long. I’d almost forgotten.”

Graham gave him a bit of a strange look. “Four month ain’t long for wood all the way from Aryen, not with the roads being as bad as they are.”

“Four months,” Kote echoed. He saw Graham watching him and hurried to add, “That can be a lifetime if you’re waiting for something.” He tried to smile reassuringly, but it came out sickly.

In fact, Kote himself seemed rather sickly. Not exactly unhealthy, but hollow. Wan. Like a plant that’s been moved into the wrong sort of soil and, lacking something vital, has begun to wilt.

Graham noted the difference. The innkeeper’s gestures weren’t as extravagant. His voice wasn’t as deep. Even his eyes weren’t as bright as they had been a month ago. Their color seemed duller. They were less sea-foam, less green-grass than they had been. Now they were like riverweed, like the bottom of a green glass bottle. And his hair had been bright before, the color of flame. Now it seemed—red. Just red-hair color, really.

Kote drew back the cloth and looked underneath. The wood was a dark charcoal color with a black grain, heavy as a sheet of iron. Three dark pegs were set above a word chiseled into the wood.

“Folly,” Graham read. “Odd name for a sword.”

Kote nodded, his face carefully blank. “How much do I owe you?” he asked quietly.

Graham thought for a moment. “After what ye’ve given me to cover the cost of the wood…” There was a cunning glimmer in the man’s eye. “Around one and three.”

Kote handed over two talents. “Keep the rest. It’s difficult wood to work with.”

“That it is,” Graham said with some satisfaction. “Like stone under the saw. Try a chisel, like iron. Then, after all the shouting was done, I couldn’t char it.”

“I noticed that,” Kote said with a flicker of curiosity, running a finger along the darker groove the letters made in the wood. “How did you manage it?”

“Well,” Graham said smugly, “after wasting half a day, I took it over to the smithy. Me and the boy managed to sear it with a hot iron. Took us better than two
hours to get it black. Not a wisp of smoke, but it made a stink like old leather and clover. Damnedest thing. What sort of wood don’t burn?”

Graham waited a minute, but the innkeeper gave no signs of having heard. “Where would’ee like me to hang it then?”

Kote roused himself enough to look around the room. “You can leave that to me, I think. I haven’t quite decided where to put it.”

Graham left a handful of iron nails and bid the innkeeper good day. Kote remained at the bar, idly running his hands over the wood and the word. Before too long Bast came out of the kitchen and looked over his teacher’s shoulder.

There was a long moment of silence like a tribute given to the dead. Eventually, Bast spoke up. “May I ask a question, Reshi?”

Kote smiled gently. “Always, Bast.”

“A troublesome question?”

“Those tend to be the only worthwhile kind.”

They remained staring at the object on the bar for another silent moment, as if trying to commit it to memory. *Folly.*

Bast struggled for a moment, opening his mouth, then closing it with a frustrated look, then repeating the process.

“Out with it,” Kote said finally.

“What were you thinking?” Bast said with an odd mixture of confusion and concern.

Kote was a long while in answering. “I tend to think too much, Bast. My greatest successes came from decisions I made when I stopped thinking and simply did what felt right. Even if there was no good explanation for what I did.” He smiled wistfully. “Even if there were very good reasons for me not to do what I did.”

Bast ran a hand along the side of his face. “So you’re trying to avoid second-guessing yourself?”

Kote hesitated. “You could say that,” he admitted.

“I could say that, Reshi,” Bast said smugly. “You, on the other hand, would complicate things needlessly.”

Kote shrugged and turned his eyes back to the mounting board. “Nothing to do but find a place for it, I suppose.”

“Out here?” Bast’s expression was horrified.

Kote grinned wickedly, a measure of vitality coming back into his face. “Of course,” he said, seeming to savor Bast’s reaction. He looked speculatively at the walls and pursed his lips. “Where did you put it, anyway?”

“In my room,” Bast admitted. “Under my bed.”

Kote nodded distractedly, still looking at the walls. “Go get it then.” He made a small shooing gesture with one hand, and Bast hurried off, looking unhappy.
The bar was decorated with glittering bottles, and Kote was standing on the now-vacant counter between the two heavy oak barrels when Bast came back into the room, black scabbard swinging loosely from one hand.

Kote paused in the act of setting the mounting board atop one of the barrels and cried out in dismay, “Careful, Bast! You’re carrying a lady there, not swinging some wench at a barn dance.”

Bast stopped in his tracks and dutifully gathered it up in both hands before walking the rest of the way to the bar.

Kote pounded a pair of nails into the wall, twisted some wire, and hung the mounting board firmly on the wall. “Hand it up, would you?” he asked with an odd catch in his voice.

Using both hands, Bast held it up to him, looking for a moment like a squire offering up a sword to some bright-armored knight. But there was no knight there, just an innkeeper, just a man in an apron who called himself Kote. He took the sword from Bast and stood upright on the counter behind the bar.

He drew the sword without a flourish. It shone a dull grey-white in the room’s autumn light. It had the appearance of a new sword. It was not notched or rusted. There were no bright scratches skittering along its dull grey side. But though it was unmarred, it was old. And while it was obviously a sword, it was not a familiar shape. At least no one in this town would have found it familiar. It looked as if an alchemist had distilled a dozen swords, and when the crucible had cooled this was lying in the bottom: a sword in its pure form. It was slender and graceful. It was deadly as a sharp stone beneath swift water.

Kote held it a moment. His hand did not shake.

Then he set the sword on the mounting board. Its grey-white metal shone against the dark roah behind it. While the handle could be seen, it was dark enough to be almost indistinguishable from the wood. The word beneath it, black against blackness, seemed to reproach: Folly.

Kote climbed down, and for a moment he and Bast stood side by side, silently looking up.

Bast broke the silence. “It is rather striking,” he said, as if he regretted the truth. “But…” He trailed off, trying to find appropriate words. He shuddered.

Kote clapped him on the back, oddly cheerful. “Don’t bother being disturbed on my account.” He seemed more lively now, as if his activity lent him energy. “I like it,” he said with sudden conviction, and hung the black scabbard from one of the mounting board’s pegs.

Then there were things to be done. Bottles to be polished and put back in place. Lunch to be made. Lunch clutter to be cleaned. Things were cheerful for a while in a pleasant, bustling way. The two talked of small matters as they worked. And while they moved around a great deal, it was obvious they were reluctant to finish whatever
task they were close to completing, as if they both dreaded the moment when the work would end and the silence would fill the room again.

Then something odd happened. The door opened and noise poured into the Waystone like a gentle wave. People bustled in, talking and dropping bundles of belongings. They chose tables and threw their coats over the backs of chairs. One man, wearing a shirt of heavy metal rings, unbuckled a sword and leaned it against a wall. Two or three wore knives on their belts. Four or five called for drinks.

Kote and Bast watched for a moment, then moved smoothly into action. Kote smiled and began pouring drinks. Bast darted outside to see if there were horses that needed stabling.

In ten minutes the inn was a different place. Coins rang on the bar. Cheese and fruit were set on platters and a large copper pot was hung to simmer in the kitchen. Men moved tables and chairs about to better suit their group of nearly a dozen people.

Kote identified them as they came in. Two men and two women, wagoneers, rough from years of being outside and smiling to be spending a night out of the wind. Three guards with hard eyes, smelling of iron. A tinker with a potbelly and a ready smile showing his few remaining teeth. Two young men, one sandy-haired, one dark, well dressed and well-spoken: travelers sensible enough to hook up with a larger group for protection on the road.

The settling-in period lasted an hour or two. Prices of rooms were dickered over. Friendly arguments started about who slept with whom. Minor necessities were brought in from wagons or saddlebags. Baths were requested and water heated. Hay was taken to the horses, and Kote topped off the oil in all the lamps.

The tinker hurried outside to make use of the remaining daylight. He walked his two-wheel mule cart through the town’s streets. Children crowded around, begging for candy and stories and shims.

When it became apparent that nothing was going to be handed out, most of them lost interest. They formed a circle with a boy in the middle and started to clap, keeping the beat with a children’s song that had been ages old when their grandparents had chanted it:

“When the hearthfire turns to blue,
What to do? What to do?
Run outside. Run and hide.”

Laughing, the boy in the middle tried to break out of the circle while the other children pushed him back.


This drew the attention of the children. They flocked back to him, making a small parade as he walked down the street, singing, “Belt leather. Black pepper. Fine lace and bright feather. Tinker in town tonight, gone tomorrow. Working through the
evening light. Come wife. Come daughter, I’ve small cloth and rose water.” After a couple of minutes he settled outside the Waystone, set up his sharpening wheel and began to grind a knife.

As the adults began to gather around the old man, the children returned to their game. A girl in the center of the circle put one hand over her eyes and tried to catch the other children as they ran away, clapping and chanting:

“When his eyes are black as crow?
Where to go? Where to go?
Near and far. Here they are.”

The tinker dealt with everyone in turn, sometimes two or three at a time. He traded sharp knives for dull ones and a small coin. He sold shears and needles, copper pots and small bottles that wives hid quickly after buying them. He traded buttons and bags of cinnamon and salt. Limes from Tinuë, chocolate from Tarbean, polished horn from Aerueh….

All the while the children continued to sing:

“See a man without a face?
Move like ghosts from place to place.
What’s their plan? What’s their plan?
Chandrian. Chandrian.”

Kote guessed the travelers had been together a month or so, long enough to become comfortable with each other, but not long enough to be squabbling over small things. They smelled of road dust and horses. He breathed it in like perfume.

Best of all was the noise. Leather creaking. Men laughing. The fire cracked and spat. The women flirted. Someone even knocked over a chair. For the first time in a long while there was no silence in the Waystone Inn. Or if there was, it was too faint to be noticed, or too well hidden.

Kote was in the middle of it all, always moving, like a man tending a large, complex machine. Ready with a drink just as a person called for it, he talked and listened in the right amounts. He laughed at jokes, shook hands, smiled, and whisked coins off the bar as if he truly needed the money.

Then, when the time for songs came and everyone had sung their favorites and still wanted more, Kote led them from behind the bar, clapping to keep a beat. With the fire shining in his hair, he sang “Tinker Tanner,” more verses than anyone had heard before, and no one minded in the least.

Hours later, the common room had a warm, jovial feel to it. Kote was kneeling on the hearth, building up the fire, when someone spoke behind him.

“Kvothe?”

The innkeeper turned, wearing a slightly confused smile. “Sir?”

It was one of the well-dressed travelers. He swayed a little. “You’re Kvothe.”
“Kote, sir,” Kote replied in an indulgent tone that mothers use on children and innkeepers use on drunks.

“Kvothe the Bloodless.” The man pressed ahead with the dogged persistence of the inebriated. “You looked familiar, but I couldn’t finger it.” He smiled proudly and tapped a finger to his nose. “Then I heard you sing, and I knew it was you. I heard you in Imre once. Cried my eyes out afterward. I never heard anything like that before or since. Broke my heart.”

The young man’s sentences grew jumbled as he continued, but his face remained earnest. “I knew it couldn’t be you. But I thought it was. Even though. But who else has your hair?” He shook his head, trying unsuccessfully to clear it. “I saw the place in Imre where you killed him. By the fountain. The cobblestones are all shattered.” He frowned and concentrated on the word. “Shattered. They say no one can mend them.”

The sandy-haired man paused again. Squinting for focus, he seemed surprised by the innkeeper's reaction.

The red-haired man was grinning. “Are you saying I look like Kvothe? The Kvothe? I’ve always thought so myself. I have an engraving of him in back. My assistant teases me for it. Would you tell him what you just told me?”

Kote threw a final log onto the fire and stood. But as he stepped from the hearth, one of his legs twisted underneath him and he fell heavily to the floor, knocking over a chair.

Several of the travelers hurried over, but the innkeeper was already on his feet, waving people back to their seats. “No, no. I’m fine. Sorry to startle anyone.” In spite of his grin it was obvious he’d hurt himself. His face was tight with pain, and he leaned heavily on a chair for support.

“ Took an arrow in the knee on my way through the Eld three summers ago. It gives out every now and then.” He grimaced and said wistfully, “It’s what made me give up the good life on the road.” He reached down to touch his oddly bent leg tenderly.

One of the mercenaries spoke up. “I’d put a poultice on that, or it’ll swell terrible.”

Kote touched it again and nodded. “I think you are wise, sir.” He turned to the sandy-haired man who stood swaying slightly by the fireplace, “Could you do me a favor, son?”

The man nodded dumbly.

“Just close the flue.” Kote gestured toward the fireplace. “Bast, will you help me upstairs?”

Bast hurried over and drew Kote’s arm around his shoulders. Kote leaned on him with every other step as they made their way through the doorway and up the stairs.
“Arrow in the leg?” Bast asked under his breath. “Are you really that embarrassed from taking a little fall?”

“Thank God you’re as gullible as they are,” Kote said sharply as soon as they were out of sight. He began to curse under his breath as he climbed a few more steps, his knee obviously uninjured.

Bast’s eyes widened, then narrowed.
Kote stopped at the top of the steps and rubbed his eyes. “One of them knows who I am.” Kote frowned. “Suspects.”

“Which one?” Bast asked with a mix of apprehension and anger.

“Green shirt, sandy hair. The one nearest to me by the fireplace. Give him something to make him sleep. He’s already been drinking. No one will think twice if he happens to pass out.”

Bast thought briefly. “Nighmane?”

“Mhenka.”

Bast raised an eyebrow, but nodded.
Kote straightened. “Listen three times, Bast.”

Bast blinked once and nodded.
Kote spoke crisply and cleanly. “I was a city-licensed escort from Ralien. Wounded while successfully defending a caravan. Arrow in right knee. Three years ago. Summer. A grateful Cealdish merchant gave me money to start an inn. His name is Deolan. We were traveling from Purvis. Mention it casually. Do you have it?”

“I hear you three times, Reshi,” Bast replied formally.

“Go.”

Half an hour later Bast brought a bowl to his master’s room, reassuring him that everything was well downstairs. Kote nodded and gave terse instructions that he not be disturbed for the rest of the night.

Closing the door behind himself, Bast’s expression was worried. He stood at the top of the stairs for some time, trying to think of something he could do.

It is hard to say what troubled Bast so much. Kote didn’t seem noticeably changed in any way. Except, perhaps, that he moved a little slower, and whatever small spark the night’s activity had lit behind his eyes was dimmer now. In fact, it could hardly be seen. In fact, it may not have been there at all.

Kote sat in front of the fire and ate his meal mechanically, as if he were simply finding a place inside himself to keep the food. After the last bite he sat staring into nothing, not remembering what he had eaten or what it tasted like.

The fire snapped, making him blink and look around the room. He looked down at his hands, one curled inside the other, resting in his lap. After a moment, he lifted and spread them, as if warming them by the fire. They were graceful, with long, delicate fingers. He watched them intently, as if expecting them to do something on their own. Then he lowered them to his lap, one hand lightly cupping the other, and
returned to watching the fire. Expressionless, motionless, he sat until there was nothing left but grey ash and dully glowing coals.

As he was undressing for bed, the fire flared. The red light traced faint lines across his body, across his back and arms. All the scars were smooth and silver, streaking him like lightning, like lines of gentle remembering. The flare of flame revealed them all briefly, old wounds and new. All the scars were smooth and silver except one.

The fire flickered and died. Sleep met him like a lover in an empty bed.

The travelers left early the next morning. Bast tended to their needs, explaining his master’s knee was swollen quite badly and he didn’t feel up to taking the stairs so early in the day. Everyone understood except for the sandy-haired merchant’s son, who was too groggy to understand much of anything. The guards exchanged smiles and rolled their eyes while the tinker gave an impromptu sermon on the subject of temperance. Bast recommended several unpleasant hangover cures.

After they left, Bast tended to the inn, which was no great chore, as there were no customers. Most of his time was spent trying to find ways to amuse himself.

Some time after noon, Kote came down the stairs to find him crushing walnuts on the bar with a heavy leather-bound book. “Good morning, Reshi.”

“Good morning, Bast,” Kote said. “Any news?”

“The Orrison boy stopped by. Wanted to know if we needed any mutton.”

Kote nodded, almost as if he had been suspecting the news. “How much did you order?”

Bast made a face. “I hate mutton, Reshi. It tastes like wet mittens.”

Kote shrugged and made his way to the door. “I’ve got some errands to run. Keep an eye on things, will you?”

“I always do.”

Outside the Waystone Inn the air lay still and heavy on the empty dirt road that ran through the center of town. The sky was a featureless grey sheet of cloud that looked as if it wanted to rain but couldn’t quite work up the energy.

Kote walked across the street to the open front of the smithy. The smith wore his hair cropped short and his beard thick and bushy. As Kote watched, he carefully drove a pair of nails through a scythe blade’s collar, fixing it firmly onto a curved wooden handle. “Hello Caleb.”

The smith leaned the scythe up against the wall. “What can I do for you, Master Kote?”

“Did the Orrison boy stop by your place too?” Caleb nodded. “They still losing sheep?” Kote asked.

“Actually, some of the lost ones finally turned up. Torn up awful, practically shredded.”

“Wolves?” Kote asked.
The smith shrugged. “It’s the wrong time of year, but what else would it be? A bear? I guess they’re just selling off what they can’t watch over properly, them being shorthanded and all.”

“Shorthanded?”

“Had to let their hired man go because of taxes, and their oldest son took the king’s coin early this summer. He’s off fighting the rebels in Menat now.”

“Meneras,” Kote corrected gently. “If you see their boy again, let him know I’d be willing to buy about three halves.”

“I’ll do that.” The smith gave the innkeeper a knowing look. “Is there anything else?”

“Well,” Kote looked away, suddenly self-conscious. “I was wondering if you have any rod-iron lying around,” he said, not meeting the smith’s eye. “It doesn’t have to be anything fancy mind you. Just plain old pig-iron would do nicely.”

Caleb chuckled. “I didn’t know if you were going to stop by at all. Old Cob and the rest came by day before yesterday.” He walked over to a workbench and lifted up a piece of canvas. “I made a couple extras just in case.”

Kote picked up a rod of iron about two feet long and swung it casually with one hand. “Clever man.”

“I know my business,” the smith said smugly. “You need anything else?”

“Actually,” Kote said as he settled the bar of iron comfortably against his shoulder, “There is one other thing. Do you have a spare apron and set of forge gloves?”

“Could have,” Caleb said hesitantly. “Why?”

“There’s an old bramble patch behind the inn.” Kote nodded in the direction of the Waystone. “I’m thinking of tearing it up so I can put in a garden next year. But I don’t fancy losing half my skin doing it.”

The smith nodded and gestured for Kote to follow him into the back of the shop. “I’ve got my old set,” he said as he dug out a pair of heavy gloves and a stiff leather apron; both were charred dark in places and stained with grease. “They’re not pretty, but they’ll keep the worst of it off you, I suppose.”

“What are they worth to you?” Kote asked, reaching for his purse.

The smith shook his head, “A jot would be a great plenty. They’re no good to me or the boy.”

The innkeeper handed over a coin and the smith stuffed them into an old burlap sack. “You sure you want to do it now?” The smith asked. “We haven’t had rain in a while. The ground’ll be softer after the spring thaw.”

Kote shrugged. “My granda always told me that fall’s the time to root up something you don’t want coming back to trouble you.” Kote mimicked the quaver of an old man’s voice. “‘Things are too full of life in the spring months. In the summer, they’re too strong and won’t let go. Autumn…”’ He looked around at the changing
leaves on the trees. ““Autumn’s the time. In autumn everything is tired and ready to
die.””

Later that afternoon Kote sent Bast to catch up on his sleep. Then he moved listlessly
around the inn, doing small jobs left over from the night before. There were no
customers. When evening finally came he lit the lamps and began to page
disinterestedly through a book.

Fall was supposed to be the year’s busiest time, but travelers were scarce lately.
Kote knew with bleak certainty how long winter would be.

He closed the inn early, something he had never done before. He didn’t bother
sweeping. The floor didn’t need it. He didn’t wash the tables or the bar, none had been
used. He polished a bottle or two, locked the door, and went to bed.

There was no one around to notice the difference. No one except Bast, who
watched his master, and worried, and waited.

CHAPTER FOUR

Halfway to Newarre

CHRONICLER WALKED. Yesterday he had limped, but today there was no part of
his feet that didn’t hurt, so limping did no good. He had searched for horses in
Abbot’s Ford and Rannish, offering outrageous prices for even the most broken-down
animals. But in small towns like these, people didn’t have horses to spare, especially
not with harvest fast approaching.

Despite a hard day’s walking, he was still on the road when night fell, making
the rutted dirt road a stumbling ground of half-seen shapes. After two hours of
fumbling through the dark, Chronicler saw light flickering through the trees and
abandoned any thought of making it to Newarre that night, deciding a farmstead’s
hospitality would be welcome enough.

He left the road, blundering through the trees toward the light. But the fire was
farther away than he had thought, and larger. It wasn’t lamplight from a house, or
even sparks from a campfire. It was a bonfire roaring in the ruins of an old house,
little more than two crumbling stone walls. Huddled into the corner those two walls
made was a man. He wore a heavy hooded cloak, bundled up as if it were full winter
and not a mild autumn evening.

Chronicler’s hopes rose at the sight of a small cook fire with a pot hanging over
it. But as he came close, he caught a foul scent mingling with the woodsmoke. It
reeked of burning hair and rotting flowers. Chronicler quickly decided that whatever
the man was cooking in the iron pot, he wanted none of it. Still, even a place next to a
fire was better than curling up by the side of the road.
Chronicler stepped into the circle of firelight. “I saw your f—” He stopped as the figure sprang quickly to its feet, a sword held with both hands. No, not a sword, a long, dark cudgel of some sort, too regularly shaped to be a piece of firewood.

Chronicler stopped dead in his tracks. “I was just looking for a place to sleep,” he said quickly, his hand unconsciously clutching at the circle of iron that hung around his neck. “I don’t want any trouble. I’ll leave you to your dinner.” He took a step backward.

End of this sample Kindle book.
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