

A Fugitive

Get going! Your life's in danger!

Orren took off at top speed. In the faint light of pre-dawn, he skipped like a hare over bushes and brambles and vaulted over boulders. He ignored stinging briars at his feet and the cold, mountain wind that blasted his bare chest and whipped his long hair about. His heart pounded from exertion, and his lungs heaved, but he did not tire, for Richard's warning echoed in his mind. Like a hornet's sting, the old man's last words pushed the boy to keep running.

Horns blew.

Orren knew that his enemies had been searching for him all night and were now finally closing in on their prey. He heard them yell and whoop. He could sense their eagerness to dole out pain and terror. These were Lord Berthus's men, known as the toughs. Cruel, violent, and unquestioningly obedient to their master, they would show him no mercy if they caught him.

He scrambled up the side of an enormous boulder. When he reached the top, he looked back and saw lantern lights in the distance. The hunters were coastal villagers unfamiliar with the uninhabited high country. This provided Orren with an advantage. He knew the area well, and would have had no trouble escaping, were it not for his enemies' superior numbers.

He clambered over the edge of the boulder and dropped five feet onto the ground on the other side. He picked himself up and kept moving. The terrain was rough and rocky, but his body was nimble. His feet found every flat surface and each small space between stones. Every time he reached a boulder, his fingers grasped the rough, pockmarked surfaces, and he shifted his weight onto the rock so he would not fall backward. Large obstructions were no match for his agility.

When he could go no farther, he collapsed on the ground and struggled to catch his breath. He lay there in the darkness, his body hot despite the autumn chill. He trembled and his chest and legs ached. Maybe if he were to stay still, he thought, his pursuers would pass him by and not realize he was there.

The horns blew again.

A face swam into Orren's mind, sending a jolt of terror through his body. It was the handsome face of a twenty-three year old man with red-blond hair and green eyes. To Orren, however, it was hideous. It haunted his dreams every night of his life and was always present in the back of his mind during the day.

It was the face of Lord Berthus Randolphus.

Orren had grown up on Lord Berthus's manor. Forced to live among wallowing hogs, the boy feared the tyrant and the toughs who worked for him. Lord Berthus seemed to have a particular hatred for him, and the boy was aware that his life always hung in the balance. Throughout his childhood, the tyrant's presence had been over him like a pall of

death, with only Richard standing in its way.

Orren wanted nothing more than to get away from Lord Berthus and to never see him again. To do so, however, he would have to move quickly and with stealth. Richard had instructed him to flee to the mainland, and once there, to find his way to the city of Alivadus. There, under powerful Baron Toynberg, who controlled that region, Orren would find sanctuary and would never have to worry about Lord Berthus again.

Electrified by that thought, he leapt into action and adrenaline took over. He set off at a faster pace. He skipped from rock to rock with the agility of a mountain goat and plowed through the underbrush like a badger. Thorns scratched him, and branches whipped his face. A few times he trod on jagged rocks that hurt his bare feet, but he did not notice. All that mattered was his need to escape, to put Lord Berthus behind him forever.

He soon realized that his efforts were getting him nowhere. No matter how fast he ran, the toughs' voices drew closer. His speed and agility would be to no avail unless he could find a way to mislead them.

Richard had frequently taken him into these hills. It was thus that Orren knew of something the old man used to refer to as the "fortress." This was a maze of ruined stone walls, within which one could easily get lost. Its layout, combined with bushy, cluttered terrain and thin mountain air, distorted sound. Orren had always been fascinated at how a rock thrown against one of the fortress walls created an echo that gave the impression that the noise originated somewhere else.

This morning the fortress would be his salvation. He charged toward the maze, which appeared black against the pillar of dawn. He approached a small gap in one of the walls, stuck his head inside, and cried out as if in pain. A shrieking echo answered from somewhere on the other side of the fortress. Orren lay still and waited, his heart pounding in his chest.

"He's in there," one of the toughs yelled, "behind the walls!"

His heart leapt as the toughs bypassed his hiding place and entered the fortress. When the last one disappeared, Orren took off at top speed in the opposite direction and headed for Richard's pathway.

There was a small cave in the side of a sea cliff, accessible only by a narrow trail. Whenever Orren and Richard used to come into this region, they slept there. The old man had many supplies stored inside it, including cooking ware, flint, jugs, baskets, bedding, a knife, a hunting bow, and a cloak made from the hide of a *vouzan*, a type of rare wild ox. There was also a hidden tunnel at the back of the cave, which could be used should an emergency escape be required.

With that destination in mind, Orren tore through thickets of bramble, briars, and holly, and descended the steep slope above where the pathway started. He tripped on roots a few times, but picked himself up and kept going. Nothing would stand between him and that cave!

When he reached the trail, he raced down it as fast as he could go. This was not an easy task, for the path cut alongside sheer cliffs and was wide enough for only one person. A single misstep could send Orren hurtling to his death on wave-battered rocks hundreds of feet below.

The sun rose over the eastern ocean, turning the waters red and bathing the cliffs in a rosy hue. The growing light made the boy frantic, for he knew that any tough who had emerged from the fortress could peer over the edge of the cliff and see him running. He pushed himself to his limits.

When he reached the cave, he saw, to his horror that gorse had grown over the entrance. Neither he nor Richard had been here in over a year, because the old man had been sick. No one, therefore, had cleared the growth away during that time, so it grew thick and now prevented Orren from entering.

He lost his temper at the prickly obstruction. He grabbed at the vegetation, ripped it away, and flung it off the cliff. After a few minutes of frenzied action, he cleared away enough gorse to allow himself to enter. He ducked low to avoid hitting his head on the entrance roof, and climbed into the five-meter shaft that led to the chamber where he and Richard used to stay. The ascent was usually smooth, but not this morning, for everything was covered in straw and feathers.

Orren used to help Richard collect dry grass and seabird down, which they would stuff into the hides of animals they hunted. They thus made numerous mattresses and cushions so the cave would be comfortable and insulated from winter's cold. In the absence of human visitors, however, it seemed that bush rats had chewed the hides and scattered the stuffing everywhere. Orren slipped several times on the stuff, but soon realized that he had to clear the debris away before climbing. When he reached the chamber, he waded knee-deep into what remained of his and Richard's handiwork.

The only light in the cave came from the entrance, and it was not enough for Orren to see what he was doing. He flailed about in the mess in search of the old vouzan cloak. He found it, extricated it from the debris, and noted with pleasure that the garment was intact. Dust and dander filled the air, causing him to cough fitfully and making his eyes water.

Blind and gasping for breath, he searched for more items. First he found pieces of leather, which he used to bandage his now stinging hands, then he located a small pot, a pan, a hunting knife, a spoon, makeshift arrows, and several pieces of flint. He placed these items inside the cloak's large pockets.

He luxuriated in the cloak's soft texture. The garment was long enough to cover him down to his knees, which was fortunate, because he wore only a ragged pair of knee-length breeches, and a belt with a pouch. Unusually, pockets made from vouzan hide made the contents within seem lighter.

The garment had a hood and sleeves, which could be left hanging free when not needed. One large pocket on the inside of the cloak was waterproof, for it had a natural

suction-like seal.

Orren felt the cave walls for Richard's hunting bow and water skin. When he located them, he fitted the bow across his chest. Satisfied that he now had everything he needed for wilderness survival, he relaxed and dozed off. Surely he was safe from the toughs here, for the cave was well hidden.

The unwelcome sound of voices at the entrance jolted him awake.

"What do we got here? A wee little cave?" a gruff voice said.

"I say so, Lumus," a brutish tough responded. "Look at all these feathers and bits of hide. Reckon the swine boy's hiding in here?"

"It's worth a look. Nice little hole for a slippery rat."

"We saw him this morning," a third tough said. "He can't have got far. Oh, Lord Berthus is gonna be happy with us!"

A chill shot up Orren's spine. His heart pounded and he broke out in a sweat despite the cold. His enemies had found the cave and would surely take him to Lord Berthus! Was there no place in the world where Orren could hide from his nemesis? Was it even possible to escape? How could he ever hope to make it out of the Corcadine Peninsula if his enemies were busy combing every square inch of it?

"How do we know anyone's been here lately?" one of the toughs asked. "The place looks a right mess to me."

"You know," Lumus said. "I saw some brush falling over the edge of this cliff like someone was tossing it. Maybe the swine boy had to do that to get in here. We need to look. Bombo, you go in first."

"But it's dark in there. We won't see a thing."

"That's why we brought lanterns," Lumus said. "Here's one. Go in and see if the swine boy's there, and if he is, pull him out. Don't kill him if you can help it. Lord Berthus wants to do that himself."

Orren's heart raced, and his stomach lurched. He saw the light from the lantern illuminate the top of the chamber. He cursed his short temper that had made him fling brush off the cliff without thinking. In doing so, he had alerted Lumus and the others as to where he was. Now what was he to do?

Fortunately the light revealed the presence of stones alongside the chamber wall, some of which were the size of a man's fist. Orren picked one up, scrambled over to the incline, and threw it down onto the approaching tough. He heard a crack and a groan as the man dropped his lantern and slid to the cave entrance.

"Bombo! What happened?"

"Swine boy's there for sure," another tough said. "Probably cracked Bombo's skull. I'll get him for this."

"Tony, wait!" Lumus called out. "He's dangerous."

"Don't care!" Tony growled. Orren heard the brute barge into the tunnel and he readied another rock. He looked down the shaft and saw Tony's enraged face below.

“There you are, swine boy!” the man yelled. “I’ll teach you a lesson!”

Orren threw the second rock. It hit the tough, who slid, unconscious, down to the entrance exactly the same way Bombo had.

“He’s in there for sure,” he heard Lumus say to the other toughs. “Tony’s an idiot. I told him the swine boy’s dangerous, and he wouldn’t listen. There’s no telling how many rocks that rat’s got, so no one else go in. Swine boy’s always got nasty tricks, he does.”

“What do we do?”

“We smoke him out,” Lumus said. “Men, grab as much brush as you can. We’re gonna set it on fire. All these feathers will burn. The swine boy will either come to us or he’ll be cooked.”

“But if we kill him,” another tough said, “then we can’t take him to Lord Berthus.”

“Better that than getting killed trying to catch him,” Lumus said. “We’ll show Lord Berthus the swine boy’s charred corpse and then the master can take whatever he wants that the rat’s got.”

Orren smelled burning. He frantically felt the cave walls for the hidden tunnel. He pushed aside some old clay pots to get to it, and then threw himself into the dark space. He could see nothing inside the tunnel. There was only enough room to crawl on his hands and knees, so crawl he did, as fast as he could go.

He was running out of time. Richard’s beloved hideout went up in smoke. The nauseating smell of burning feathers and hides filled his nostrils and throat. His tongue grew thick with the taste of ashes. The heat was so intense that he felt as if he was being cooked alive. His eyes stung and hot tears streamed down his face. He coughed and gasped for breath, knowing that in moments the smoke would damage his lungs.

He gave in to despair. How could he possibly survive this inferno? Any second now, he would collapse and die here, and Lord Berthus would have his wish.

The mere thought of his archenemy’s triumph enraged the boy and gave him a boost of energy. He set off at a superhuman pace. Possessed by anger and hatred, he no longer felt his arms or legs. Neither did he have to feel his way about. Though effectively blind, he somehow knew where to go.

The tunnel made a few twists and turns before it rose. The incline was gentle at first, but after a few meters, it became steep. Orren was compelled to use his hands and legs to climb. Still coughing and sputtering, he scrambled upward in a last ditch effort to save his life. He had to escape the deadly fumes, if only to deprive Lord Berthus of his wish. The stinging in Orren’s eyes, the strangled breath, and the heat were unbearable, but he did not stop.

Through closed eyelids he noticed a light. He passed underneath it, and his lungs filled with fresh air. Orren looked back and saw that he had passed underneath a hole within which a patch of blue sky was visible. The opening allowed smoke and fumes to

escape.

He was so relieved, he wept. He crawled a few more paces. The burning smell dissipated and was replaced by an earthy odor similar to that of wet mud after a rainstorm. The ashy taste on his tongue disappeared and his eyes watered less. Breathing was much easier now, and the air, though heavy, was delightful. Orren had narrowly escaped a fiery brush with death.

The toughs, he knew, would not be able to follow him into the tunnel lest they themselves suffocate. It would take hours for all the smoke to escape through the little hole, so he could afford a moment's rest.

He collapsed on the cave floor, exhausted. The impact caused something hard to push into his thigh. Orren saw stars and cried out in pain. He had forgotten about the stone he carried in his belt pouch. It was the size of his fist, ovular in shape, and as blue as the sky. He had first laid eyes on it yesterday, but he loved it as though it had been in his possession his entire life.

He put two fingers inside the pouch and caressed the stone's smooth surface. He forgot about the pain, for the unusual object gave him peace and hope. There was something special about this stone, though he knew not what.

Deep in thought, he continued stroking the stone. He was soon lost in his thoughts, and memories of his childhood flooded his mind.

The Boy in the Sties

Orren would never forget the swinery's persistent stench. The smell of pig manure, urine, and rotting food contaminated the air within its stone walls. There were no windows, and the compound's shingled roof allowed no fresh air to enter. Hundreds of sties filled the place, all of them crowded with pigs whose grunts and squeals drowned out other sounds.

Most of the time, a filthy fog sat beneath the ceiling rafters. The sty fences dripped with brown moisture, enabling fungus to grow in profusion. Mice scampered about everywhere. In the summer, the compound was plagued by swarms of mosquitoes and biting flies, which bred in stagnant pools.

For Orren, the swinery was home and had been so for as long as he could remember. Lord Berthus forced him to live there. Locked inside at night, Orren slept in the sties among the pigs. He ate from their troughs and wore few if any clothes. His hair grew long and tangled. He covered himself with mud and muck to keep off the cold of winter and the biting insects of summer.

The swinery workers were nasty toward him. They beat him, threw things at him, and taunted him with demeaning names. Orren was aware that the workers were themselves victims. They lived in constant fear of Lord Berthus's violence. Orren had frequently seen them beaten and humiliated by the lord or his toughs. Brawls between workers were common, especially after one had been the brunt of the tyrant's rage. Orren had learned the hard way to stay away from any swinery worker who had been a recent victim, lest he become one himself.

When Orren was nine years old, three drunken workers forced him into a sty with a large and ferocious wild boar, kept for breeding purposes. They laughed and clapped while the unfortunate boy dodged the beast. His agility saved him that day. He leapt onto the sty fence, pushed aside two workers, and fled to a distant corner of the swinery. There, shivering and weeping, he stayed hidden in the mud for hours.

That terrible episode, however, changed him for good. It made him realize that he would have to live by his wits. He resolved to make the swinery workers think twice before abusing him in the future.

The next day he stole chains from a worker. When the boar was sleeping, he snuck into its sty and tied the chains to the beast's trough and to the thick wooden ceiling rafters above. The workers fed the boar every day by throwing a bucket of food over the fence, into its trough. This morning, however, Orren waited for them, and when they were gone, he hoisted the trough out of the boar's sty, emptied it, and put it back. He repeated the process for three days, and the boar did not get food. On the third day, Orren stole a saw, with which he cut the boar's sty planks.

The next morning, when the workers arrived, the enraged beast burst out. In the

safety of a nearby pen, Orren savored his revenge as pandemonium reigned in the swinery. Several workers were injured, and the toughs were called in to kill the boar.

Orren played more practical jokes on the workers to intimidate them. He pelted them with rotten fruit from the ceiling rafters. He put buckets of manure on top of the swinery door to fall on them when they entered. He spread slime on the straw they walked on so they would slip. His tricks were unpredictable; a worker never knew when he would be a victim. When angry workers pursued the boy, he was too quick for them. If they caught him, they risked injury, for he knew where to punch, kick, or bite. The workers learned that the filthy boy with the long hair was more trouble than he was worth, and eventually, they left him alone.

Every so often, however, Orren was selected for some particularly distasteful or dangerous job that Lord Berthus needed done. The tyrant made him grind flour by tying him to a large millstone, forcing him to push it, and whipping him if he faltered. Sometimes the manor lord desired seabird eggs, so Orren was lowered upside down from the top of a cliff, by a rope tied to one leg. He faced harsh winds and the birds' sharp beaks to provide delicacies for Lord Berthus's table. Other times, he was forced to open the latrines beneath the cliffside manor house. He then had to shovel the waste into the sea far below.

Orren occasionally was the direct object of one of Lord Berthus's bad moods. One time, the tyrant whipped him so hard, the boy thought he would die. The welts burned on his skin for days afterward. Another time, Lord Berthus tied him to a post outside the swinery during a hailstorm. Once, the manor lord, in a drunken state, attempted to drown him in a barrel of ale, but fortunately, Lord Berthus's grip slackened, and Orren was able to get away.

Despite existing in constant terror of Lord Berthus, however, life was bearable because of Richard, the steward of Randolphus Manor.

Orren cherished the memory of the kind old man with the white hair and beard, who was in charge of the manor's internal affairs. Lord Berthus relied on Richard to keep everything running smoothly. The old man was honored and respected by everyone on the manor. He was immune to the abuse the young tyrant heaped upon everyone else, for Lord Berthus appeared to have a soft spot for him. Orren had often seen Richard use his influence to intercede on behalf of a worker whom the tyrant wished to punish. Richard listened to people and helped them in whatever way he could, but he seemed to have a particular fondness for Orren.

Many were the kindnesses Orren had received from the steward. The old man brought him food from Lord Berthus's kitchens and old blankets on winter nights. Every week, he cleaned the boy's teeth with a special liquid; treated his sores; and brushed the knots out of his hair. Richard told Orren that he wanted to help him even more, but he dared not do so when Lord Berthus was around, lest the tyrant ban him from Orren's presence.

When Lord Berthus went on trading voyages to the mainland, Richard would sneak him out of the swinery and take him places. Sometimes they went to the nearby harbor town of Tidesdale, where Orren saw the boats, merchant shops, and smithies. Once, Richard brought him to a secluded cove where he taught the boy to swim. Most often, however, he took Orren into the mountain country high above Tidesdale and Randolphus Manor. There he showed his young charge how to survive in the wild, instructing him as to the many properties of different plants. Orren learned to whittle arrows and to shoot them with precision, even if they were not straight.

Under Richard's tutelage, Orren became adept at making fires, hunting, and hiding from potential pursuers. He spent many a happy night in the hidden cave on the sea cliffs, listening to Richard tell him stories about the world beyond the Corcadine.

"You will have to escape and go there," the old man always said. "The sooner you go, the better. Things won't improve for you here."

Orren, however, had no desire to escape. Though his life on Randolphus Manor was terrible, Richard was there. Orren's love for the old steward was greater than anything else, including his fear of Lord Berthus. In the boy's eyes, Richard was the entire world, and life without him was inconceivable. The steward's presence made Orren's suffering worthwhile. How could he run away and leave Richard behind?

One morning, Orren was jolted awake by an unpleasant voice resounding through the swinery. "Where's the filthy, good-for-nothing?"

Orren's body shook, though not from the cold. He hunkered down in the mud, hoping not to be noticed. He did this every time he heard the uncouth voice of Ferrus Staffords, the person he dreaded most besides Lord Berthus. Staffords was the manor lord's peddler, a grotesquely fat man with a nasty scar on his forehead, sagging jowls, filthy clothes, and a vile temper. He stank of perspiration, cabbage, and fish, and his breath reeked of alcohol. His huge, meaty hands liberally dealt out head-reeling slaps to anyone who happened to offend him. He never entered the swinery, except to abuse some hapless worker or any other unfortunate, powerless individual he happened to meet. Orren had long since learned to stay out of his sight.

"Where is he?"

"Wh-where is who, sir?" a worker asked in a shaky voice.

"The swine boy, who else?"

Orren's body went tense. His stomach clenched and he tasted bile in his throat. He broke out in a sweat that created little mud rivulets on his face. Never before had Staffords come into the swinery to look for him specifically. Couldn't he find someone else to abuse?

"You fools, find him for me *now!*"

Orren stayed very still and wished for the bully to forget about him. He heard shouts and cries as swinery workers scurried to and fro to do Staffords's bidding. They sloshed through mud and climbed over fences, disturbing pigs.

"There he is," one of the workers said. "Let's go in and get him."

"Careful," a second worker said. "He's full of tricks."

"It's him or Staffords," the first one said. "Take your pick."

Both men climbed over the fence and approached Orren. He waited for them to come. As they were about to grab him, he jumped up and slapped them on their chins, causing them to fall backward into the mud. He leapt over the sty fence and into the next pen.

The swinery turned into a bedlam. Everywhere, workers scurried about. Orren heard the two men he had downed get up with a groan.

Before long, every worker in the swinery was on his tail. Orren leapt from pen to pen in an effort to escape, but wherever he turned there were workers coming for him. He dodged two, causing them to crash into each other. He rammed another one in the stomach. He climbed up a post to the rafters, and swatted a hanging hornet's nest into the midst of six of his pursuers. All he could hear was cursing and hollering, and an irate Staffords bellowing at the top of his lungs.

Orren made his way along the rafters to a hole in the ceiling. With all his strength, he pushed through the shingles and heaved himself onto the roof. When he got there, he found six toughs waiting for him. One of them lunged for him, but Orren sidestepped the man, who fell into the hole. He kicked the shins of two more toughs, and raced across the roof toward the mountainside against which the swinery was constructed. One of the toughs, however, proved handy with a lasso and threw it over the boy's neck.

Orren fell down and frantically tried to pull the rope off. His captor pulled, and Orren choked. Three toughs grabbed him and bound his hands so tight they hurt. The men carried him on their shoulders across the roof and down a ladder to the muddy ground outside the swinery, where Staffords was waiting. The peddler was out of breath and panting. As soon as Orren was flung to the ground, he received a kick in the stomach.

"Nasty little rat!" Staffords yelled. "When I call you, you *come!*"

"What do you want him for anyway?" one of the toughs asked. "He's nothing but trouble."

"I know," the peddler said with a snarl. "I should ring his worthless neck right now. The only reason I don't is 'cause Richard wants him. I don't know why he wants this louse, but I do what Richard wants, because Richard's my friend."

"Well, we can't take him to Richard's room like this," the tough said. "He'll get the master's rugs all filthy."

"I know. Let's clean him."

They carried Orren to a room with buckets of water, brushes, and lye soap. The toughs scrubbed him so hard, he screamed in pain. They slapped him and told him to stop making a racket.

“Keep the rope on him,” Staffords said. “I’m taking him in now.”

Orren calmed down, telling himself that it did not matter if he had a rope around his neck or if Staffords was rough with him. He was about to see Richard.

Orren had not seen his friend in over a month. Last time, the old steward was pale, out-of-breath, and used a walking stick. The boy stayed up many nights worrying about him. Anxious to see Richard, Orren went with Staffords obligingly.

They entered the manor house. To get to Richard’s room, it was necessary to climb two flights of stairs. At the top of the second flight, there were two more staircases. Staffords took the one on the left. The steps creaked and groaned beneath the peddler’s considerable weight. When they reached the top, the big man shoved Orren into the room. The boy fell to the hard, wooden floor.

“Here he is, sir,” Staffords said.

“Thank you kindly, Staffords,” Orren heard Richard say. “Could you get me some ale and meat broth? You can leave the boy here. He won’t make any trouble for me. He never does.”

“Anything for you, Richard,” the peddler responded. Orren was amazed. Even Staffords, bully though he was, loved and honored the old steward. Eager to do Richard’s bidding, the fat man left the room. Orren heard the steps creak and whine, as Staffords descended.

The boy looked about in wonder. He had never been in Richard’s private chamber before. It was small but luxurious, with a wooden floor and two tall windows, which were now open, allowing fresh air with a hint of salt spray to waft into the room. A wardrobe sat against the left wall. On the right wall was an elaborately decorated bed with four posts.

Richard lay on the bed. There were soft linens and cushions beneath his body. Next to him was a marble pedestal upon which sat a clay bowl full of steaming water, along with various jars, and a pile of folded towels.

What living quarters! Orren was happy that the men had cleaned him up, lest his filth defile the sanctum where Richard lived.

“Orren,” Richard said. “Take that rope off your neck. At the foot of the bed you’ll find some clothes. Put them on and then come over here.”

Orren did as he was told. He found linen underpants and a pair of old breeches with a belt, attached to which was a small pouch. He put them on and savored the feel of the fabric against his skin. They were very basic clothes, but to him they were a luxury, for he was used to going without.

He approached the bed, looked at his friend, and got the fright of his life. He barely recognized Richard, for the old man was pale and much of his hair had fallen out.

His lips were blue and his eyes seemed glazed over. His gnarled old hands lay immobile by his side. The steward shivered and his breathing came with difficulty. Every inhalation was accompanied by a wheeze.

“Richard?” Orren spoke in a frightened whisper. “What...what...happened?”

“Orren,”—Richard’s voice sounded terrible—“all your life I’ve protected you. I can’t protect you anymore.”

“W-why?”

“I’m dying, Orren.”

“No!” Orren cried out. “You’ll get better.”

“Orren, listen to me. I’ll be gone soon. And then you’ve got to get out of here. I really mean it this time. Leave Randolphus Manor and don’t look back.”

“I can’t leave you!” The boy burst into tears.

“You have no choice,” Richard said. “Lord Berthus wants you dead. You need to flee to Alivadus on the mainland. Lord Toynberg will take you in. I’ve told you all this many times before, but now you’ve *really* got to get out of here. Lord Berthus wouldn’t kill you as long as I was alive, but soon as I’m dead...anyway, I’ve taught you everything you need to know about wilderness survival. I want you to flee from Randolphus Manor soon as you leave this room. Go to our cave. Your old vouzan cloak is up there and so’s my hunting bow. Get them and make your way to the mainland.”

Orren shook his head in disbelief.

“Richard...why?” he said after a few moments of silence.

“Why what?”

“Why does Lord Berthus want to kill me? I never did anything to him.”

Richard tried to prop himself onto an elbow, but he did not have the strength. He had to content himself with lying flat on the bed.

“Lord Berthus is your brother. Half brother, actually.”

Orren was silent. His jaw dropped open and he sat and stared at the ailing man.

“How...how can he...”

“You don’t believe me? Open my wardrobe. There’s a mirror there.”

Orren did as he was asked. Never having seen a mirror before, let alone his reflection in one, he gasped and stared dumbfounded. Like Lord Berthus, he had green eyes and red-blond hair, unusual traits in the Corcadine, whose Gothma inhabitants were dark-haired, dark-eyed, and swarthy. In fact, Lord Berthus was the only person Orren had ever seen who looked different...until now.

Orren twirled his hair in his hands. He had never noticed its color before, because it was always caked with mud. Staffords and the toughs, however, had cleaned it, and now it was the color of the rising sun. There could be no doubt that Orren was a younger version of Lord Berthus.

“I...I don’t get it...” Orren turned around and looked at Richard in confusion.

"I'll explain," the old man said. He took as deep a breath as he could and proceeded. "Lord Lorien Randolphus was the manor lord before Lord Berthus, but he was not like Lord Berthus. The local folk loved him and he treated the workers right. Even so, he was a rich and powerful man, which made him some enemies. The Framguth lords on the mainland felt threatened by him. Lorien knew this, and he formed an alliance with one particular mainland lord, Alaric Klehr. Lord Klehr gave Lorien his daughter Rowana in marriage, and Berthus was their son."

"And me too?"

"No," Richard said. "The marriage was a disaster from the start, so Lorien had Frater Berlissi, the old priest of Tidesdale, annul it. He sent Rowana back to her father on the mainland. He wanted to send Berthus too, who was only nine years old at the time, but I would have none of that. You see, the Framguth lords worship evil powers called the *odia*, and through them, they can work dark magic. I didn't want Berthus turning to evil ways, so I made sure he stayed here with his father. Now, this is where the story gets interesting. Come closer, Orren, my boy."

When Orren approached, Richard spoke in a whisper that contained a hint of conspiratorial mischief.

"Rowana had a handmaid, a pretty young thing named Marda. Lorien fell in love with her. When he sent Rowana away, he kept the handmaid here and married her. Marda was your mother."

"What happened to her?"

"She died soon after she gave birth to you," Richard said. "Lord Lorien never got over it. He was sure that House Klehr had killed her with dark magic, and I couldn't say he was wrong. Anyway, he wanted revenge, but the only way to fight magic is with more powerful magic. So he set off on a quest to the mainland to find the *gwellen*."

"The what?"

Richard pointed to a jug of water on the pedestal. Orren held it to the old man's lips and Richard drank. He then resumed his explanation.

"To explain all this to you," he said, "I've got to side track a bit. You see, Orren, there are many kinds of folks. There are short, dark Gothma folks like the ones who live 'round here. Then you have tall, light Framguth folks who look more like you, Berthus, and your father. You get more of *them* on the mainland. Then there are other kinds of folks, who live far away. All of these are human. You got me?"

"Uh, yes."

"Then there are folks who're *not* human. They live in areas where no humans live, and you don't see them much. We call them *sabes*. Sabes come in different shapes and sizes, 'cause there are different kinds. Some would look weird to you if you saw one."

"Okay," Orren said. He wondered where all of this was going.

"Well, the greatest of the *sabe* races was the *yelia* race. They're not around anymore. But once there were lots of them and they had very strong magic. The sources

for that magic were six super-powerful stones called the gwellen. They still exist, but no one knows where, because before the yelia died out, they hid the stones. Folks were too afraid of the old stories about the yelia to go looking for the gwellen, but your father was not.”

“So he went to look for them?”

“Yes,” Richard said. “He set out into the wilderness with twenty other men. I told him he was crazy to go. ‘Listen, Lorien,’ I said. ‘Even if you find the gwellen, you won’t be able to take them. You won’t even be able to pick one up. No one can pick up one of those stones except for a yelius, and there’s no yelia left.’ And you know what he said to me? He said, ‘I can pick them up, Richard.’ That’s what he said.”

“He said that?”

“He turned out to be right,” Richard said. “He and his friends actually found three of the gwellen, and Lorien *could* pick them up. No one else could. They weren’t big stones—only about the size of your fist, —but they were too heavy for anyone to lift, except for your father.”

“Then what?” Orren was intrigued.

“His group was on the way to the legendary Valley of Beasts,” Richard said. “Lorien figured that if the valley exists, another stone would be there. They were ready to cross the Hargash River in the Greymantle Mountains. He was very close to the Fallagourn Falls. Then disaster struck. His group was ambushed by...well...he said they were walking bushes. I don’t know what that means, but I *do* know that those walking bushes shot arrows at his people. Of his twenty men, all but three were killed. Lorien himself was struck with several arrows before he jumped into the river to escape. He was nearly swept over the falls, but he caught onto a rock in time. He waited until the walking bushes were gone.”

“And then what?”

“He crawled out of the river. He was weak and had lost much blood, but his remaining three friends found him. They nursed him back to health as best they could, but he could no longer walk. They had to carry him out of there on a litter, and they journeyed all the way back to the Corcadine. Lorien got sick along the way, and a few weeks after he got back here, he died. As for the gwellen...well, one of them he lost in the river. He told me he heard it go over the falls. The other two he hid, but I don’t know where. The three guys who were with him knew, but Berthus killed them when they wouldn’t tell him where Lorien hid the stones.”

The old man’s face fell. “That’s when I knew I had failed. Despite my efforts, Berthus turned evil in the end.”

“Oh,” Orren said. He had no idea what all of this had to do with him.

“But that does not matter to you,” Richard said. “What *does* matter is that before your father left, he wrote a will, and do you know what it said? That if he should die, everything he had became yours.”

“ Mine?”

“Yes, yours,” Richard tried to nod. “You see, Lorien never loved Berthus since Berthus was the son of the woman he hated. You were the son of the woman he loved.”

“So all this is mine?” Orren cried out in anger.

“The manor house, the swinery, everything,” Richard said. “You are the rightful owner of Randolphus Manor, Orren Randolphus...but there’s nothing you can do about it now. When your father died, you were a boy of three. Berthus was nearly fourteen, and he already had a small gang of toughs. He took over the manor and threw you into the swinery. He wanted to kill you, but I wouldn’t let him. I knew then that my job was to try to turn Berthus away from evil and, at the same time, to make sure he didn’t kill you. I failed at the first task, but only you can ensure that I don’t fail at the second. That’s why you’ve got to get out of here. To Berthus you’re a threat, and he wants that threat gone.”

“Wh-why did you never tell me?” Tears streamed down Orren’s face.

“Your anger would’ve got the better of you,” Richard said. “You have a quick temper. I was afraid you would try something stupid, but now I’m dying, Orren, and my last wish is that you get out of here. Promise me.”

The old man’s eyes showed desperation.

“Richard, I...”

“Promise me!” the old man commanded in a voice that was increasingly hoarse.

“I promise.” Orren’s love for Richard was stronger than his anger at the injustices from which he had suffered.

“Good,” Richard said, out of breath. The effort from so much talking had taken its toll, and Orren could see life seeping out of his friend’s body.

“Farewell, Orren,” Richard said with the utmost effort he could muster. “I’ll always love you.”

Orren watched, horrified, as Richard stopped talking and went silent. His eyes rolled back, his face relaxed, and his breathing stopped. His skin turned gray in front of the bewildered, terrified boy.

Orren was alone.

Bold Theft

Orren could not take his eyes off of Richard. He refused to believe that his friend was dead. Such a thing could not be possible. Maybe if he were to wait here, Richard would come back to life. That had to be it.

He heard something that made his body convulse.

“Hey, Fatso,” Lord Berthus’s voice sounded from the bottom of the stairs. “What’re you doing with that jug of ale and the pot of stew?”

“J-just taking it to Richard, master,” the fat peddler responded. “H-He w-wanted—”

“I’m going up to him right now,” Lord Berthus said. “So give me that stuff. That way I’ll know you won’t eat it all yourself.”

Orren heard laughter from two other men, and panic welled up inside him.

The only place he could hide now was under Richard’s bed. He dropped to his knees and crawled under it. His right knee hit something hard. He saw stars from the pain, but did not cry out. He eased his body over whatever it was that had hurt him, lay

down on his stomach, and tried to control his breathing. His knee throbbed, but he gritted his teeth and tried to ignore it.

Lord Berthus ascended the stairs and entered the room. Orren caught a glimpse of his half-brother's handsome but ferocious face. A chill went through his body and he lay still.

The first of Lord Berthus's companions entered the room. Orren recognized Shelton, a small, mousy man with a head that, aside from a few strands of gray hair, was entirely bald. He had little, beady eyes and a malevolent sneer. Shelton was Lord Berthus's head advisor and a troublemaker of note.

After Shelton, Lumus entered the room. Lumus was the chief of Lord Berthus's toughs, a big brute of a man with a small head, a stupid expression on his face, and unkempt black hair.

"Hey, Richard," Lord Berthus said. "I'm here and I brought you something."

Silence greeted the manor lord.

Orren froze as Lord Berthus approached the bed. The tyrant's boots filled his vision. The boy tried to will his heart to stop pounding. If only he had not stood there in shock for those few minutes! If only he had done as Richard had asked him to, and escaped. Now, he might not get another chance.

"He's not answering me." Lord Berthus's tone sounded somber. "Why's he not answering me?"

"M'lord," Shelton said. "I have some experience in matters of healing. Let me take a look at him."

Shelton approached the bed. Orren stayed still while the advisor took Richard's limp wrist.

"He's dead, m'lord."

"Dead?"

"Yes, dead," Shelton said. "He's only been dead a few minutes."

"But that's impossible, Shelton. He can't be dead."

"M'lord, have I ever led you wrong?"

"Well, no," Orren thought Lord Berthus's steely voice contained a hint of sorrow. "I-I suppose not. But...well, there's got to be something good in this. I mean, doesn't there have to be?"

"There is," Shelton said. "It's very sad that Richard's gone. We'll all miss him terribly, but now that he is, you can solve a serious problem."

"You mean—"

"The swine boy, m'lord," Lumus said. "You can kill him in whatever way you like."

Orren had difficulty breathing. His mouth went dry. His hands and feet trembled. He tried to calm himself down, remembering what Richard always said about not giving in to panic, but with little success.

“Why, of course!” Now, Lord Berthus sounded gleeful. “The swine boy dies today. Before we drag that little piece of filth out of the swinery, there’s something I want to tell you two gentlemen. Shelton, you’ve been a loyal adviser to me, always giving me good advice. You were the one who helped me take this place over.”

“That’s right, m’lord,” Shelton said.

“And Lumus, you have turned the toughs into a feared militia that has squashed all opposition to my rule.”

“Only too glad to help, m’lord,” the brute said.

“Well, the time has come to show you two how well your efforts on my behalf will pay off.”

Orren’s heart nearly stopped when he saw the tyrant’s hand reach under the bed. He expected the manor lord to grab him and haul him out, and he braced himself for the worst. To his surprise, however, Lord Berthus picked up the object that Orren had slammed his knee against.

“See this?”

“M’lord! Is it—”

“Here.” Lord Berthus put it on the floor. “You try to pick it up.”

Despite his fear, Orren was curious to see what would transpire next. He moved his head forward, but all he could glimpse was Shelton struggling to lift the object from the ground. The little man gave up.

“Lumus, you try it,” Shelton said. “You’re stronger than me.”

The big brute had no more luck than Shelton had.

Lord Berthus bent down and lifted the object with one hand and without effort. The other two men whistled in awe.

“You found one!” Lumus said, dumbstruck.

“I have, and only I can pick it up, which means that only I can use it.”

“Your father could,” Shelton said.

“My father’s dead! Dead and gone. Useless when he was alive, and even more useless now, except that he feeds the dirt so we can grow our food. I won’t die the way he did, Shelton. I will rule the continent of LeFain and you two are set to become two of the most powerful and richest men alive.”

“M’lord,” Lumus said. “Why did you leave it under the bed?”

“Some of these things are supposed to have healing powers,” Lord Berthus said. “I thought it might help Richard get better. This is clearly not one of the ones that does, but I think I have an idea of what it *can* do.”

“So now that you’ve got one,” Lumus asked, “what’re you gonna do?”

“Get drunk,” Lord Berthus said. “You two can join me. I need some brandy to take my mind off Richard here. Then, when I’m in a happier mood, we’ll throw the swine boy off the cliff.”

“Make sure you throw him off the cliff to the north,” Shelton said, “so later you can go down there and see his body parts lying around.”

“I will. Good idea, Shelton.”

“And then what, m’lord?” Lumus asked.

“And then we’re off to the mainland,” Lord Berthus said. “We’ll find the other five. We’ll be taking lots of men with us, toughs, bandits, pirates, and anyone else who seeks fortune and glory.”

“M’lord,” Shelton said. “The mainland is full of dangers. You don’t expect the Framguth lords there to let you and hundreds of men romp through their lands, do you?”

“Oh, I have a plan for them,” Lord Berthus said. “The Framguth lords have a lot to worry about with all those peasant uprisings happening in the mainland. I’ll tell them that I’m their only hope. They’ll support me in my quest and we won’t have to worry about supplies, since Framguth lords own most of the land anyway.”

“But the Drammites,” Lumus said. “They say the Drammites are making these uprisings happen.”

“If they’re smart,” Lord Berthus said, “the Drammites will stay out of my way. If they don’t, I’ll crush them easily, since I’ll have the Framguth lords on my side. I understand that the Drammites perform human sacrifices. Well, if they make trouble for me, I’ll sacrifice them on their own altars.”

“And Master,” Lumus said. “There’ve been stories from up north. Foul beasts coming out of the Forest of Doom, spawn of Thelta that haven’t been seen since the time of the great wars.”

“The spawn of Thelta will be eating out of my hands,” Lord Berthus said. “You wait and see. Come, let’s go downstairs .”

Orren’s heart hammered as he listened to the stairs creak and whine under the three men’s feet. He had to escape now, for it was his only chance. He crawled out from under the bed and exited Richard’s room. He hurried down the stairs and noticed a very large basket at the bottom. He heard the servants’ voices, so he opened the basket, climbed inside, and lowered the lid over his head. He tried to still his breathing as the servants passed by the basket. He waited for them to ascend and then to return with Richard’s body. When the servants had done so, he climbed out.

He ran down a short passageway and entered a large drawing room filled with plush couches. He hid behind them and waited, keeping his ears pricked. The manor house was eerily quiet and the thumping in Orren’s heart seemed to fill the room.

After a few minutes, he emerged from behind the couches and descended a staircase, and then ran down yet another passageway. He was about to enter another room when he heard laughter and drunken singing.

He poked his head around the corner and saw Lord Berthus, Shelton, and Lumus sitting on couches and drinking from golden goblets. Lumus had passed out. The big tough lay slumped against the couch with his eyes closed, his mouth hanging open, and

his tongue lolling out. Lord Berthus and Shelton were giggling and passing insulting remarks about how stupid Lumus looked. They passed a decanter to one another and both men drank more wine.

Orren stayed hidden, waiting to see what would happen. After a few minutes, their voices became slurred. Shelton rolled off the couch and landed with a splat on the floor. Lord Berthus's voice trailed off, his head bobbed forward, and he started to snore.

Orren slipped into the room and hid behind the couch upon which his half-brother slept. He could hardly believe that he was so close to the individual who wanted him dead. Terrified as he was, he peered over the couch to see if he could escape from under his enemies' noses. Something caught his eye.

Between the couches, was a marble table the height of a man's knee. Goblets, wine decanters, and Lumus's right foot rested on it. In the middle of the table, however, sat an unusual stone. It was ovular in shape, the size of Orren's fist, and blue as the sky. It was positively the most beautiful thing the boy had ever seen.

Orren was drawn to the stone. He knew instinctively that this was the object he had hit his knee against when he crawled under Richard's bed. Lord Berthus had seemed very proud of it. No doubt, it now sat on the table so the young tyrant could show it off in front of his advisor and chief tough.

Orren wanted that stone. He wanted it so badly that he was willing to risk being captured by his would-be murderer in order to obtain it. Had Lord Berthus not taken everything *Orren* loved? Orren's inheritance, property, and the life of luxury he should have lived, had all been ripped away from him by his evil half-brother. An untold amount of time that could have been spent with Richard had also been stolen from him. As if all of this were not enough, Lord Berthus wanted to take away Orren's life as well.

It was only right that Orren should take something from Lord Berthus, something the tyrant cared about.

He tiptoed over to the table, grabbed the stone, and shoved it into the pouch on his belt. It suddenly hit him that he had stolen something from Lord Berthus! A cold shower of terror went through his body like an earth tremor. In panic, he fled. He dashed down the hall leading out of the chamber, and ran into the kitchen. A large, fat chef stared wide-eyed at him.

"Stop! Where are you going?"

He tried to grab Orren, but the boy rammed him in the stomach, sending the man sprawling into a sack of flour. The sack tipped over and the kitchen went white. Coughing, Orren continued running. A young servant saw him covered in flour and screamed, "A ghost! There's a ghost!"

Yelling and pandemonium erupted from all corners of the house. Orren knew he had raised the alarm, and he cursed his luck.

The next chamber he entered was a long dining room with a big table in the middle and fancy chairs. There were four large windows, all of which were open to allow

a breeze in. Orren caught a whiff of wild fennel, and it occurred to him that if there was wild fennel growing outside the window, it must mean there was ground there, as opposed to sheer sea-cliffs.

He ran to one window, looked out, and saw that indeed, there was only an eight-foot drop to a narrow piece of ground on the cliff edge. He leapt out, landed on his feet, and ran. He circumnavigated the manor house walls and soon, was on the little wagon way that cut alongside Randolphus Manor and through the holly and spindle forests. He raced up the road as fast as he could go, heading for the little, hidden trail that led up Cloudwisp Peak. Too late, he saw Staffords step out into the road. The fat peddler moved surprisingly quick and grabbed Orren by the arm.

“Well, well, what have we here?” he smirked. “You trying to escape, little rat?”

“No, Staffords, sir,” Orren stammered. “I was trying to—“

The peddler slapped him across the face. Orren fell to the ground and tasted blood.

“Don’t lie to me!” the peddler growled. “You’re coming with me, back to Lord Berthus.”

Orren bit him on the arm. Staffords howled and let him go. Bellowing, the peddler lunged for the boy. Orren rolled out of his way. Staffords lost his balance and fell. The fat man started to pick himself up, but Orren kicked him in a very painful place, and then fled. After a twist in the road, he was out of the peddler’s sight.

He found Richard’s hidden pathway. He charged up the mountainside, crashing through holly and juniper branches. Desperation gave him an energy boost, and he did not stop until he reached a small ledge where he and Richard had once watched the sun set over the western ocean. Overwhelmed by exertion and memories, he collapsed.

It was dark and silent in the tunnel. Orren was alone with his thoughts and memories. In fact, he was alone in the world, for Richard was gone, and no amount of denial would change that.

The realization that the only friend he ever had was dead pressed upon him like a heavy boulder. Tears streamed down his cheeks. A lump developed in his throat and there was a gnawing sensation in his stomach. He had many happy memories, but there would be no more. Even the old cave Richard loved was now a smoking ruin.

Orren had never considered life without Richard. He had never entertained the possibility that the old steward might die one day. To him, Richard was life itself and without him, how could there be a future?

The boy lay flat on the tunnel floor and bawled. Incapacitating thoughts went through his head. Did it really matter whether he was burnt to a crisp in the cave or whether the toughs captured him? Would it make a difference if he stayed here until he starved to death? What use did his life have if Richard was not there to share it?

Snap out of it, a voice in his mind spoke. Richard would not want you this way.

Orren's eyes flew open. His heart jumped.

The voice had spoken to him! How could that be?

The voice was akin to that of a man, but was purely telepathic, and possessed a richness that seemed more than human. It had always been with him, but had never actually spoken. On lonely nights in the dank air of the swinery, when Orren was miserable and pined for Richard, the voice hummed soothing tunes in his mind, lulling him to sleep.

He did not know what the voice was. He had never given much thought to it, really. It had always been there. He had never imagined it would actually talk, though.

"Huh?" Orren spoke aloud. "Did you say something?"

I said that Richard would not want you to be like this, the voice said. *He would want you to flee the Corcadine, go to the mainland, and make a new life for yourself.*

"But how can I have a new life without Richard in it?"

There will be new opportunities, new friends. Richard lived to protect you. He trained you to survive in the wild. All he wanted was for you to escape from Lord Berthus and make a life elsewhere. You owe it to him to obey his last, dying wish.

Orren got up on his hands and knees. Whether it hummed or spoke, the voice had always inspired him to carry on, much as it was doing now. Orren decided that what it said was correct. If he really wanted to honor Richard's memory, he would do as the old steward had asked. That meant escaping the Corcadine, but first he would have to get out of this tunnel.