

# The Prophecy of the Kings

Book 1

Legacy of the Eldric

By David Burrows

Second Edition January 2010  
Copyright © D Burrows 2010

The Prophecy of the Kings trilogy comprises  
Book 1: Legacy of the Eldric  
Book 2: Dragon Rider  
Book 3: Shadow of the Demon

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical or photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the author.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by the way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the author's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Cover artwork by Philip McDonnell.  
Copyright David Burrows - all rights reserved

**ISBN 978-0-9556760-5-5**

## Prologue

“Lay the body there,” Chanathan said pointing.

The three soldiers carrying the corpse dropped their burden with a meaty thud to the forest carpet. The men looked disgusted by their task. In the distance an owl hooted and one of the men looked around, fear glinting in his eyes as he scanned the hidden recesses between the trees.

“It’s an owl,” one of his companions said. Chanathan could hear the concern in the voice. Only months ago the sight of another man’s fear would have elicited sarcasm or even bullying, but after the recent horrors there was a greater bond between these men. *Battle brothers* was a common enough expression, but only men who had stood shoulder to shoulder in the darkest moments of combat truly understood what that meant, men who had felt blood splash their hands and blades and experienced the pervading stench of blood, sweat and steel in their nostrils. That was how such close bonds were forged.

Chanathan stepped up to the corpse and spat in its eyes. The body was that of a man in his thirties. He wore a robe whose colour in the dark of the wood was difficult to decide. It did nothing, though, to conceal the bloodstain that marked the deep wound that had killed him.

Chanathan turned on his heel. Coming between the trees in file were others who had fought demons only hours before. It had been close, but Drachar’s death had finished the bloody conflict and even now, men of the alliance were hunting down the enemy as they sought to escape. Many of the approaching men were sorcerers and all were clearly bone tired, stumbling as they came into the clearing. Even though they were exhausted, Chanathan knew that one final act was required to guarantee an end to the bloody war.

Ashona approached Chanathan. She looked close to tears, and Chanathan felt pity overwhelm him. His own tears threatened and he choked down his emotions, but could not stop himself from taking her hand. Victory felt so very hollow, not at all how he had imagined it to be so many months ago—death still befouled his mind like a toxin.

“Swiftly, we must bind his spirit. It must *not* be allowed to escape or the demons will crown him their king,” Chanathan said.

“Surely not,” Ashona replied. “How can the demons still follow *him* after what has happened? He *failed* them. He is dead. We have killed sorcerers by the score. They cannot summon demons—not for a hundred years at least.”

Chanathan shook his head. “You are wrong, I fear. *He* made a pact with the demons, a pact that even death cannot undo. He has given the demons everything they wanted. Countless souls sent screaming to their world for eternal damnation. If they get *his* soul too, they will bow to him and call *him* Lord.”

Ashona sobbed. “Then we have failed!”

“No. Not if we can banish his soul.”

“And how can we do that?” Ashona pleaded. Chanathan looked past the

grime of battle and into her eyes. With more affection than he had ever felt before he stroked a strand of hair from her face.

Without replying, he turned to the other sorcerers who by now had spread themselves around the clearing. They looked a sorry bunch, blood-soaked and covered in gore. Some distance away he could hear the army celebrating; men calling out to each other, glad to find friends and relatives alive; drinking away the cold fear instilled by demons only moments before. Abruptly singing filled the air. Only troops fresh from the horrors of war could show such emotion. By comparison, the men around Chanathan were silent, begrimed with blood and barely able to stand.

“We must act swiftly. Until this night is done his shade will be confined to his earthly body. You there, Carlan, Aswall and Harecht, draw a rune of binding around the corpse. Tarlam and Herest, summon elementals at each corner of the rune. Air, fire and water will do for what we need.”

The men set to their activities while the others fell back to watch. As they worked, the din from the army became background noise. Woodland creatures occasionally called out, distracting Chanathan from his musing. What he planned, no one had tried before and he had to think, if this went wrong he would doom his friends, and himself.

Finally, the others were ready. He looked down at the corpse now lying at the centre of a rune, diligently drawn in the dirt. At each of the rune’s corners, tiny elementals glowed; their small voices clear even with all the other sounds around them.

The sorcerers gathered while the three soldiers hovered to one side, knowing they were witnessing a truly significant moment in history. This was a solemn time.

Chanathan raised his eyes skyward. Casting a rune in the air with his hand he called aloud, “Drachar, I summon you!”

Nothing stirred. A breeze caused the trees to sway and for a moment the rustle of leaves drowned out the distant celebration.

“Drachar!” Chanathan called more urgently. “You are summoned to pay for your crimes.”

A pungent smell filled the clearing. Unable to help themselves some men stepped back, fear pounding their hearts like poison coursing through their veins. A silver shape appeared, hovering eerily above the corpse.

“Bind them, both body and soul,” Chanathan ordered and others immediately spoke, casting runes to strengthen their earlier spell.

The glow took strength and the indistinct form of a man appeared. Hollow eyes stared deep into Chanathan’s soul and for a moment he nearly quailed, but then, by his side, Ashona squeezed his hand. All at once he was glad of her presence.

“Foul creature! Abomination!” Chanathan roared.

The spectre laughed. “But I am one of you,” a ghostly voice whispered, grinding the nerves of all present. “I, too, am one of the Eldric.”

“How dare you!” Chanathan shouted, suppressing a shudder. “You forsook us the moment you looked upon the demon world. Your twisted craving for power has destroyed you. The king banished you. You were unmade and unnamed; the sands of your soul stained forever by the blood of betrayal. How

dare you compare yourself to us?"

"You forget," answered the now mirthless voice. "We were *all* banished. We left our homeland hundreds of years ago because our ancestors dared to look upon the demon world. I am more like you than you would care to admit."

Chanathan was stunned into silence. The spectre faded briefly and for a moment Chanathan thought it was gone.

"Bind it!" Prince Ellard said, stepping forward, looking up at the spectre. "You are a traitor! You killed the King!"

"He killed me first," the spectre said in a peevish tone.

"Damn you! You betrayed your people! We will not let you find your way to the demon world," said Ellard. To Chanathan it seemed that his eyes flamed with passion.

"But you cannot stop me! I am Drachar! I do as I will, and *I will* damn you all."

There was a silence for a moment. Even the revelry seemed to have stopped as though the world was holding its breath.

"But you are wrong," Ashona said softly. At the start of the war she had been such a gentle soul, but looking at her now...

Her eyes bored into Drachar's and her shoulders were set in utter defiance. "We will banish you but not to where you expect to go! Prince Ellard, give me your sword. Only one of the seven will help with this spell casting."

Ellard stepped forward and handed his sword over. It was a marvellous weapon, forged from a meteor that had crashed to the earth the previous year. They had made seven swords and each was proof against demons.

"What are you going to do?" Fear tainted Drachar's voice, and briefly he appeared to shrink.

Ashona chanted as she drew a rune over the blade. Chanathan realised then her intent. The sword amplified the power of the person holding it. The rune was to open a gateway to another world and for a moment Chanathan feared Ashona was opening a gateway to Hell. He did not recognise the rune at first and then comprehension dawned.

Prince Ellard must also have realised for he rushed over to take back his sword, but Chanathan laid a hand on his shoulder. "It is all right. She knows what she is doing. She is opening a gateway not to another world but between them."

Ellard frowned. "The nether regions?" he asked

Behind them Drachar wailed. His form glowed brighter and the surrounding sorcerers' voices became more urgent. At that moment, an elemental expired; its scream echoing into the night air.

"Help them," Chanathan ordered and others joined the sorcerers about the rune, summoning elementals to bind Drachar in place. Furiously he struggled and then the gateway was complete, purple and green streaming from it.

"Go!" Prince Ellard commanded, laying his hand on his sword. The ghostly shape drifted towards the gaping rent in space as an icy wind gusted, a prelude to the nothingness beyond.

"You shall not stop me!" he screamed. "I will return and then I will destroy you, your children and their children." The light from his ethereal form faded as it progressed through the gaping wound. Then abruptly it was gone. Ashona stopped casting the rune and the rent slammed shut, Drachar's final scream

fading away.

Night noises about the wood returned as though the banishment had forbidden sound.

All at once, Chanathan sensed that it was too much for Ashona. She sat on the ground as though her legs could no longer support her. Others were leaving but at her collapse, they paused.

Ashona cried out, "I see it! I see the future. Drachar *will* return! I see the fires! I see the death!"

Chanathan knelt by her side. "Calm yourself. That is not possible." The three soldiers came over, wanting to help but hesitating, too afraid to come too close.

Chanathan gently took her face in his hand and made her turn to look at him. "We have won. We have banished Drachar's shade. This land is safe now."

Ashona stared past Chanathan. He sensed she was seeing into another world.

Her voice was so low that he had to strain his ears to hear her. By his side one of the soldiers gasped. "It's a prophecy," he murmured in awe.

*When Tallin's crown once more does shine,  
Drachar's shade will rise sublime,  
Three Princes Royal through time will sleep,  
An appointment with destiny three kings to keep,  
Trosgarth's arm across the land will reach,  
Of war and famine his army will preach,  
And one will stand to oppose his throne,  
A king resurrected from within his mountain home,  
Of air, fire and water he will be born,  
To aid the people when all else is forlorn*

"Ashona!" Chanathan wailed, shaking her shoulders, "Ashona!" he sobbed.

The light in her eyes dimmed. She was too close to her shaol, her guardian spirit, and that had always worried Chanathan.

"Ashona," he cried.

Slowly she shook herself as though waking from a dream. "Thank the Kalanth!" Chanathan sighed, grinning broadly.

Chanathan helped Ashona to her feet. By their side a soldier made a warding sign against evil, his mouth agape. Chanathan turned to him, "Forget what you have just heard. Do not mention it to anyone." He doubted the soldier would; when she had spoken Chanathan had felt the compulsion in her tone. The man stared back blankly, angering Chanathan.

"All of you!" Chanathan commanded. "Forget what happened, under pain of death."

Ashona looked at him bewildered. "Why? What has happened?"

Chanathan looked at her, truly glad she was back. "Nothing. We have won a great battle and darkness has been banished from the world."

Taking her hand he guided her from the wood, towards hope and an uncertain future.

Behind them the three soldiers remained, but for a while only. Sensing the evil of the departed soul, they took to their heels, seeking the company of the living; eager to tell the tale of what they had just heard.

## Chapter 1

### Escape

“Please, Emma,” Kaplyn said, giving her his most charming smile and using his softest tones normally reserved for special occasions, and this rated very high on his list of special occasions.

Emma pouted and Kaplyn knew he had won and she would do as he wanted, but for the sake of the game, he continued the flattery. “You are very special to me and when I return...”

“And what will happen when you return? I am a serving maid. That is all...” Emma flashed an icy glare at him and Kaplyn knew he had erred.

“But you are special to me, regardless of your position. You know that,” Kaplyn wheedled, coming closer and putting his hands on her shoulders, looking deep into her eyes, the way he knew that she liked. He smiled again, raising his eyebrows in a questioning manner.

Emma returned the smile and beneath his hands, he felt her melt.

“How long will you be gone?” she asked.

“Three weeks, perhaps four at the most,” he replied. In truth he had no idea. His plans were half formulated. Emma looked downcast all at once.

“I need to go, Em,” he said softly, using her pet name. “I am stifling here; I hate it.”

Emma looked up and he could see the confusion in her eyes. “Most people can only dream of being in your position. How can you hate it so much?” she questioned.

“I just do,” he replied. “I have no freedom. I am followed everywhere I go. That’s not a life.”

“But you are a prince...”

“Some prince!” he interrupted. “I’m ninth in line to the throne and some of my own brothers do not even know me. Please,” he continued, “I am not asking a lot. Just distract the guard so that I can leave.”

“Not asking a lot? I know Sanfred. He’ll have his hands all over me before I can say how the *Kalanth* are you?”

That was exactly what Kaplyn was hoping for. He too knew Sanfred and he also knew Sanfred fancied Emma. In his mind, however, it was tonight or never and, to escape, sacrifices were needed.

“Look, here’s some gold,” Kaplyn said taking out a purse he had earlier put a couple of sovereigns in for just this occasion.

Emma’s eyes widened as she felt the coins within. “I would help you even without a bribe,” she said. “You know that.”

“Of course I do,” Kaplyn said, taking her in his arms. The warmth of her body and scent of her hair almost made him reconsider the folly of his leaving, but then he hardened his resolve.

“And when are you leaving?” Emma asked.

“Tonight,” he replied, huskily.

Emma pulled back, staring at his face as though trying to commit every line

to memory. "You will come back?" she asked.

"I will return with tales to make my brothers green with envy," Kaplyn grinned.

He went over to the bed and took up his sword, buckling it about his waist. A saddlebag was next, filled with provisions for the road, and then four cloth sacks with lengths of twine followed. "I'm going to get Star," he said. "Go down to Sanfred shortly. Make sure he is *inside* the guardhouse so he does not see me leave."

Kaplyn pulled on a woollen cloak, not particularly suited for an Allund prince, but one that he hoped would help him to blend in with a crowd. Looking at himself in a mirror, he saw a young man in his early twenties, long dark hair partly obscuring a handsome face that often won the heart of a young woman. He wore a leather jerkin, secretly acquired at the market a few weeks earlier. Again, it was practical rather than flashy, as was his norm. His riding boots were expensive and these and his sword were the only items that might betray his privileged upbringing.

Kaplyn kissed Emma and, without a backward glance, left the plush rooms of his childhood, striding swiftly along the deserted corridors, thankful for the thick carpet that silenced his footfalls. He was surprised that, even though the hour was late, lanterns lit the brightly decorated corridors.

Kaplyn's heart was hammering, but even still, he grinned broadly. He was actually doing it. He was escaping. Through silent corridors, he traced his way to an exit. After descending a tight spiral stair, he made it to the palace back door without meeting anyone. Pausing by the heavy oak door, he listened before opening it a crack. As the door swung silently inwards, the smell of the stables greeted him. He could not believe it was going so easily. The sounds of voices came to his ears, but the speakers were a long way off judging by the muffled tones.

Kaplyn stepped out into the night. The air was cool, not surprisingly so for early spring. Quickening his pace, he hurried to the stables, not pausing to step into the deep shadow of the open door. Horses fidgeted and, ignoring these, Kaplyn went to Star's stable, swinging open the wooden gate confining her. Star nodded her head in welcome. On a peg, Kaplyn kept his bow and a full quiver. He took them down for later.

He took the cloth sacks and tied one about each of Star's hooves. She nickered and, knowing her as he did, he sensed that she did not understand what was happening.

"Don't worry," he whispered stroking her warm flank. "Just a night ride. That's all."

He went to fetch a saddle and a blanket and then set about preparing Star for their journey, talking to her softly all the while. Once he had completed his preparations, he took her rein and led her from the stable. This was going to be the difficult part, he realised, leading Star across the cobbled roads to the gate linking the palace to the town. Once through the gate, he was confident he would escape.

As they went, he was surprised how effective the sack cloths were proving in dampening the sounds of their passage. Before long, he came in sight of the gate. He blessed Emma for there was no sign of Sanfred. Hurriedly he led Star towards

his goal, the pounding of his heart in his ears sounding loud enough to alert anyone in the vicinity. A few yards away, behind a door leading to the palace gardens, a dog started to bark. Kaplyn quickened his pace and then he was alongside the gate. He felt his skin prickle with excitement and, at any moment, he expected some one to discover him. Then, all at once, he was through and before him a narrow road, flanked with tall rickety-looking buildings, led to the main city gates. The shops on either side had their shutters drawn but, even this early, there were already a few lights and sounds of activity within some of these buildings.

A little farther on and he encountered the first people. They were probably staff going to bakeries or other employment to light fires. A few people cast Kaplyn enquiring looks and, for a moment, he feared that his clothes blended less well with the common folk than he thought. It then dawned on him what the problem was. Star still had the sack cloths over her hooves. He stopped to remove them before continuing, but the din of her iron shod hooves was too loud to dare going much farther. Kaplyn walked her deeper into shadow in the lee of a large building where he waited for the dawn when the town gates would be opened.

Gradually, as the sky lightened, more people started to appear and with them the occasional cart pulled by tired, dispirited looking horses. Kaplyn joined one as it passed, riding a short distance behind it. With his heart seemingly in his throat, he followed the cart and driver to the gates. The guards were swinging the gates open and waving traffic out. There was no attempt to stop anyone leaving, and Kaplyn simply rode through the gate as though he had every right to do so.

A short way from the city walls, he kicked Star into a trot. A smile broke out over his face and he punched the air. "Yes!" he exalted. He had escaped, but what future lay before him he did not know.

## Chapter 2 Ambush

The cracking of dry branches snapped Lars from his melancholy. Daydreaming was dangerous in a wood, especially with night approaching. Lars' staff came up automatically and he turned to face the potential threat. A man crashed through the thick undergrowth, a cudgel raised in his right fist. His wild eyes screamed silent hatred as he bore down on the big man. Lars was a fighter and instinct took over. Other men might have blocked the cudgel's downward stroke, but Lars knew that, in a fight, time was crucial. Without thinking, he lashed out with a straight-arm blow, aiming the staff's end at the man's throat.

The combination of the man's momentum and Lars' blow snapped his assailant's head back, jarring Lars' arm in the process. His assailant's legs buckled and he fell to the woodland floor, a scream impossible through his damaged throat. His eyes bulged and his hands went to his windpipe as he thrashed for air, grunting with the effort to breathe. Turning, Lars sought new enemies and, to his chagrin, several men advanced through the trees, forming a ring around him. Seeing their comrade disabled so quickly, they were cautious, but greed and poverty drove them on.

"Surround him," one of the men shouted. Again Lars cursed his earlier lapse of concentration. A foolish mistake he should never have made. Slowly he turned, assessing the men before him, his staff held out, ready to counter an attack. They were a mixed bunch. All were filthy and covered in months of accumulated grime. Their clothes were torn and, where they had bothered, badly repaired. Most carried knives or cudgels and only two held swords.

"Move in together," the man who had spoken earlier demanded. He seemed to be their leader. He pointed his sword towards Lars, but did not go forward himself. Lars kept turning, but no one moved. His eyes kept straying to the leader's sword, speckled with rust, the edge chipped and blunt. If the blade did not kill him, blood poisoning would. *Focus; watch their shoulders and eyes, not their weapons*, he thought.

The wounded man's thrashing became wilder. Others glanced down at him. His face had turned blue and his tongue protruded as though seeking to absorb the air he so desperately needed. A few final kicks and then he was still, his body contorted in the final spasm.

"He's killed Ballan," one of the shorter men said unnecessarily. The others grumbled and then one man shouted a curse, leaping forward, his knife raised. Lars' back was to him, but hearing the shout and cracking of twigs, he spun around, sweeping the staff in an arc. The man ducked back as the staff whistled by his head, his eyes instantly turning from anger to fear. Lars stabbed down at him but he was already scuttling back out of range.

"*He's one man!* Everyone, attack him!" their leader shouted.

"You've got a sword. You attack him," a man sneered.

Lars stared into the leader's eyes, daring him. He was as tall as Lars was, but

lean. His nose must have been broken many times and so odd was the shape that it was barely recognisable. The leader waved at Lars with the sword's tip. "After three," he said. "One, two—*three!*" He shouted, lunging forward.

Lars threw the staff forward, allowing it to slip through his fingers until he judged the length right. He grabbed the staff before the end left his hand and punched at the leader's face. He felt the staff connect, but he was already turning, using all his strength he swung the staff in a wide circle. If anyone else was going to move, his action stopped them in their tracks as they rocked back on their heels to avoid the blow. Lars was strong and he put all his effort into the blow. The wood whooshed through the air, leaving no doubt as to his strength.

The leader fell back, cursing and clutching his head in his free hand. When he removed his hand to inspect it for blood, there was a neat red circle on his brow where Lars' blow had connected.

"Anyone else who moves, dies," Lars declared. He was afraid, but knew that he dare not show that. These men were bullies and, no doubt, cowards, but their numbers might overcome their fear.

He started turning again so he could see them all. "Kill him," a man wearing a fleece urged. He spat at Lars but made no move himself.

"He isn't worth it," another man said. He was fat and bald. One eye looked infected and was weeping, making it look like he was crying.

"He looks as poor as we do," the man with the fleece commented.

"We are not quitting *now!*" the leader said. "He killed Ballan!"

"What do you care? You hated him," the man with the weeping eye growled.

The leader smiled. Black gaps made his teeth seem all the more uneven. "Not until this fat pig is dead," he spat.

"We need a bow," one man said.

"Then go back to the camp and get one," the leader raged. The man didn't need further urging, and ran off between the trees, disappearing in an instant in the growing gloom.

Lars muttered a prayer, "*Slathor*, give me strength!"

"What did he say?" one of his tormenters asked.

"How *the Kalanth* do I know!" the leader roared.

Lars realised he had to do something before the other man returned with a bow. Turning, he tried to determine which man might break if he charged him. He assessed each man in turn, but one seemed more likely to break than the rest. He found a candidate, a short man with wild dancing eyes and an ugly, uncaring face. His opponent held a sword awkwardly but if Lars had judged correctly, the sword would not matter. The man was also closest to the tree line, and if Lars could make it there then he could escape into the darkness.

His mind made up Lars roared, leaping at the man and swinging his staff. He had selected his target well, but, instead of fleeing, the man stood his ground, petrified by the suddenness of the larger man's attack. Lars swung his staff, its length keeping him from the other man's sword. The staff cracked against the other man's temple sending him flying. The blow was well timed and its shock raced along Lars' arm.

Not stopping, Lars leapt over the body as two men sought to cut off his escape. Now that the action had started, adrenalin conquered the other men's fear. With shouts they were all converging in on the big man. Lars flicked the

staff out at the man on his right, missing his opponent who dodged to one side. It slowed him, but already the man to Lars' left was closing the gap.

"He's killed Arland!" Lars heard from behind him. "Take him alive!"

Someone threw their cudgel at Lars' back, catching him between the shoulder blades and knocking the breath from his body. Lars stumbled forward, his attack on the man to his left failing as his loss of balance threw off his aim. Lars gasped for air as the man to his left grabbed his staff but, rather than slow down, Lars let go, abandoning the weapon. The other man, not expecting to take the weapon so easily, lost his balance and fell heavily to the ground.

Someone from behind Lars tumbled into his legs, throwing Lars to the woodland carpet. Another man lashed out with his cudgel, striking Lars across the shoulders. He gritted his teeth and grabbed a handful of dirt in agony.

"I want him alive," the leader roared.

Twisting, Lars threw one man off him but the others had caught up. Fear of their leader stopped their blows. Lars lashed out with his fist, catching one man under the chin and throwing him backward. Someone grabbed his arm and a man threw himself across his legs. Roaring his defiance Lars threw out another punch. Lars yelled as his hair was grabbed from behind, forcing his head back. A knife pricked his flesh and a thin trickle of blood ran down his neck. Lars stilled.

"Don't move," the man with the knife said. His breath was foul and combined with the stink of his clothing was almost overpowering.

Cursing, the leader ran at Lars and booted him in the face. Lars rocked back on the ground while the men struggled to hold him down.

"You killed my brother," the leader screamed, kicking Lars in the ribs. "Tie his hands and feet. I will make you suffer," the leader continued, breathless with rage, his eyes bulging and spittle running down his chin.

The men obeyed and shortly Lars could not move. "Pick him up and carry him to the camp," the leader ordered.

It took three men to lift Lars, whilst two more picked up the body of the short man Lars had killed. Lars could see the bruise on his temple where he had crushed his skull.

Lars tried to escape and his efforts caused the men carrying him to let go. He made it to his knees before the leader stood over him, his sword aimed at Lars' heart. "Tonight you will die," he said. "Slowly—and before you die you will beg me for mercy, but do not expect to receive any."

Lars summoned all of his strength, trying to break his bonds. He must not die. He had to find his wife and son. With a roar of rage he threw every bit of his strength against his bonds. His muscles bunched and, for the briefest moment, he felt his bonds give.

The pommel of the leader's sword crashed against his temple, blackness engulfed him and he knew no more.

## Chapter 3

### A Chance Encounter

Kaplyn reined in his mount. The distant scream echoed in his mind. What sort of animal could make such a noise? Breathlessly he waited for another sound but none came. Even the woodland birds and animals fell silent at the inhuman cry.

Silently he cursed himself for being a fool. He should not have entered the wood. The path he was following had long since petered out and to make matters worse, he was lost. That was not quite true; he knew where he was, in a wood somewhere between Dundalk, his home, and Pendrat, his destination. His earlier excitement had waned. Now he was cold, hungry and afraid, the latter being a new and unwelcome experience for him.

Never before had he been so alone. Always, there were people close by. Now his neighbours might be outlaws, krell or worse. He glanced around, assessing the light; judging it too dark to ride safely. Sighing, he dismounted before patting Star's flank.

"Good girl," he said, more to hear a voice rather than to calm her.

Wearily he took her rein and led her on, looking for somewhere safe to camp. The scream had unnerved him and, more than anything, he craved the company of people. He couldn't keep the tales from his childhood from his mind, of krell and other fell creatures. He tried to dismiss them by reminding himself that these were fairytales and nothing more, but a fear of the unknown kept returning to haunt him. The Krell Wars were real enough, but they were many years ago. Krell, if they still existed, roamed only the wildest regions such as the mountains and forests of the world. The wood he was in was far too small and too near the Allund capital to conceal krell. The king's troops regularly patrolled between the cities, the way was safe, or at least it ought to be...

At that moment Kaplyn stopped. Since the scream, he had walked for quite some time or at least felt he had. The trees were merciless, growing close together, making him force a passage. His hands and face were scratched and sweat now made these sting. What had made him stop though was not the trees, but a faint glow ahead. He squinted, trying to reassure himself that there was indeed a light. He continued forward when he heard voices. *Perhaps there was a clearing and charcoal workers*, he thought. He smelled the air but could only scent damp and decaying wood.

Loosely looping Star's rein over a branch he unhooked his bow from the saddle and threw his quiver over his shoulder. He bent the bow to string it and once armed felt marginally better. Taking stock of his surroundings, he inched forward trying to make no noise. All around him was the faint rustling of branches and old leaves as the wind blew softly. Before too long he saw a line of trees and just beyond these, a small rise crowned with thick bushes. He became convinced that between the trees there was indeed a glow. Dropping to all fours, he crawled towards the bushes, parting branches to see through.

Before him, the ground dipped into a glade where a large fire cast enough light to see by. A man was pacing around the fire and four men were astride a fallen tree trunk whilst three others slouched on the ground. They gave the impression of men used to living rough, hardened by nights spent in the wild and, now he had seen them, there was no doubting that they were outlaws. Some wore leather tunics torn and stained with wear, while others had thick woollen cloaks whose colour had long since faded. Their weapons were crude, mainly cudgels or knives, although one wore a sword tucked through his belt. Only the pacing man wore both a sword and scabbard, probably taken as plunder.

The pacing man abruptly stood still and threw an arm out, indicating beyond the circle of light to the rear of the camp.

“Bring him here,” he growled ominously. His voice carried easily to Kaplyn. “It’s time to deal with the man who killed my brother.”

Two men arose from the log and walked away from Kaplyn, disappearing amongst the trees. Kaplyn ducked lower, thinking that he must return to Star. Just as he was about to leave, the men returned, pushing another man roughly before them. He stumbled forward a few steps in a manner suggesting his hands were bound behind his back.

He was a big man, broad across the chest, with powerful shoulders. His hair and beard were blond, which was a surprise to Kaplyn for Allunds were brown-haired and Thracians marginally fairer.

At that moment, his captives were forcing him to his knees, kicking the back of his legs and pushing down on his shoulders. The prisoner resisted but their efforts were too much for him and he collapsed to his knees.

Striding towards the prisoner the leader raised his foot and slammed his heel into the prisoner’s face. Toppling backwards, the big man managed to stop himself from falling. When he looked up his beard was flecked with blood.

“You will not have an easy death,” the outlaw spat with undisguised hatred. “You killed two of *my* men. One was my brother—for that, you’ll pay.” He circled the prisoner before coming to a halt behind him. “The only thing is ... I haven’t decided how to kill you—*yet*.”

“Let me finish him,” one of the men sitting on the trunk offered, holding a long knife in his hand, his eyes shining with anticipation.

The leader shook his head. “He’s mine. I want to see him squirm. Make sure that you hold him firmly,” he waved his hand in the direction of two of his men. He then crossed to the fire as his men leapt to their feet to stand either side of the kneeling prisoner, each gripping a shoulder. The leader’s dagger reflected the firelight as he drew it before plunging it into the fire.

“Let’s see how strong he is without his eyes,” he said through gritted teeth.

In his hiding place, Kaplyn tensed and he felt the colour drain from his face. Part of him wanted to leave and yet another part of him wanted to aid the prisoner—but what could he do? If the outlaws caught him, they would kill him. It was a dreadful dilemma, to stay and help or to leave, knowing that an innocent man might die because of that decision. Watching the outlaws torment the prisoner, anger blossomed in his chest and suddenly he knew what he had to do.

Crawling backwards, he sought deeper shadows before rubbing soil on his face to mask its whiteness, spitting on his fingers to soften the soil. Rising slowly he stood braced against the trunk of a tree. His hunting bow, while not meant for

battle, was a stout weapon. He placed two arrows point first into the ground by his side before nocking a third. Taking aim he prayed to the Kalanth for an alternative.

The men either side of the prisoner struggled to hold him down as he fought against them. Removing the now glowing knife from the fire their leader advanced, clearly enjoying himself as he brought his knife deliberately towards the other man's eyes.

Kaplyn struggled with his conscience until he could not afford to wait any longer. Drawing his bow a fraction more, he released the arrow. A scream of agony rang through the trees as the arrow hammered into the outlaw's shoulder. With a mingled wail of pain and rage, he dropped his knife.

In quick succession, Kaplyn loosed the other two arrows. He was good with a bow and could put ten arrows in flight in a count of sixty heartbeats. His aim, after the first arrow would not be good, but the effect was what he wanted.

One arrow hit the trunk the men were sitting on and the other flashed between two others. All eyes turned towards the trees, looking in Kaplyn's general direction but not at him. He kept still and it was soon clear from their bewildered looks that the outlaws could not see him. Silently he drew another arrow from his sheath and nocked it.

As though released from a spell, the men sitting on the fallen trunk flung themselves backward, behind the improvised barricade. The two men holding the prisoner let go as they, too, dived for cover behind the trunk.

"Who's out there?" one man cried out to his companions.

"Town guard?" came a muffled reply.

"Can't be," said another. "We're too far from the town. The guard would never come this far."

"King's troops then?" came back a timid reply.

"Quiet!" snapped the leader. "Cease wagging your tongues and use your bloody ears!" He alone was standing, clutching his wound; his face twisted in pain. After a moment, he seemed satisfied. "Get up," he ordered. When no one responded, he went over to the log and delivered a hefty kick to some poor unfortunate. A grunt followed.

"There's only one man, otherwise they would have attacked by now. Get out there and find whoever shot me!"

An outlaw timidly climbed to his feet. Kaplyn aimed and loosed another arrow that thudded into the trunk sufficiently close to send him scurrying back for cover.

"He's a good shot," Kaplyn heard.

"I don't care," the outlaw chief screamed. "Get out there and bring me his head!" He delivered another kick and Kaplyn heard a further grunt of pain.

Finally, one man dared to rise, either out of bravado or because of his leader's brutality. The man sprinted for the line of trees to Kaplyn's left. Kaplyn let fly an arrow but his aim was poor and the man escaped. Time was against him now with an outlaw amongst the trees. Again he feared capture, but he could not leave the other man—not now.

Seeing their colleague's success and fearful of their leader's anger, two more men ran after the first. Events were now so out of control that Kaplyn had to shoot more accurately. The arrow hit one of the running men in the lower back,

spilling him to the ground with a cry of pain. Briefly, the man struggled to crawl forward, but his strength left him and he collapsed. The other man managed to reach the tree line where he disappeared from view.

Behind the log no one dared move, even their leader dropped behind cover, still berating the others for their cowardice. Forgotten and recognising an opportunity to escape, the prisoner climbed with difficulty to his feet and started to run towards the trees in the opposite direction taken by the two outlaws.

The outlaw leader, seeing his prisoner escaping, shouted out in rage. He stood up. A well-placed arrow barely missed his head, causing him to drop back with a yelp of agony as the barb already in his arm bit deeper.

Kaplyn shot two more shafts at the tree trunk in quick succession before scooping up his quiver of dwindling arrows. He ran through the thick vegetation, aiming in the general direction the prisoner had taken. He had little difficulty in finding him, following the sound of cracking twigs and the louder snap of branches.

Before Kaplyn could reach him the large blond man stopped and turned to face him; his feet firmly planted and defiance in his eyes even though his hands were bound.

“I’m a friend,” Kaplyn said, skidding to a halt.

The big man relaxed. “Untie me,” he replied, turning his back and offering his bound wrists.

Kaplyn wanted to continue running and the delay made his heart hammer even faster. However, he slung his bow across his back and drew a dagger. As quickly as he could he cut the bonds.

The big man rubbed at his chafed wrists. “Thanks,” he whispered.

“Go!” Kaplyn urged. “They’ll be after us.”

They jogged deeper into the wood, but branches lashed their flesh, forcing them to walk. In the confusion, Kaplyn had no idea where Star was. He was considering whether he could find her when something caught his attention. He grabbed the other man’s shoulder, forcing him to crouch. Not far away he heard someone crashing through the vegetation.

“They’re over here,” someone shouted.

Kaplyn kept a firm grip on the other man’s shoulder.

“Stay still,” Kaplyn whispered. At first, he thought the outlaws had discovered them, but the sound of their passage through the vegetation was fading. “Come on,” Kaplyn whispered and led them away from the direction the outlaws had gone, taking care to keep noise to a minimum.

After a while, Kaplyn said softly, “That was close. We nearly stumbled into an outlaw. Something must have distracted him.”

“Probably an animal,” the other man suggested softly.

Kaplyn nodded, thinking about Star. “We need to keep walking. They’ll still be looking for us.”

In silence, they continued for the better part of the night, stopping occasionally to listen for signs of pursuit. After several stops Kaplyn decided they were finally safe; he collapsed where he stood, breathing a sigh of relief.

“I’m shattered,” the big man said, sitting down across from Kaplyn with his back against a trunk. Dark rings circled his eyes and he looked barely able to stand. “My name’s Lars,” he said, holding out his hand. Kaplyn shook it.

“Kaplyn,” he returned.

“I’m grateful you came along when you did.”

“What happened?” Kaplyn whispered.

Lars shook his head. “I was foolish enough to enter the wood, that’s what happened! They must have seen me as an easy target, armed only with a walking staff. I put up a fight, but when the second man fell, their leader went wild, ordering me to be taken alive. Their numbers overwhelmed me.”

The two men fell silent for a moment, each listening to the night noises, trying to discern if the outlaws were still following them. Above, an owl hooted and then there was silence.

“I’ve never seen anyone with blond hair before. Where are you from?”

“Gorlanth. It’s far across the sea.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

Lars nodded. “Not many people have. Few Allunders even know land exists across the sea. A storm keeps all but the bravest captains close to the shore. Every day I pray to return home, to my wife and son.”

Kaplyn saw the hurt reflected deep within his eyes. In respect for the other man’s need for silence, he turned his thoughts to their predicament, estimating that about half the night remained. “We need to leave,” he announced at last.

“Can’t we rest here, for a while at least? After all it would be safer continuing in the morning, when it’s light.”

Kaplyn was not so sure. The wood made him nervous and he was keen to leave. He conceded, however, that it was more dangerous travelling in the dark.

“Very well, we’ll stay here, but we need to take turns on guard.”

Lars nodded and Kaplyn offered to stand the first watch. For a while he sat awake, listening to Lars’ snoring which seemed loud enough to attract a host of outlaws let alone whatever creatures lurked in the wood. Kaplyn thought about his brothers and how they would handle this situation. Their memory made him smile. Karlan, the eldest, was pompous in the extreme. He would have ordered Lars to stand watch while he slept soundly. For a moment, Kaplyn felt a pang of jealousy towards Lars. Why should he sleep while Kaplyn was awake? Then he considered the experience Lars had just suffered and decided to let him rest.

His thoughts turned to Emma and he felt a twinge of guilt. She and Sanfred might be in trouble by now. He would make amends upon his return he decided, but the guilt remained.

He regretted the loss of his belongings and especially Star, nevertheless he realised there was no going back. He had his purse and a few gold coins secreted into the lining of his leather jerkin so he could afford to replace his losses. Then his mind turned to the man he had shot. Even though he was an outlaw, he hoped he had not killed him. It was an uncomfortable thought and one that would prey on his mind for some time.

After a while, when Kaplyn felt that he could not stay awake any longer, he shook Lars’ shoulder. The big man stirred and looked up blearily. “Your turn to keep guard,” Kaplyn said.

Lars grumbled, sat up and looked out into the darkness. Kaplyn waited to make sure his companion was taking his duty seriously, then laid down and instantly was asleep.

## Chapter 4 Pendrat

“Are you still angry?” Lars asked.

“You *were* meant to stand guard,” Kaplyn complained. After setting off, they had struggled through the wood until finally emerging from the trees at about mid-morning. Presently they were crossing an open field and their boots tugged as they tangled with the long grass.

“Nothing happened though,” Lars answered. “I know it was wrong, but I was *really* tired.”

Kaplyn regarded the other man. The night before he had cut an imposing figure, but the light of day told a different story. He was carrying too much weight and the colour of his nose suggested he was fond of ale. However, now he looked genuinely sorry, like a chastised puppy.

Kaplyn was not happy though. Something had awoken him. Something he had not recognised. He had sat bolt upright, his arms flaying at whatever had disturbed his sleep and he could not get the image out of his mind. A face had peered down at him, green glowing flesh and almond eyes with a tongue that had flickered across small pointed teeth. Kaplyn was sure that he creature had touched his forehead. Then Kaplyn had yelled, waking Lars who had clearly been asleep the whole time.

By the time Kaplyn was on his feet with his sword in his hand, whatever had been near had gone. He had felt peculiar ever since, tainted as though touched by something evil. He rubbed at his forehead and then looked at his hand but there was nothing to see. He wiped his hand on his trousers. He did not mention his experience to Lars. He now felt foolish, having jumped at the shadows. Upon sighting the creature his immediate thought had been of krell, but now imps and demons seemed to plague his mind. Fairytales, he scolded himself angrily.

“I suppose we are both rested,” Kaplyn grumbled, in answer to Lars’ earlier question.

Behind them a rook cawed, causing Kaplyn to glance back. Something had disturbed it, and its flurry of wings carried easily on the still air. His face fell and he groaned.

“Don’t they ever give up?” Kaplyn groaned.

Lars looked around. Kaplyn could not tell how many outlaws were following; they were still some distance. He broke into a run, urging Lars to keep up.

Think! What were their options? Ahead, there were a couple of copses, but hiding was a last resort. A rabbit scampered from a thicket, startling Kaplyn. It zigzagged in front of them before bolting into a gorse bush. Kaplyn kept running. Lars lolled along by his side, his face flushed.

Rounding one end of a copse Kaplyn saw a stockade wall. “A farm,” he gasped. “Keep running, it’s not far. We’ll make it before they catch us.”

Kaplyn risked glancing back; five figures were following and the gap between

them had shortened. As he ran, his sword slapped against his thigh and he feared it would trip him. He held it still with one hand whilst he ran.

Returning his attention to his front, he had a better view of the farm. The palisade comprised logs lashed together, while peeking over the wall, thatched roofs supported chimneys, venting grey smoke against a blue sky.

“Ho the farm!” Kaplyn shouted, waving his arm as he ran. “Ho!” he shouted louder, catching sight of a figure silhouetted on the wall. The pungent smell of livestock mixed with wood smoke filled the air.

Within bow range, Kaplyn came to a halt and shortly Lars staggered to a halt by his side. Kaplyn glanced back, but there was no sign of their pursuers who must have hidden in one of the copses, probably waiting to see what happened next.

By now, there were several figures on the wall and to Kaplyn’s consternation some were armed with bows. Two men approached through a gate, both carrying pitchforks. The taller of the two was the older, grey haired and with a rugged face no doubt acquired from long days spent in the fields. The other man, probably the first man’s son judging by his age, was darker haired and broader across the shoulder. Neither men smiled as they came to a halt before them.

Kaplyn could not read their expressions. “I’m Kaplyn. We are lost and fleeing outlaws. Last night they captured my companion here, Lars, and I managed to free him.” By his side, Lars was red faced and breathing hard.

At the mention of outlaws, the grey haired man’s eyes sought the land behind them. “How many?” It was a demand rather than a question.

“Five,” Kaplyn answered.

The other man snorted. “Cowards—the lot of them. They’re content to waylay a lone man, but they’ll never attack here, with so many.”

“I may have killed one of them last night,” Kaplyn answered truthfully. “And Lars killed the chieftain’s brother. That makes them all the more dangerous.”

The farmer’s stoic look broke as he smiled. “Did you now? Killed some of them did you? Good for you.”

“I want to buy a horse, and food,” Kaplyn asked, sensing they had the farmer on their side.

“I have a horse, but it’s not for riding,” the farmer answered.

“I can pay for it,” Kaplyn took out his purse, counting out fifteen silver *calder*.

The other man’s eyes widened. “You’d better see the animal before offering your money.” He turned to his companion. “Kroner, go and fetch bread and cheese for these men. And fetch them a skin of wine while you’re about it.”

The farmer then led them through the gates where six other men and a handful of children stared at them wide-eyed.

“Go on,” the farmer said to the children. “Stop gawping and get on with your chores.”

“Will you be all right? I mean with the outlaws out there?” Kaplyn asked.

The farmer smiled. “As I said, outlaws are cowardly creatures. Besides, there will be more men here by nightfall when they come off the fields. Thanks for the warning though.

“Here we are,” the farmer said as they arrived before a tall barn. Inside, a very stocky plough horse snorted and turned its gaze towards them as they

entered. As Kaplyn approached it gently butted his shoulder, seeking a titbit.

“You have no other?” Kaplyn asked. The farmer shook his head.

The animal had been well looked after and was clearly big enough to carry them both. Sighing, he decided it would have to do and he offered the farmer the coins. At that moment, Kroner returned with food wrapped in a large cloth and a skin of wine.

“Would you like to stay for a meal?” the farmer offered.

“Thanks for the offer, but no,” Kaplyn replied. “I need to get to Pendrat. I’m hoping to take part in the games.”

“Really?” the farmer said, sounding impressed. “Which sport are you entering?”

“Archery,” Kaplyn said. The farmer looked at Lars.

“I’m heading to Pendrat as well. Wrestling is my specialty.”

“Well good luck to both of you. If you return this way, let me know how you got on. Now, Pendrat is some distance away and you may struggle to get there by tonight. If you prefer, you are welcome to stay here for the night,” the farmer offered, but Kaplyn shook his head.

“The sooner the outlaws see us leave, the safer for you and your family. Can you direct us? I have no idea where we are.”

“Fortunately you are not far from the Pendrat road.” The farmer led them outside where some women had joined the men folk to see the strangers. “Go that way for a quarter mile and then you’ll find the highway. Bear left and just keep riding. We’ll watch your trail for a while and make sure that no one follows you.”

Kaplyn and Lars thanked the two men. At the gate, Kaplyn mounted but Lars struggled, muttering all the while. After several attempts, he finally admitted that he had not ridden before. His face flushed red with embarrassment. Kaplyn dismounted, cupping his hands to help him and then Kaplyn mounted in front of Lars. They set off, waving to the farmer and his family as they left.

As they rode, Kaplyn kept looking back but after a while became confident that any pursuit was far behind. However, he hoped he hadn’t visited ill on the farmers.

Gradually, the land became more wooded and the trees made Kaplyn nervous; he had preferred the open countryside. Lars was gripping his waist so firmly that Kaplyn was having difficulty breathing.

“Tell me about your homeland,” Kaplyn asked, seeking to set the other man at ease.

There was a short delay and gradually Lars’ grip relaxed. The horse swayed as it walked but being such a broad animal their seat was secure, even without a saddle.

“It’s beautiful,” the big man started wistfully. “Although the weather is more extreme than it is here. It’s colder in the winter and the nights are longer. The summers are warm, though, and the spring is glorious when violets carpet the meadows. And the mountains...” His voice caught and Kaplyn glanced back. Lars’ jaw was firmly set and his eyes sparkled with unshed tears. Kaplyn looked to their front, embarrassed to have seen the other man’s pain.

Lars did not seem to notice and continued his tale. “My people live in villages along the coast. Our homes surround a central long hall. In the winter nights, we tell stories and drink beer.

“I miss it,” he sniffed loudly. “You’ll have to forgive me; I left behind my wife and son and have no way to get back to them.” After a pause he continued. “What about yourself—where are you from and what do you do?”

The question caught Kaplyn by surprise. “I’m from Dundalk,” he managed after what he hoped wasn’t too long a pause. “I served in the palace guard for a couple of years but didn’t get on with one of the Hest Commanders, so I decided to leave.” It was a lie, but reasonably close enough to the truth to be plausible.

“What’s a hest?”

Kaplyn glanced back. “It’s a small unit of men in the army.” At that moment, a bird took flight at the side of the path, startling the horse and Kaplyn. He hoped it wasn’t a sign for the lie that he told.

“The palace guard?” Lars said, suitably impressed.

“It sounds better than it was,” Kaplyn answered, dreading any further questions. Swiftly he changed the subject and for the rest of the day they chatted about Allund and its people. By early evening the scenery had changed, becoming gently undulating as soft sunlight pleasantly warmed their faces.

Kaplyn urged their mount to greater haste as the sun started to sink below the surrounding foothills, casting long shadows across the narrow path. He was fretful that they had not yet seen Pendrat. The wild, as they had already found to their cost, was a dangerous place and they had been lucky that they had encountered nothing worse than outlaws.

Just when he was about to give in and suggest stopping for the night, they crested a hill and at last, below them, was Pendrat. The path they were following ended at a rickety looking bridge, spanning a deep gorge. The other end of the bridge led to the main gates, which for the moment at least were open. Within the town, lamps were being lit and tiny flames sprang into being along the narrow streets as though by magic. Spurring their mount down the gentle incline, they hurried towards the town and safety.

The bridge’s wooden planking clattered noisily as they crossed. Some sounded loose, much to Kaplyn’s alarm. He looked over the side. The ravine fell away sharply towards a narrow, turgid stream whose waters frothed white against grey boulders. A stink of rotting vegetation wafted up, causing him to turn away.

At the bridge’s other end, two sentries stood idly, leaning against their spears. They stared up at the men as they rode by, humour sparkling in their eyes. Kaplyn feared that they might be stopped, but then they were beneath the thick stone walls and in the town proper.

People thronged the main street but parted to let them pass, nudging partners or friends, smiling or laughing at the newcomers’ misfortune to be riding double on an aged plough horse. Looking up to avoid their stares, Kaplyn saw bright banners suspended between the buildings.

A juggler was performing by the side of the street, keeping three balls spinning in the air. He shouted something to Kaplyn, who could not quite hear what he said, but it caused merriment to those surrounding the performer and they laughed gaily.

Kaplyn’s gaze swept the crowd seeking the distinctive uniform of the palace guard and wondering whether they had already been here. There was no sign of them and so he aimed towards a large inn, nested between tall buildings, whose

weather-stained beams sagged in the most alarming manner. A squeaking sign proclaimed it to be “The Thirst and Last.” Kaplyn dismounted while Lars practically fell off as his legs buckled beneath him.

A scraggly youth emerged from an alley to one side of the inn. “Can I take your horse to the stable?” he offered, holding out a grubby hand.

“Aye, thanks,” Kaplyn replied. “Here’s a couple of copper *tell*. Take good care of him and make sure he is well fed and watered.”

“Do you have any money?” Kaplyn asked turning to Lars.

“No. They took everything. I was going to enter the wrestling, although I was hoping to lose some weight beforehand.” He patted his paunch. “It appears I’ve developed a taste for your countrymen’s ale.”

Kaplyn considered for a moment. Taking out his purse he took out some silver calder. “Here. Take these,” he offered.

The other man shook his head. “I cannot,” he said. “It’s not right.”

“Pay me back when you win,” Kaplyn grinned, forcing the coins on the other man. “Now let’s see if there are any rooms left.”

Inside, the tavern was busy; the air was thick with smoke from numerous clay pipes and a badly vented fire. Kaplyn paused uncertainly. He had never experienced anything like this before and turned to see what Lars made of it. The big man stood by his side, clearly at ease in the strange surroundings.

The smell was overpowering; a combined reek of spilt ale and months of accumulated cooking odours. He would have to get used to it, especially if he was claiming to be an ex-palace guard!

Kaplyn forced his way to the bar. Within moments, a sullen looking landlord appeared, wiping his hands on a greasy apron.

“What can I do for you, gents?” he shouted above the hubbub.

Kaplyn shouted a reply. “Two rooms for two nights ... and supper.”

The landlord eyed Kaplyn’s clothes and his eyes narrowed. “That’ll be two pieces of silver. Each.”

Kaplyn started to rummage through his purse and the landlord’s eyes nearly fell out of their sockets. Clearly, he had expected Kaplyn to barter at least.

“And three copper *tell* for the meal...each,” he added.

Lars started to complain but Kaplyn mistook him. “It’s all right, I’ll pay.”

“Up the top of the stairs at the back is one room and through that door is another,” said the landlord, pocketing the money as swiftly as he could. “Go to the end of the corridor. It’s the last one on the right.”

“You paid too much,” Lars advised as they started towards their rooms.

“The prices will be high because of the games,” Kaplyn answered. In truth, he had no idea how much a room should cost. His purse was full but by Lars’ look the landlord had cheated him. Frowning, he decided to be more careful in the future, not wanting to attract undue attention to himself. “Let’s have a look at the rooms and meet up back here.”

Leaving Lars, Kaplyn ducked through a door with a sign proclaiming *Duck or Grouse* above it. There was not enough room on the stair for two and he wondered what would happen if he met someone coming down. His boots thudded noisily on the steps as he climbed.

At the top of the stair, a door led into a small room barely large enough for the single bed and rickety table that supported a cracked washing bowl and

pitcher. The roof was only a few inches above his head and it sloped alarmingly over the bed, forcing him to crouch to reach it.

He hoped he wasn't disturbing someone below as the floor boards creaked ominously. Briefly, he wondered what was holding the place together as he sat down, testing the mattress. It was far too soft for his liking.

He went across to a small, cracked mirror hanging on the wall. He stared at his image for a while, checking his forehead. The memory of whatever had awoken him was fading but he still felt tainted. His skin looked unblemished and now, in the safety of the town, he dismissed the event as the over activity of a tired mind.

The room smelt musty. Opening the only window, he inhaled the fresh evening air. It carried a mixture of aromas—baking bread, stables and other scents of a busy town. Even with its shortcomings, at least he felt safe.

Across the street, garlands decorated many of the windows to ward against demons and other evil spirits. The townsfolk also feared the spirit world and Kaplyn, after his night of being afraid, suddenly felt less foolish knowing others feared the dark. He left the room, hoping that the meal would be better than the accommodation.

Lars grinned up at him as he sat down. Kaplyn waved to the landlord for their meal, who in turn waved to a serving girl. She disappeared briefly before returning, holding aloft a heavily laden tray with practiced ease.

Smiling broadly, she set down two large wooden bowls containing a thick meaty stew and a plate piled high with large hunks of warm bread. When Kaplyn looked down at his plate he frowned. Potatoes and meat poked through a blanket of thick, brown gravy, looking very unappetising. Using a broad wooden spoon, he tasted a morsel. It was surprisingly tasty.

"It's good to have company again, especially with fine ale on the table," Lars commented between mouthfuls.

"After last night, I'm just relieved to be within the town," Kaplyn answered. At that moment, a slurred and insolent voice at an adjacent table caught his attention.

"Aye, that's a fact!" A man hunched over a large but empty flagon of ale was saying. "Three wizards, and I spoke with them." Kaplyn's curiosity was aroused at the mention of wizards; in Allund wizards were rare.

In all, there were five men at the table, farmers judging by their appearance. He motioned Lars to silence as he eavesdropped on the conversation.

"Don't be daft, Gillan," retorted another of the group. "There is no such thing as wizards, as we all know. If you ask me, you've been sitting here for too long and the beer has finally soaked your wits." The speaker was a small, but stout individual with a good-humoured face and smiling eyes. "Wizards are nothing more than a fairy tale and you have told enough of *those* in your time."

"How come I spoke to one then?" Gillan replied defensively, pushing himself forward to confront the other man. His face was round and fleshy and his nose was red from years of hard drinking. His eyes seemed to be having difficulty focusing and he kept blinking at his antagonist.

"Are you causing trouble again Gillan?" the serving girl asked as she collected empty tankards from the table. The others about the table grinned while

Gillan muttered angrily.

A hush had descended over the nearby tables as others listened in to the conversation.

"There were three of them," Gillan continued, determined not to lose face and forgetting that he had already mentioned their number. "I saw them about half a mile from the village. One of them stopped to ask me the way here. It was he that said they were wizards, "Coming to entertain the good townsfolk.""

The others around the table smiled, enjoying Gillan's discomfort as he mimicked the wizard.

"Wizards?" Lars whispered to Kaplyn.

"Yes, I heard," Kaplyn said, slightly irritated. Then he decided he was being harsh. Leaning over he whispered to Lars, "Years ago, during the Krell Wars, wizards were supposed to have been common, but now they are rare. Some people still travel the land claiming to be wizards, although they are more usually just clever magicians, using slight of hand to dupe their audience." Kaplyn turned his attention back to the speaker.

"And why shouldn't there be wizards?" one of Gillan's companions was saying, coming to the other man's rescue. He was a short, respectable looking fellow. The others in the group quietened to hear what he had to say. "Just because there are no wizards in Allund doesn't mean that there are none at all. And besides, look how many people are prepared to believe in other more fanciful notions such as demons; if they exist, then why not wizards?"

"Aye," a grey bearded man with large staring eyes interrupted. "That's a good point. Remember last year and old Fowler's farm!" Several nodded their agreement and, judging by their expressions, it was not a pleasant memory.

"That was never proven," replied his neighbour in a dismissive tone. "Surely you don't believe that Fowler was murdered by a demon. We're full-grown men, not daft children frightened of the dark." The man nodded towards Gillan who was too engrossed with his mug and its lack of content to take offence.

"Aye, maybe," his grey-bearded companion conceded. "But there is no denying that something strange happened that night. There are many prepared to believe that a demon took old Fowler. His wife was hysterical when we found her and her mind has since gone; she talks to no one now, save her dead husband." He sat back, balancing his mug in a casual manner on the edge of the table.

"I was one of the first to arrive at the farm," he continued softly. "That was just after his son rode into town, crying of murder. When we arrived at the farm, *by the Kalanth*, there was the most god-awful stench." He wrinkled his nose absent-mindedly with the memory. "It was unlike anything I had ever smelt before."

"If it was unlike anything you had smelt before then how do you know it was a demon?" Gillan retorted gruffly, clearly eager to get his own back now that no one was listening to him.

The other man's face was deadly earnest and his eyes blazed angrily. "You had to be there to understand, and then you wouldn't be so swift to disbelieve," he snapped

"Tell them about how you found old Fowler, Bram," another member of the group prompted. He looked a nervous individual; his face was white and his eyes

wide with superstitious fear.

Bram grimaced. "It's a sight that will haunt me the rest of my days," he replied sadly, shaking his head as though to rid himself of the memory. "The look on old Fowler's face — such a fearful look that I am surprised I am still sane for having seen it. There was blood everywhere, and someone or something had ripped his heart from his chest."

"I have heard tell, that demons take the victim's heart for it contains the soul!" said another wisely

"That would explain the fearful expression on old Fowler's face," Bram agreed. "For when the old man died his final view was that of Hell itself." His statement left his audience in an uncomfortable silence.

"Old wives tale!" a voice loudly proclaimed from behind the group. All eyes turned towards a tall, gregarious young man who gave them a mischievous lopsided grin as he casually leant against a chair; a large mug of ale held precariously in his fist.

"From what I hear, Fowler was an old man," the youth continued. "By all accounts he was as fat as one of his sows, and just as stupid." Taking a swallow of ale, he eyed the others through narrowed slits. "His time was due — nothing more, nothing less. And, if you want my opinion it was nothing more mysterious than a heart attack that killed him," he said gesturing about the room with his mug and wetting several people with its contents. "And," he continued loudly, having seen the filthy looks he was receiving from those that he had soaked. "If I had died from heart failure, then no doubt *my* face would be twisted into an ugly grimace and there would be a horrible smell as well," he finished smugly.

Several laughed at this, although the laughter was somewhat forced for his story did not explain how Fowler's chest had become ripped open.

"Farlan, your face couldn't get any uglier!" A reveller shouted back. More laughter followed and this time it was heartier. It appeared that demons were for dark, unlit places and not for the brightly lit "Thirst and Last."

Kaplyn shivered, remembering his night alone in the wild. That experience had left its mark on him and perhaps for that reason he was more prepared to believe the story. Others too clearly believed it for Farlan was given more space. Even if you did not believe in demons, it appeared that it was not wise to tempt providence.

"Do you believe in demons?" Lars asked.

Kaplyn shrugged. "No, I suppose not," he decided eventually.

Lars shook his head. "My people believe in evil giants," he said. "We believe that one-day, at the end of the world, they will attack Fallor-Ell, the home of the gods. Since coming to this land I have heard of little else other than demons."

Kaplyn nodded. "It's nothing more than folklore," he answered. "People believe in demons because our ancestors used to."

"There's logic in that," Lars replied. "But what do you think persuaded your ancestors to believe in demons?"

That was a profound question to which Kaplyn did not have an answer. In silence the two men ate, grateful at least for the company of others.

## Chapter 5 The Spring Fair

The following morning, patches of light mist hugged the ground. The sky itself was cloudless and the sun felt pleasantly warm on Kaplyn's back as they made their way towards the competition arenas. By his side, Lars groaned loudly, putting his hand to his forehead.

"What's the matter?" Kaplyn asked. He could guess, but was feeling devilish.

"Too much ale," Lars moaned. He looked pale and his eyes were red rimmed. Kaplyn shook his head, grinning.

They came to a large field filled with tents whose apexes sported bright coloured pennants. Even though it was early there was a buzz of voices, occasionally interrupted by shouts of exultation from spectators.

Kaplyn was nervous, but the archery was not until later. He considered himself a good shot and fancied his chances of winning. In the meantime, he followed Lars to the wrestling arena. A long-faced official with pious eyes took Lars' entry fee, which he tossed with a loud clatter into a metal pot beneath the table by his side. Lars offered Kaplyn a brave smile as he went to join the other contestants to await their bouts.

A barrel-chested referee with wild unkempt hair and an even wilder look in his eyes bullied the men into a line.

"Stand straight," he grouched, standing before the men like a drill instructor. "When I touch your shoulder and say a number, then remember it. One's will fight two's."

He walked down the line touching each man's shoulder and saying either one or two. "Right, pair up. There are five arenas. Off you go and good luck."

The men turned, looking somewhat bemused until other referees took charge, leading the way to the arenas.

Kaplyn followed Lars and five other men. Their referee started the fight and, much to Kaplyn's surprise, Lars managed to win the first two bouts without any problems. He was surprisingly agile and clearly knew some clever holds. The third fight proved more difficult. Lars' opponent was about his size, but it soon became clear that he knew little about wrestling and was simply using his weight and height. Lars finished the fight with a double arm lock that, no matter how hard he squirmed, his opponent could not break. He yelped for a submission and the referee signalled that the fight was over.

There followed a short break while Lars awaited his next challenger who, as yet, had not finished his fight in one of the other arenas. Lars sat on the grass, taking time to recover. Then a tall gangly individual swaggered into the ring, oozing an air of confidence. Looking down his long nose at Lars, his lip curled in a sneer. Most contestants wore similar apparel, vests and tight trousers, so their opponents did not have anything to grip. Lars' vest did nothing to conceal his over large paunch.

The fight started and Lars circled his opponent who abruptly leapt towards the bigger man and delivered a hefty blow to Lars' chin before skipping back. The crack from the contact was audible and a roar went up from the crowd. Someone jostled Kaplyn and he nearly lost his balance, having to grab the rope separating contestants and spectators, for support. Kaplyn glanced over his shoulder and gagged on the smell of stale breath.

"Sorry," grinned a man leaning on his shoulder and almost immediately Kaplyn was shoved again as the man became excited a second time. "Go on, Remus. Hit the lump of lard."

Lars was holding his chin and was glaring furiously at his opponent who was circling, trying to get behind him.

"Hit him again, Remus," shouted the man behind Kaplyn.

Without warning, the lighter man stepped in, delivered a blow to Lars' chin with his fist and stepped nimbly back. Lars turned to catch him but the other man kicked out against Lars' knee and again spun away.

Lars seemed to be moving very slowly against the lighter man and Kaplyn thought he could not last much longer. Already his nose was bleeding and he had a distinct limp. His opponent was clearly enjoying himself and he skipped back and forth in front of Lars.

"That's my boy," shouted the chap behind Kaplyn, and others in the crowd shouted encouragement. The jostling and the loud voice in his ear was annoying Kaplyn. Pushing back against the supporter he cast him a withering look that seemed to do the trick. The other man raised his hands apologetically and stepped back a few inches.

Twice more a fist flashed out, catching Lars in the face. Lars almost looked to be standing still. Then suddenly, with no warning, Lars had caught his opponent's arm, spun and ducked under the arm, turning it harshly up the other man's back. His opponent's face dropped and he tried to stand on tiptoes but Lars forced the arm higher until Kaplyn fancied he heard the joint pop.

"Ouch," shouted the man behind Kaplyn. "That must have hurt."

Kaplyn afforded himself a smile at the other man's misfortune as the referee leapt in to stop the fight. Lars' rival dropped like a sack of potatoes and rolled on the ground clutching his arm. The referee raised Lars' arm, signalling that he had won.

Amazingly, the next bout was the final. Kaplyn pushed his way through a sizeable crowd, apologising as he went for treading on toes or having to be too forceful to gain passage. The nearest betting tout was a short, bad-tempered looking individual with a large hook shaped nose.

"Five silver *calder* on Lars to win," Kaplyn shouted above the din. The tout snatched the money, which swiftly disappeared into a large pocket. He scribbled something on a slip of paper and thrust it into Kaplyn's hand. He was already serving the next person and Kaplyn pushed his way from the queue while trying to decipher the unintelligible script on the discoloured paper.

When Kaplyn arrived back at the arena Lars was standing by the ropes, doubled over with his hands on his knees. His face was pale and his knees were shaking. "Too much beer, Kaplyn." Loudly, he belched and grinned. "He looks a bit more of a challenge," Lars said nodding to the opposite side of the arena where a broad-chested man glared disdainfully at Lars. He was of equal size to

Lars, with upper arms almost as thick as his thighs. His nose looked like it had been used to straighten a wall.

The referee who had initially paired the fighters came into the ring and, in anticipation, the crowd fell silent.

“In the final...” the referee bellowed. “On my right hand side, needing no introduction, Darl from Pendrat,”

“Darl for champion,” someone shouted.

“We’re with you, big man,” shouted another.

“And on my left is Lars,” the referee continued above other shouts of support for Darl. “As you can see Lars is not from Allund, but we don’t want to hold that against him.”

“Break his leg, Darl” someone shouted.

Kaplyn grimaced. By the sounds of the support, Lars was in trouble whether he won or lost.

“Let’s have a clean fight. Start!” said the referee and dozens of voices shouted encouragement.

Warily Lars circled his opponent.

“Come on big man,” taunted Darl. He waved a hand beckoning Lars and trying to encourage the other man to attack.

Lars shook his head. Kaplyn wondered if he was still trying to recover his breath.

A flicker in Darl’s shoulders caused Lars to step aside, but the Allunder did not attack. He merely sneered at the other man’s caution.

Then, with a loud bellow, Darl ran at Lars, catching his outstretched arms and forcing them back. The two men stood, toe to toe, each pushing with all of his might. Lars ducked and twisted at the same time, crossing Darl’s wrists as he did so.

The Allunder also twisted, trying to prevent his elbow from locking, and at the same time, he brought his booted foot down hard on the side of Lars’ knee. Lars instinctively buckled, releasing his arm lock and saving his knee from serious damage. Kaplyn grimaced, but Lars swiftly recovered as he swung his elbow up hard, catching the other man under the chin, forcing him back. As Darl retreated, blood sprang from the corner of his mouth and he scowled angrily at Lars for the affront.

“Finish him, Darl!” someone in the crowd urged. The big man took this as his cue and launched himself at Lars a second time.

The collision nearly knocked Lars from his feet. He grabbed Darl’s arms, preventing him from encircling his waist.

To the crowd the fight looked like a stalemate as the two men strained. Slowly, however Lars forced Darl’s arms back and the Allunder realised that he was in trouble. In desperation, he dropped to one knee and pivoted, throwing Lars’ body weight over his shoulder.

He tried to catch Lars off balance, but Lars allowed himself to fall forward, maintaining a firm grip on the other man’s wrist. With a fluid grace he somersaulted across the other man’s shoulder, wrenching his opponent’s arm as he landed.

Darl cried out in pain and nursed the injured limb. Lars rolled away from his opponent and quickly rose to a crouch, waiting for Darl’s counter-attack. The

other man was still recovering and seeing Lars waiting for him seemed only to infuriate him further.

Screaming with rage he ran at his opponent and kicked high, aiming at Lars' head, but Lars neatly caught his heel and ducked under the ill-timed blow. He in turn kicked out at Darl's standing leg while retaining his grip on the other, causing the big man to go down in an untidy heap with Lars on top of him.

Lars was panting from the exertion and did not look like a champion wrestler. "*Karlam*, aid me!" he bellowed.

Darl however was face down and couldn't see the look of pain the exertion cost Lars. Kaplyn grimaced; Lars was winning but marginally.

Straining, Lars forced Darl's left leg behind his right knee and then folded his right leg, trapping his left. Darl screamed.

"I submit!" he bellowed.

The referee leapt in and slapped Lars on the shoulder. "Fight's over. Let go! *Now!* Before you break his leg."

The crowd howled.

"Fix," someone shouted. "Darl, you've cost me a week's wages!" cried another.

Kaplyn did not wait to congratulate Lars but sought out the tout he had seen earlier, before the other man could escape. Kaplyn grinned, enjoying the tout's discomfort as he claimed his winnings.

"Not sure I should pay out," the tout muttered.

"Why?" Kaplyn growled.

The other man grimaced. "Well that Lars was not from these parts. He could be professional."

"You were happy to take my money, so pay up," Kaplyn countered, giving the tout an ominous look. It worked; the tout counted out a handful of silver *calder*. Counting it, Kaplyn made his way through the crowd towards Lars who was still sitting on the ground, gasping.

Kaplyn smiled down. "Well done! It was a good fight," he acknowledged, crouching down.

Lars nodded, but said nothing between loud gasps for air. Kaplyn waited patiently for the big man to recover.

"*By Slathor!* That was hell," he managed finally, groaning as he did so and gripping the grass in pain.

Kaplyn grinned at his discomfort. "Who is Slathor?" he asked.

Lars forced a smile. "He is one of my gods. We have many."

"And Karlam?"

"God of war," Lars managed.

When Lars was finally ready, Kaplyn helped him to his feet.

"If I had known that you Allunds liked to fight, I'd have found another country to be shipwrecked in. Five fights! It's too much, there has to be an easier way to earn a living."

Lars shook his head as he started slowly towards the referee who was coming towards the pair with the big man's winnings. "How much did you bet on yourself?" Kaplyn asked.

Lars paled, shaking his head. "I didn't save enough; the ale was too good. Still I'll be able to sleep content tonight as at least now I can afford a room and

lodgings,” he said holding the prize purse, clearly enjoying the weight of the coin.

Kaplyn led them towards the archery range. There were more people now and the pavilions created funnel points, squeezing folk together. Someone bumped into Kaplyn and inadvertently his gaze fell upon a small, grey haired old woman standing a few yards away. Claws, disfigured by arthritis, clutched a shawl yellowed with age about her throat. She glared about the crowd, looking down a long thin nose speckled in warts.

When her gaze met his, her thin lips parted, her eyes widened and to Kaplyn the world seemed to slow. He tried to look away but the damage was done.

Her arm came up and she pointed at him. He tried to step backwards but the press of bodies trapped him. At first, he assumed she had recognised him and would alert the palace guard when they came this way, but that was unlikely he realised almost as soon as the thought popped into his head. Lars stood by his side and behind them voices murmured.

“Old Kate’s going to make a prediction,” Kaplyn heard someone say.

As if on cue the old woman spoke in a low gravely voice, while still pointing directly at Kaplyn. “I see you.” Her gaze seemed to penetrate Kaplyn’s very soul.

People stopped to listen and Kaplyn found himself at the centre of a ring of people. A hush fell upon the crowd.

“You would destroy us all!” she muttered, shaking her head. “The prophecy haunts you; beware lest you set in motion events that cannot be stopped. The Eldric are lost, never to be found.”

“I see also the ghost by your side. Oh, he is not there yet—but he will be! I know his shape and his desire, and the gleam in his eye. Death he will bring to us all. You would summon dragons: a living plague to ravage the world.”

Around Kaplyn the crowd murmured and people cast him troubled looks.

“Superstition,” Kaplyn said, albeit softly. He was shaking and his brain refused to function.

“Kate often sees things,” a man behind Kaplyn said.

“Aye,” said another. “Like the flood last year when the cattle drowned.”

“*Superstition* is it!” Kate answered. “One day you will see the man I speak of. Think then upon my words. Beware the dragons, and befriend them to your cost.”

Kaplyn turned his back on the woman and forced himself into the crowd. Kate had fallen silent and it was clear that there was no more entertainment, so the mob parted to let him past. Some people followed as though expecting Kate’s premonition to come true immediately. Kaplyn looked over his shoulder; fortunately Kate wasn’t there.

The thought of the archery competition was furthest from Kaplyn’s mind and instead he sought a quiet place behind a large tent where he sat down upon the ground. Lars joined him. Several people that had followed looked on from a distance but soon lost interest and went on their way.

“What was that about?” Lars asked.

“An old fraud, trying to enhance her reputation as a witch!” Kaplyn suggested, trembling and clearly shaken by the event.

“Dragons, though,” Lars said.

“There are *no* dragons. She was deranged, probably *mad*,” he complained.

Lars looked unconvinced. “Who are the Eldric?”

“Who *were* the Eldric,” Kaplyn corrected. “They came over the sea several

hundred years ago. For a while they brought peace and even stopped some of the wars.”

“How did they accomplish that?” Lars asked.

“I can see that I need to explain some of our history,” Kaplyn looked up to the sky. His heart was slowing and talking was helping to calm him.

“Trosgarth and Aldrace are nations to the north of Thrace. In the past, they were constantly waging war with just about everyone. That was a time of petty kingdoms. When the Eldric arrived, they were much more advanced than we were; both culturally and militarily. They landed here in Allund,” Kaplyn laughed. “That nearly started a war, but common sense prevailed and it was a good thing too. The balance of power shifted in favour of the Southern Kingdoms. Then I suppose that people became more interested in trade than fighting.”

“What happened next?” Lars asked.

“Peace lasted for many years, but always Trosgarth resented the Eldric whose weapons were far superior to anyone else’s; some were even supposed to have been magical. The peace ended when an Eldric Lord called Drachar sided with Trosgarth. Why he chose to do so, no one knows. The Eldric were reputedly powerful sorcerers and Drachar the most powerful of all. He was able to summon the most potent demons.”

A roar from a nearby crowd interrupted Kaplyn. Overhead a few birds raced from the din, their black forms in stark contrast to the white clouds that now filled the sky.

“Do you want to find the archery?” Lars asked.

Kaplyn shook his head. “Not now. It’s probably too late judging by the noise from the crowd. I’m happy to sit here for a while.”

“What happened to Drachar?” Lars asked. His eyes were wide. “Did he summon demons?”

Again, Kaplyn nodded. “There was a war later called the Krell Wars.”

“I’ve heard of krell. But what are they?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen one but they are meant to be half-demon, half-human. Drachar united the krell tribes and I think that was why Trosgarth sided with him. The battle of DrummondCal decided the war. The Eldric, leading an army from the Southern Kingdoms, defeated Drachar, using sorcerers and summoning demons of their own. It was a devastating battle by all accounts.

“Drachar was killed but some say that his ghost was too powerful to be banished and it remained, seeking to rise again in the distant future.”

“And that’s the basis of the Prophecy the old woman spoke of?”

“Yes.”

Lars shifted uncomfortably and his frown suggested he wanted to ask more.

“Let’s find some food,” Kaplyn suggested.

“My treat,” Lars beamed back, patting his bulging purse. “What about the Prophecy first though?”

Kaplyn smiled. “The Prophecy is rather cryptic so don’t expect to understand it.” Kaplyn searched his memory before reciting it.

*“When Tallin’s Crown once more does shine,  
Drachar’s shade will rise sublime,  
Three Princes Royal through time to sleep,*

*An appointment with destiny —three Kings to keep,  
Trosgarth's arm across the land will reach,  
Of war and famine — his army to teach,  
And one will stand to oppose his throne,  
A King resurrected in his mountain home,  
Of air, fire and water —he will be born,  
To aid the people —when all else is forlorn.”*

“I see what you mean about being cryptic. Any ideas what *Tallin’s Crown* is?”

Kaplyn shook his head. “No idea.”

“And the Eldric? What became of them?”

Kaplyn frowned, the other man was insatiable, but his curiosity was understandable. The Eldric had always fascinated Kaplyn. “No one knows. There’s only ruins where their cities once stood. There are Eldric artefacts around, cooking utensils, the occasional sword and such, so there is no doubt they existed. But what became of them? It’s said they disappeared after the Krell Wars.”

“*Disappeared,*” Lars snorted. “An *entire race!* How can that be?”

“I know it sounds ludicrous,” Kaplyn continued. “And there are many rumours about their disappearance. People talk about seeing Eldric ghosts on pilgrimages to this place and that.”

“The old woman mentioned a ghost.”

“Aye, some people believe in a shaol, or a guardian spirit. They are supposed to watch over us; protecting and guiding us. I’m not sure if that is what she meant, but personally I still think she was deranged.”

“She was certainly spooky. Her eyes were strange, I can’t describe them. They seemed to stare inside you, if you know what I mean.”

Kaplyn shuddered. He did know what Lars meant. “Come, let’s get some food,” he said rising.

Lars continued to question Kaplyn as they walked. “What do *you* think became of the Eldric?”

They crossed a relatively crowd-free area, aiming towards a tent from which came the smell of barbecued meat. Kaplyn’s mouth watered. “I think they were ashamed of the destruction caused by one of their own kind. Thousands perished in the Krell Wars and to make matters worse it is said that a demon takes a person’s soul when they die.”

Lars grimaced. “That’s horrible. But where did the Eldric go?”

“I’ve no idea,” Kaplyn replied. They entered the tent and joined a queue of people. At the front, a diminutive plump woman was serving what looked like pork on a large slice of bread. Lars fell silent for a while. The two men arrived at the head of the queue and good to his word Lars paid.

They ate as they meandered between the tents. Kaplyn recognised a pennant flying over one particularly large tent. “Look, that’s where the karlot competition is being held; with any luck I may salvage something from today.” Fate so far had been unkind to Kaplyn, having lost his horse and nearly killed by outlaws. Things had to improve. Together the two men made their way over to the tent as Kaplyn explained that karlot was a board game. Once at the tent, Kaplyn gave the official his name and paid his entry fee.

Kaplyn played and won four games of karlot and quickly, much to his surprise, found himself in the final. In this round, a thin faced Hullender, whose eyes sparkled in anticipation, faced him.

Kaplyn guessed he was a merchant, judging by the rich cut of his clothing and numerous gold rings, which he twisted nervously. A hush descended over the watching crowd as they waited.

Kaplyn won the toss to start. Throughout the previous games, he had adopted standard openings. Now, facing his opponent in the final game, something prompted him to change tact. His opponent looked confused as Kaplyn slid the krell piece, in front of his kara-stone, forward two squares. Since there was a time limit he had to counter quickly and Kaplyn recognised his move as the dristal's gambit.

The pieces on the board represented mythical creatures and the dristal was a large bird of prey, which dwarves had ridden into battle in the final days of the Krell Wars. The move opened the opponent's defence by attacking the chanth, a demon of considerable power. Kaplyn ignored the threat and continued to build up an attack on his adversary's sorcerer. In the ensuing moves Kaplyn managed to keep one piece ahead of his rival. When an opening presented itself he confidently took his challenger's dwarf chieftain.

The Hullender, sensing victory slipping from his grasp, altered the pattern of play. Kaplyn found the sudden attack across the front of the board difficult to counter, but fortune was with him. The Hullender had left his kara-stone vulnerable and swiftly Kaplyn took the piece with a krell. He sat back in relief while a look of pain crossed the Hullender's face as he realised his fatal mistake. Finally, he smiled, admitting defeat and offering Kaplyn his hand. Kaplyn had won and his recompense was a far heavier purse than when he had arrived.

## Chapter 6

### Vastra

Kaplyn met with Lars later that evening in the tavern. They ordered meals and a large flagon of ale with two mugs. Lars initially looked green at the sight of the ale, but his colour soon returned after his first draft.

“Your health,” he said, belching loudly and placing his mug firmly on the table.

Kaplyn looked startled. Half of its content was gone. “Your health,” he replied, raising his mug and taking a cautious sip. It was a strong brew.

“At least I’m better at wrestling than sailing,” Lars commented. His voice betrayed the hurt that he was obviously feeling.

“How did you become shipwrecked?” Kaplyn asked, sensing the other man wanted to talk.

Lars took another swallow of ale to wet his tongue. “Our voyage was between villages for trade,” he said depositing the heavy flagon on the tabletop. “My father was the Glan-Can, which is chieftain, of our people. I was travelling with the crew to negotiate in the trade of our cargo.”

“Glan-Can—is that like a prince?” Kaplyn asked.

“I’d never thought of it like that, but I suppose you are correct. We don’t have kingdoms and my father’s land was quite extensive.”

Kaplyn hid a smile behind his hand; the coincidence that both he and Lars were royalty was too much.

“Anyway, the distance was not great, barely a few miles along the coast and we had done this trip dozens of times before. It was usually a safe enough journey for we sailed in sight of the coast, so there was little chance of becoming lost.” He took a deeper drink of ale and Kaplyn waited patiently for the big man to continue. Lars put his mug down and wiped his beard, signalling to the landlord for more.

“This time though a strong wind followed us and it soon became a storm, forcing us farther out to sea.” His eyes looked distant and Kaplyn realised that the tale was painful. “The storm seemed to have a mind of its own and whichever way we turned it followed. Never before had I seen such waves. They towered over us, drenching the planking and sweeping two men overboard. Then, as suddenly as it had started, it ceased.

“It was unnatural. Behind us was a wall of black clouds, reaching high into the heavens. From within this, we could hear the loud booming of waves as they danced to the storm’s frenzied tune. And yet, about us, the sea was as calm as a village pond.”

The landlord appeared through the crowd and set a fresh flagon down, slopping the contents messily on the table. As swiftly as he came he went, leaving Lars to continue his story. Kaplyn topped up their mugs.

“Suddenly a shape surfaced yards from the gunwale. What manner of sea beast it was I did not know but it was a fearful sight. Its head towered over us on

a long thin neck and I will never forget the fear I experienced as its eyes watched us, running about the deck like headless chickens.

“Slowly the monster dipped gently beneath the sea, as if its curiosity was satisfied and it was off to find its supper. The crew breathed a sigh of relief, hoping beyond hope that it had swum away and left us in peace. Quickly we ran to put up the sails and escape before the storm engulfed us. We were too late though; the sea erupted as the beast reared high out of the water, landing with a crash on the gunwale.” Lars brought a giant hand down hard on the table top with a loud slap as if simulating the sea monster's attack. Several of the tavern's occupants jumped with shock and turned around to see what the commotion was.

Lars ignored them and continued with his story. “The wooden timbers cracked like dry twigs and the sheer weight of the creature capsized us. I dived over the rails just as the ship went down. When I surfaced I could hear the others screaming in terror, as the beast hunted them down. Then the gale hit once more.

“I grabbed on to wreckage and clung on for all I was worth, calling to Harlathan, the god of the sea, to save me. It was a fearful ride; giant waves tossed me like a leaf in a storm,” Lars paused to take a drink.

“Go on. What happened next?” Kaplyn asked, enthralled.

“I don't know how long the storm lasted, but later the sea jettisoned me onto a sandy beach. For hours I lay there, trying to convince my stomach that the world was finally still.

“Since then I've been wandering around doing odd jobs, trying to get by,” he looked thoughtful. “That would be nearly a year ago. I miss my wife and son, but deep down I know I'll never see them again.”

Kaplyn wanted to offer him a token of comfort, but words were not enough. He needn't have worried though; Lars took a long draught of ale and grinned at the now empty glass. “Come,” he said. “Our purses are full and the evening is young. Landlord!” he shouted above the noise of the crowd. “Where is that man?”

Kaplyn looked at his own ale and grimaced. At that moment he felt, rather than saw, a shadow fall over them. Swiftly he looked up and was startled to see a man standing by his side, looking down at him. The stranger must have been light-footed to get so close without Kaplyn realising.

“May I join you?” he asked, indicating the spare seat beside them.

The stranger's face was long and thin and his features fine, reminding Kaplyn of an alabaster sculpture that he had once seen. His hair was oily, raven black and cut short, accentuating a high forehead. A brooding countenance marred what some folk might have otherwise have considered good looks. Even his clothes were sombre, although his fleece-lined doublet and short riding cloak looked expensive. Kaplyn doubted that he lacked money.

“I am Vastra,” he said in a way that seemed to imply it was of some importance. “And I have a proposition for you.”

Kaplyn looked to Lars, but he merely shrugged.

“Take a seat,” Kaplyn finally offered, indicating the empty chair.

Vastra lowered himself as though standing was wearisome. “I'm looking for hired help. I seek an artefact and need an escort and then help in its recovery,” Vastra continued.

“Recover or steal?” Lars asked.

“The work is honest. I assure you,” Vastra replied tersely.

Lars looked puzzled. “Why choose us?” It was the question uppermost in Kaplyn's mind.

“I saw you both competing in the games. You both won events and I think you would be well suited to the task I have in mind,” Vastra replied.

“Where are you going and what do you seek?” Kaplyn asked.

“I am travelling to Tanel,” he announced boldly.

“Tanel? It's an Eldric city. It is nothing more than ruins.”

Vastra nodded, “It is. I am a scholar and have been led to believe that there may be something of interest there.”

Kaplyn was curious. “And what might that be?”

“Once you have decided whether to accompany me, I shall tell you more.”

Kaplyn was thinking of returning home, maybe by a roundabout route to visit an old friend. Tanel was not too far out of his way though and it might prove to be an interesting diversion. Company would also be welcome on the long ride, especially after his night alone in the wild. He was uncertain, however, and did not want to commit himself until he knew more.

“You will be well paid,” Vastra assured them, seeing their reluctance. “Ten *calder* to escort me to Tanel and two gold pieces if you are successful in retrieving the object.”

Kaplyn was impressed; it was a considerable sum. “Tomorrow,” he announced finally, having decided to be cautious. “We will decide then. Meet us first thing in the morning and we will let you know our decision.”

A smile touched Vastra's lips and he bowed fractionally before rising from the table and leaving through the press of bodies.

“A strange man,” Lars commented watching Vastra's retreating form.

Kaplyn shivered, surprised by the effect the stranger appeared to have on him; it was as if his soul had touched something dark.

Kaplyn awoke early, cold and disorientated by his strange surroundings. The last thing he remembered was opening the window to let in the fresh night air, which had been foolhardy for his blanket had fallen off in the night, leaving him shivering. Lars was definitely a bad influence and he tried to remember how much he had drunk before retiring.

Deciding it was best not dwelling on the matter he hurriedly arose causing his head to spin. Blinking in confusion, he waited for a moment for his head to clear. With a sinking heart he realised that the clothes, strewn in disarray around the room, were not how he had left them the previous night.

His brow beetled as he looked about at the mess and a sickening realisation dawned. Someone had robbed him. He grabbed his clothes, searching them. His money and all of his winnings were gone. In despair, he sat forlornly on his small bed.

His sword still rested close to his bed where he had left it and that was a blessing at least. It alone was worth a considerable sum and he would have been devastated to return home without it. He cursed under his breath and then more loudly, jumping to his feet and grabbing his shirt. Throwing it on, the threads cracked. He would find the landlord and give him a piece of his mind. Never before had he been robbed and someone had to be held to account.

Descending the tight stairs he pulled his jerkin on, noting the torn lining where he had hidden the coins in case of emergency. Again he cursed. Shouting for the landlord he stormed into the tavern. The proprietor appeared almost at once, bumping into a chair in his haste.

"I have been robbed!" Kaplyn stated bitterly. "Someone has taken my money," he continued.

The landlord looked bewildered, "Slow down, sir. Sit, and tell me what has happened."

Kaplyn ignored him. "Somebody came into my room late last night and stole my money, including my winnings."

The other man looked nonplussed; he held out his arms in a helpless manner and started to stammer a response. "Are you certain? Could you have misplaced your purse?" he asked defensively.

Kaplyn scowled. "The money has gone!"

The landlord stroked his chubby chin nervously. "How are you going to pay your bill?" he asked suspiciously.

Kaplyn was stunned. "How dare you! A thief robbed me while under the protection of your roof. There is no lock on my bedroom door and you do not even employ a night watchman."

"This is a simple establishment, sir," The landlord countered. "We cannot afford such precautions. Besides, no one has ever been robbed here before."

Kaplyn realised that they were not alone; a figure was sitting in an alcove, partially hidden by the shadows. He recognised Vastra who leaned forward with an amused expression.

A sudden commotion caused Kaplyn to turn as Lars stormed into the room, wearing a look of thunder. His face was red with suppressed rage. "My money has gone," he stated bluntly. Kaplyn could see the pain reflected in his eyes; his winnings had meant a great deal to him.

Kaplyn turned to the landlord who was now pale and sweating profusely.

"You will have to pay for your rooms immediately!" he insisted. His eyes kept darting towards the door as though he was hoping for the intervention of the town guard.

"We have no money! It's all been taken!" Kaplyn hissed.

"Then you'll have to pay with something else," the landlord continued hopefully, his eyes straying to Kaplyn's sword.

Seeing the direction of his gaze Kaplyn felt his anger rising. However, Vastra interrupted before he could reply. "I might be able to help," he suggested softly, and the group's attention focused on him. "How much do these gentlemen owe?"

This was obviously much more promising and the landlord brightened visibly. "Four *calder* and twelve *tell*," he declared after a pause and much hand wringing.

Vastra opened his purse and placed coins on the table, which the landlord scooped up, muttering his thanks before darting away.

"There was no need to pay him," Kaplyn argued, turning to confront Vastra. "It's partly his fault the burglar got into my room."

"Did they take everything?" Vastra asked.

"Yes!" Kaplyn replied thinking about the hidden coins.

"It would appear that we are in your debt," Lars stated through gritted teeth.

“I’ll replace your money, and add to it if you will accompany me. The offer I made last night still stands.”

“I will go, if what you want is reasonable,” Lars sounded defeated.

Kaplyn was in a quandary. Never before had he been penniless and he was still coming to terms with the situation. “Tell us what you want,” he said, realising he had no option. In his place, his brothers would have laughed and walked away, but Kaplyn’s conscience would not let him do that.

“Sit down,” Vastra invited. They complied, although Kaplyn disliked someone telling him what to do.

“I am a sorcerer,” Vastra confided in them, much to their surprise. “There is an artefact in Tanel which I wish to find.”

“A wizard?” Kaplyn asked uncertainly.

“A sorcerer,” Vastra corrected. Something in his tone suggested that the difference was important.

“I have seen many magicians in the past,” Kaplyn replied, in no mood to pander to Vastra’s ego. “Can you prove that you are what you claim?”

“I do not perform tricks, if that is what you are asking,” Vastra said with menace in his voice. His eyes glittered with suppressed rage. “You will be paid for your work,” he reminded them. The mention of money also reminded them of their debt.

“Tanel is a ruin!” Kaplyn continued, taken aback by Vastra’s anger. “There is nothing there, except stones.”

“Then you will be well paid just to escort me,” Vastra replied sighing. “It is little more than a few days ride, and then you will be rich.”

“What is it you seek?” Kaplyn asked.

“It’s a gold pendant about the size of my hand,” Vastra said. “On one side is a map and on the other Eldric writing.”

“How much is it worth?” Lars asked.

“It is priceless,” Vastra said simply, although his eyes gleamed as he spoke. “Of course it is only of value to the right person and I am offering you a rich reward for your help,” he continued, making it clear that it was worthless to anyone else but him; clearly, his trust only went so far.

“Why is it that no one else is seeking it, if it is so valuable?” Kaplyn asked suspiciously.

“Only a few people can unlock its whereabouts and, even if its location were known, its recovery would be difficult.” Vastra paused as if considering how much to tell them. “There is an element of risk,” he continued. “I have watched you both during the games and you seem to be capable men.”

There was a moment’s silence. “How do we know that you have the money?” Kaplyn asked.

Vastra unhooked a pouch from within the folds of his jacket; it was evidently full and clearly heavy. Vastra opened it and removed twenty silver *calder* and four gold coins. The purse remained bulging. Lars cast Kaplyn a glance at the sight of such wealth.

“Be warned,” Vastra said suddenly, returning the coins to the purse. “I am quite capable of defending myself.” The purse quickly disappeared within his jacket. “I only warn you in case you decide that you like the look of my purse rather than the work I offer.”

“I am no *thief*, if that is what you are inferring!” Kaplyn snapped irritably.

“If you are an honest man, which I believe is what you are, then there is no insult intended.”

Vastra's apology, thin though it was, mollified Kaplyn.

“I'll meet you outside as soon as you are ready. I already have supplies and horses,” Vastra said, rising.

“It looks as though our fortunes have changed once again,” Lars commented.

“Aye, but perhaps not for the better,” Kaplyn replied.

“Is it possible that Vastra had something to do with the theft?”

Kaplyn had not considered that possibility and frowned deeply. “No. I am assuming the thief climbed through the window. Otherwise he would have to have gone through the tavern and that is busy most the night, judging by the din. If that was the route the thief took, Vastra doesn't look capable and besides, I doubt he is *that* desperate to hire our help; there are plenty of others around.” Kaplyn was seething but he was also intrigued to be going to Tanel.

“Come,” he said. “We'd better not keep him waiting. I need to fetch my bow. I'll see you outside shortly.”

True to his word Vastra was waiting outside. The boy, from the night they had arrived, was saddling three horses. Lars cast Kaplyn a sideways glance and grimaced at the prospect of more riding.

Vastra handed Lars a heavy double-handed sword. The big man eyed it suspiciously.

“There are many dangers on the road,” Vastra explained. “I look to you two for my protection.”

Lars buckled the sword about his broad waist but no matter how he tried to adjust it he looked ill suited to it. “I would have preferred an axe,” he grumbled. Vastra ignored him and mounted.

Lars and Kaplyn also mounted and together the three men rode from the safety of the town. Once more the wild was calling, but as to their future...? Kaplyn was now at the mercy of someone else and he didn't like it at all.

## Chapter 7 Shelter for the Night

They rode for the remainder of the day. It was a pleasant journey, at least for Kaplyn. Lars complained bitterly, sitting astride his horse as though expecting to fall off with every step.

Gradually evening claimed the land and shadows grew longer. Kaplyn felt anxious but did not know why. There were no signs of dwellings and he certainly didn't want to spend a night outdoors. However, this was not the source of his growing discomfort.

Abruptly a lark flew overhead calling shrilly. The horses startled and crabbed across the path. Then Kaplyn understood what was worrying him. His horse was nervous and he was sensing that.

He glanced at the other two men and saw discomfort reflected on both their faces. "Do you feel it?" he asked.

"What?" Lars answered, although Kaplyn heard the strain in his voice.

"Kaplyn's correct, there is something not right this evening. We'd better hurry and hope to find shelter," Vastra answered. He spurred his mount on and they followed as best they could. Kaplyn grabbed Lars' reins and urged his own mount to canter. Glancing back, Lars was bouncing in his seat in an alarming manner, gritting his teeth in pain.

Cresting a rise, they finally saw a small settlement, although still some distance ahead. It was nothing more than several long low wooden buildings surrounded by a stout palisade, probably a farm Kaplyn realised.

By now the heavens were a mixture of fiery reds and burnished golds as the sun sank below the horizon, illuminating the underside of clouds, gathering in the darkening sky. By the time they reached the farm, apart from the skeletal silhouettes of trees, Kaplyn could barely see. He hoped the occupants would not refuse them entry for arriving so late. They halted a respectable distance from the palisade. A thick briar bush grew in profusion around its base, adding to the defences. The smell of wood smoke and cooking wafted towards them and Kaplyn's stomach growled in anticipation.

"Hello the farm," Kaplyn called, and in silence they waited for a reply.

A torch became visible between the posts, followed by voices. They watched the partially obscured flame dance as if by magic toward the wall, finally coming to a halt on top of the palisade.

In the torchlight, a dark-haired man with a thick unkempt beard peered at them. His face stood out in stark contrast to the surrounding night as he raised his torch aloft. By his side several other figures joined him, many armed with longbows.

"We are seeking shelter for the night," Kaplyn called up.

The first figure raised his torch, looking at them between the posts as though having some difficulty in seeing them.

"How many are you?" he asked in a deep voice.

“Three,” Kaplyn replied.

“Three?” the fellow questioned. “Come forward into the light so we can see you.”

The man cursed the darkness as they walked their mounts forward until they were looking up at the farmer. His grey beard marked him older than Kaplyn had first thought.

“You’re travelling late!” the farmer accused.

“We are returning from Pendrat and the games. This is the first farm we have seen this evening,” Kaplyn explained.

“The games?”

Kaplyn had deliberately mentioned them, hoping their account of the games would be recompense for their food and lodgings.

“Take a torch,” the farmer said, waiting for Kaplyn to come forward before dropping one to his outstretched hand. “Place it twenty paces back along the path.” It was a wise precaution intended to see if anyone else lurked behind.

Kaplyn complied and returned to the other two as the gates swung inwards. Inside, a dozen men carrying an assortment of weapons and farm implements surrounded them. Behind them, the gate thumped closed.

“You will have to excuse our precautions,” the farmer said coming down a short flight of steps leading from the wall. “There’s been talk of outlaws hereabouts.”

“You have our thanks, it’s a dark night and we are only too glad to find shelter,” Kaplyn said.

“You’re welcome to spend the night in my house,” the farmer replied. “Ralph, my youngest, will see to your horses.”

A strapping man in his early twenties stepped forward and took their reins before leading the animals away.

The other farmers returned to their own homes, leaving the three travellers to follow the farmer who introduced himself as Callan; the seven men accompanying him were his sons and Callan introduced each in turn.

Callan’s house was a long single storey timber building, crowned with a thick thatched roof. A tall stone chimney rose into the night sky, venting the cooking fires. The windows were small and thick; coarse materials covered the openings, keeping out the evening chill.

They ducked beneath a low door and stepped down into the room. The floor inside was lower than outside giving the room additional height, much to Lars’ obvious relief.

Kaplyn entered last to discover a long table dominating the room. About it several women and numerous children were sitting, watching them with awe. The table was heavily laden with bowls of steaming food and a delicious aroma filled the room. Lars brightened at the sight of the food and his eyes widened further when he saw a large flagon of ale in prime position at the table’s centre. Kaplyn felt he should nudge the bigger man to make him behave.

At that moment, extra chairs appeared followed by a round of introductions. In turn, Kaplyn introduced his group as the farmer’s wife served the food. Callan asked where they were from. Kaplyn repeated the lie that he was formerly from Dundalk and he had worked in the palace guard. Questions rained down on him about the King and the royal family. As a simple soldier, he knew he should

know very little about them and he found the questions awkward.

He was glad when the focus of attention turned to Lars. The tale of his shipwreck overawed them and next, Kaplyn and Lars spoke about the games.

One of the farmer's daughters kept looking at Kaplyn and he tried to look elsewhere, only to find his attention wandering back to her good looks. To his embarrassment he found that she was still watching him. Cheeks reddening he hurriedly looked away. She was about his age and very pretty. Unfortunately, he could not remember her name amongst the rush of so many.

He suddenly realised that Callan was talking to them. Feeling foolish he listened to what he was saying.

"What about your quiet companion, did he also compete in the games?" Callan was asking.

Vastra shook his head, feigning not to reply.

Not wishing to offend their host Kaplyn spoke on his behalf. "Our companion is a wizard," he declared, hoping to lighten Vastra's mood. Instead he received a withering look and too late he realised his error.

The farmer's eyes widened. "A wizard?"

Vastra cast Kaplyn a sideways look. There followed an embarrassing silence before Vastra spoke. "Perhaps there is some task that I could help you with?" he offered, half-heartedly.

The farmer's eyes brightened considerably. "Aye, that there is. If we could be the first to get our crop to market we would get a higher price," he stated hopefully; Vastra nodded.

"I have a bull which has not yet sired an heir," Callan continued as though he could not believe his luck.

Vastra's nod this time was barely perceptible, his eyes locked on Kaplyn's as though daring him to let the farmer continue. Under Vastra's glare, Kaplyn felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

"Well, it's getting late," Kaplyn interrupted, taking the hint. "We've been travelling since dawn and if you don't mind we had better get some sleep."

"I'm sorry," Callan replied. "I had no idea time had passed so quickly; it is rare that we have visitors. We don't have any spare beds, but you are more than welcome to sleep in Ralph's room. He can move in with one of his brothers."

Kaplyn thanked Callan who stood up to escort them to their room. The family bid them goodnight and Kaplyn passed close to the girl whose good looks had attracted his eye. She smiled sweetly at him and he left the room with the imprint of her face and the scent of her hair indelibly stamped into his mind.

Ralph's room was tiny and a single pallet lay on the floor. Vastra immediately claimed it. For a moment, Kaplyn wanted to order him off the pallet, but he controlled his anger, settling instead with a dark look, which Vastra simply ignored. Muttering, Kaplyn removed his belt and sword, which he dropped on the floorboards with a thud before sitting to remove his boots. He lay down, trying to get comfortable.

Not being very tired he listened for a while to the noises of Callan's family moving about the other rooms. For a while he lay awake hoping that Callan's daughter might come to the room and together they could go somewhere private. The thought made it harder to sleep, but shortly not even thinking about her could keep him awake and he drifted into a silent slumber.

Soon, the only noises about the farm were the chirruping of crickets and the occasional bleat from restless sheep housed within the stockade for the night. A lone sentry patrolled the tall stockade wall, taking measured strides along the narrow wooden walkway while waiting patiently for the rays of the sun to pronounce the dawn.

Kaplyn awoke abruptly, immediately at a loss as to where he was. He became aware of raised voices outside followed by a brief glow that danced across the ceiling. The plaster was old and crumbling and had formed odd lifelike shapes. He realised that somebody had carried a torch by the window. Now it was dark—completely dark.

“Where am I?” he croaked, sitting up.

Lars muttered something unintelligible and sat up, knuckling sleep from his eyes.

“See to the sheep and make sure they’re secure,” someone said in a muffled voice.

“Right you are. You fetch my bow and I’ll meet you around the front,” came the reply.

Kaplyn remembered then the farm and Callan. “Lars, something’s going on. Where are my boots?” He groped round with his hands. Lars opened the door allowing a soft light, cast by the dying embers from the fire in the other room, to filter through.

“Are we getting up?” Lars asked, yawning and stretching. “It must be about midnight.”

“You two can get up,” said Vastra from the bed. “But don’t expect me to.” He turned over and pulled the blanket over his head.

Kaplyn glanced at Lars who shrugged. Kaplyn grinned; the more he knew about Vastra the less he liked him.

Outside, Kaplyn nearly bumped into a knot of people standing by the door. Other farmers surrounded Callan and his sons. Some were holding torches while others armed themselves with bows and arrows, much to Kaplyn’s consternation. Somewhere beyond the stockade an eerie howl filled the air. Immediately another howl followed, but closer.

“Wolves,” Callan explained looking towards the distant sound.

Kaplyn frowned. “Why are you concerned? The stockade will keep them out surely?”

“This howling has been going on for some while and the volume, suggests an uncommonly large pack. We’re manning the walls as a precaution.” Callan replied, stringing his longbow, placing one end against his foot and bending it using both hands. His wife handed him a quiver of arrows. “Thanks,” he acknowledged.

Kaplyn thought he sounded nervous. “Where are our horses? I have a bow.”

“I’ll fetch it,” Ralph volunteered from behind his father.

“I’ll come with you and get my sword,” Lars said. Both men left and returned shortly. Ralph handed Kaplyn his bow and a quiver of arrows.

“OK, if we’re all ready? Let’s go then,” Callan said.

Kaplyn stumbled in the dark. About him the farm was a riot of different noises; sheep were bleating, dogs were barking and loud thuds came from the

stables as the horses bumped against the wooden walls. Thunder crashed close by, and abruptly the noise from the animals escalated.

When they mounted the palisade steps the wolves' howling increased. Around Kaplyn, men muttered angrily.

"What are wolves doing down here this time of the year?" one fellow asked no one in particular. He held his torch over the stockade wall, trying to increase the range of its glow. All at once a grey shape slipped into view.

"Bloody animal," one man shouted above the general din. He rapidly bent his bow and nocked an arrow but the wolf was gone.

"Some of you hold the torches out," Callan suggested. "Get some boys up here," he called over his shoulder. "Give them torches."

Shortly some youths arrived. One lad passed by Kaplyn. He looked about twelve. His eyes darted about the adults and when someone handed him a torch he jumped in alarm. "Hold it out over the stockade," the man proffering the torch said. "Hold it high, so that the archers can see."

The lad nodded and stood beside Kaplyn. Kaplyn felt sorry for him. It was dark and cold and the boy had probably just left the comfort of his bed.

"A chilly night," he offered and the boy nodded, seeming incapable of speech.

"It'll be alright," Kaplyn tried to reassure him.

By now a pool of light illuminated a short distance from the stockade wall.

"Over there!" One man yelled. Immediately several arrows flew to the spot. However, the wolf had slipped back into the shadows.

"Damn, not even close," someone muttered.

"Another one!" Bows bent and arrows flew. Angry curses followed the wolf as it escaped.

Three more shapes ran from the darkness, sprinting for the palisade. From their position on top of the stockade, the farmers only caught glimpses of the wolves. Several bows sang and arrows struck the dirt about the racing forms. No wolves were hit and they were soon lost from view beneath them, hidden by the thick briar hedge.

"Blast and damn—missed." One chap cursed. "They're too fast."

The men leant over trying to see the wolves, but the palisade itself made it difficult to look down and the briar hedge concealed them. Below, they heard the frantic scratching of claws on wood.

"What the hell is going on?" Kaplyn heard. "Wolves don't attack farms."

"Tell them that," someone answered.

"They're demon lead," shouted another.

"Hold your tongue," Callan called. "I'll have no such talk, especially in front of the youngsters."

Several more shapes bolted from the darkness and scores of arrows thumped into the ground around the racing forms. Voices shouted warnings to others to prepare, but the wolves were difficult targets. With growing confidence, more ran from the darkness, racing towards the wall. Abruptly yelps filled the night air as arrows finally found targets.

"We would do better if we had something to stand on, so we could shoot down over the palisade, Callan," Kaplyn suggested.

The farmer nodded and shouted down to his wife to get as many people as she could to find boxes and stools.

“And boiling water,” Kaplyn called as an after thought. “Where is Vastra?” Kaplyn muttered under his breath.

Lars shook his head. “Probably still in bed!”

Women arrived, each carrying a stool or box that the men used to step up to shoot down upon the briar. Cauldrons filled with boiling water followed and farmers tipped these over the wall and onto the briar. Several wolves broke cover and arrows swiftly brought these down.

Still more wolves came. The wolves’ recklessness alarmed Kaplyn; even though bodies littered the ground, newly arriving wolves seemed undeterred. To make matters worse, the sound of splintering wood suggested some were close to breaking through.

Within the compound young children screamed hysterically. Most of their parents were busy on the wall and the few that remained within the compound struggled to keep control.

“I’m no help here,” Lars said. “I’ll go below.”

Kaplyn barely nodded as he released another arrow, sending a shape stumbling head over heels. He glanced over his shoulder. The pandemonium below startled him; people were scurrying back and forth and smaller children were huddled together, crying.

Abruptly a scream rent the night air.

A wolf loped around the corner of a building, followed heartbeats later by a second. Both paused, teeth bared. Kaplyn saw a small boy standing alone, howling with fear. The wolves started to lope towards him, swiftly gathering speed.

“Lars!” Kaplyn screamed, pointing. “The boy!”

Lars had reached the bottom of the stairs and he turned and saw where Kaplyn was pointing. Bellowing, he sought to distract the animals as he sprinted towards the boy, his sword raised.

Fortunately, Lars arrived first; bowling the boy out of the way his sword fell, cleaving the skull of the nearest wolf, which was in mid-leap. Even at a distance, Kaplyn heard the thud of the sword’s contact. The wolf collapsed in a growing pool of blood just as the second wolf leapt at Lars who was struggling to free his sword from the downed wolf’s skull.

“Look out!” Kaplyn yelled.

The wolf hit Lars, tumbling them both to the ground. For a moment neither moved; then Lars pushed the body off and stood up. An arrow protruded from the beast’s side. Farther along the wall towards Kaplyn, Ralph lifted his bow and Lars acknowledged his help with a wave.

A woman ran to the boy, scooping him up and sprinting to a nearby building. Seeing this, men started to forsake the walls to protect their families.

Then a new and more terrifying howl carried on the still night air freezing Kaplyn’s blood. This was different to the other howls, like that of a wolf, yet much more powerful—a portent of evil.

Callan turned to Kaplyn. “What *in the name of the Kalanth* was that?”

“*Werewolf!*” one of the men close to Kaplyn muttered. Others agreed and a murmur went around the defenders.

Kaplyn turned and found Vastra standing there. Overcoming his shock he asked, “A werewolf? Is that possible?”

Vastra shrugged. "I've never heard of werewolves except in tales."

"If you are a *wizard* then you should help!" Kaplyn said. His patience of the other man was wearing dangerously thin.

Vastra scowled. "I'm a *sorcerer*, not a wizard. Whether I help or not is my decision, not yours. However, I *have* decided to help. Look to the torches, what do you see?"

Kaplyn frowned. "I don't understand"

"What colour are the flames of the torches closest to us?"

"Blue."

"And flames burn blue in the presence of a demon," Vastra returned.

"A *demon*? You are kidding?"

"Not a demon fully manifested in this world, but I suspect a wolf has been possessed. It's probably trying to seek a human host."

Kaplyn couldn't believe what he was hearing. Vastra shook his head as though he knew it was a waste of time trying to explain.

"Give me one of your arrows," Vastra said.

Kaplyn complied and using the tip of a small knife, Vastra scratched a rune on the arrowhead. Kaplyn frowned and the frown deepened when Vastra spat on it.

"The rune needs a water-elemental, otherwise it is just scratches on metal," Vastra explained. "If it is a demon, then the rune will cause it greater harm than the arrow ever could. Look to your front. Don't be alarmed for I will conjure a light. It won't last long so you will have to be quick to spot the possessed wolf."

Kaplyn turned to face the night, certain that Vastra was mad.

Vastra muttered something and at once a bright light flared, illuminating the ground before them, causing Kaplyn to jump in shock even though he had been warned. The glare made him squint while his mind reeled with the knowledge that he had just witnessed real magic.

To his front was a sea of writhing bodies. Hundreds of wolves filled his view. Round marble eyes stared back, reflecting the light, making the animals seem hellish.

"Look! There! Near the back of the pack!" Vastra said.

Kaplyn did not know what to look for and then all at once he did. One wolf reared up amongst the bodies. It was unnatural. It tried to stand on hind legs as though human. Kaplyn drew back his bow, sighted and let loose the arrow without pausing.

By his side Vastra muttered something unintelligible, causing the arrow to flare in its flight like a shooting star. A deep-throated cry filled the air as the wolf reared backwards, falling amongst the others.

Abruptly the light failed and night returned. Kaplyn retained an image of the wolf in his mind and the look of baleful hatred on its face horrified him. Never before had he encountered such a thing. He now had an inkling why his people were so superstitious. If Vastra was correct and this was a *possession*, then what would a full-fledged demon be like?

All around Kaplyn was a stunned silence; abruptly the wolves in the briar hedge broke cover, running away from the farm. Howls filled the air, but these seemed more normal and there was even a note of fear.

Kaplyn turned to talk to Vastra but he was gone; it was almost as if he had

never been there. Kaplyn shivered. Soon he was alone and there was no sense remaining. Within the stockade the people remained busy and Kaplyn avoided them as he made his way back to his room. Vastra was either asleep or feigning it and Kaplyn was too stunned to seek answers, or even to wait for Lars. All at once he felt a dreadful lethargy. Throwing himself onto the floor and kicking off his boots, he was asleep in seconds.

The morning came much too quickly. Sunlight streamed through the chinks in the fabric covering the window. Kaplyn and Lars awoke to find Vastra lying on the pallet, staring at the ceiling. Together the three men rose and returned to the main hall where they found Callan and his wife waiting to serve them breakfast.

"Thank you for last night," Callan said. "We killed upwards of thirty wolves. I had my men burn the bodies in case the sheep get wind of their stench."

"Did they find anything unusual?" Kaplyn asked, sitting down.

Callan shook his head and laughed, "You mean the mutterings about a werewolf? I think we let our imagination get the better of us. Your friend's light scared them off though. That was a fine piece of magic, if I may say so."

"Is that what happened? I wondered why the wolves turned tail, if you'll pardon the pun," Lars said. "They ran off because of the light? Well I suppose that makes sense. It scared me half to death. You should warn someone before doing that, Vastra."

Kaplyn convinced himself that he was being silly; it was a wolf he had killed and nothing more. He helped himself to bread, which he buttered and smothered in honey. He caught Vastra eyeing him but the other man looked away. Kaplyn felt foolish all at once. Had Vastra been teasing him about a possession?

"It's a strange portent though, the wolves attacking last night, especially coming so soon after the krell raid on Burland farm," Callan said.

Kaplyn was shocked. "I hadn't heard about any krell raids."

"Where have you been?" Callan asked. "Krell have been raiding the borders for several years now, and they are becoming bolder. Burland was a good day's march from the mountains and their route must have taken them close to Kinlin castle. They killed or captured everyone, and only three men survived. They were in the fields and returned to find no one left, other than charred corpses."

"I'm sorry," Kaplyn said, genuinely disturbed. "The news had not reached Dundalk."

Callan nodded. "The survivors live with us now and we are stronger for it. By the time the King's troops arrived the krell were long gone, but to give the Hest Commander his due, he followed them as far as he dared. The mountains are a dangerous place and I cannot say I blame him for quitting. Perhaps if we were richer then the King would choose to protect us better."

Kaplyn frowned, fighting an inner rage. He did not like to hear accusations against his father, especially ones suggesting his people were being left defenceless. He vowed to speak with him upon his return.

Callan toyed with his food. "You would be welcome to stay with us," he said. "We could use your bow arm and your friend's strength." Callan smiled at Lars and then timidly looked at Vastra. "I admit that a wizard would be more than useful. What do you say?" he asked.

The offer touched Kaplyn. "I'm sorry," he replied, not wanting to hurt

Callan's feelings. "Your offer is tempting, but unfortunately we have other commitments."

Callan smiled. "Never mind. You did us a good service last night. If you are ever in the area and need a place to rest, then you would be more than welcome to stay with us." Callan suddenly brightened. "Now, if the offer still holds, then we would appreciate your friend's help with the corn, and there is my bull."

At the edge of a large field a small crowd gathered, waiting to see Vastra cast his spell. Rumour had swiftly spread that Vastra was responsible for the light the night before and anyone that wasn't otherwise busy crowded around, eager to see magic performed.

Vastra glowered at Kaplyn before crouching down to study the tiny green shoots poking above the rich soil. Kaplyn smiled. That he had riled Vastra was a small victory. He grinned across at Lars but the big man was intent on Vastra who was experimentally rubbing soil between his fingers. He looked satisfied and he started to trace a rune in the dry soil, muttering a few words as he did so. The crowd edged forward, trying to hear better and many looked disappointed as though they had expected the shoots to leap from the soil to a brazen fanfare.

Vastra merely arose and the crowd reverently parted to let him pass as he started towards the stockade.

"Is that it?" Callan asked uncertainly, watching Vastra's retreating form.

Kaplyn nodded, not knowing what to say; last night was the first time he had seen magic performed and he, too, was not sure of what to expect. The farmer beamed as together they followed the reticent sorcerer back to the stockade and his prize bull where a similar spell was to be cast. Afterwards the crowd dispersed happily believing that the bull would now sire many heirs.

While they returned to Callan's house, Vastra remained silent, ignoring Callan's thanks. Kaplyn could not understand his behaviour, after all the farmers had been more than courteous. Even though it was simple fare, it was all they had to offer. At the house Ralph, holding their horses, awaited them. Some children came to watch them go and Kaplyn noticed the girl from the previous night, standing behind the small figures. He smiled awkwardly, pleased by her attention but feeling guilty about the thoughts he had harboured towards her the night before.

Once more Callan thanked them for their help, reminding them again that they were welcome to stay. Kaplyn looked at the girl and quickly returned his attention back to Callan and once more he rejected his well-meant offer. A memory of Emma declaring that she was only a maid sprang to mind. What would his father think if he knew he was eyeing up a farmer's daughter? Kaplyn thanked Callan for his hospitality and together the three men mounted. As they set off Kaplyn glanced back and the girl waved to him. Smiling broadly Kaplyn returned her wave, all thoughts of his earlier guilt banished as he grinned broadly. It was going to be a beautiful day.

Kaplyn's mood changed as they rode. He kept thinking about Vastra's ill temper when dealing with Callan. A short way later and he could contain himself no longer. "Why were you rude to the farmers, Vastra?"

"Because they are clods," Vastra sneered. "They do nothing more than dig in

the dirt, hoping for better days.”

The outburst surprised Kaplyn and he signalled to Lars to keep him from voicing his own anger. For a while they rode in silence. Kaplyn frowned as he considered what might have upset the sour wizard. He was losing patience with the other man and was debating whether to leave him and to head for home. Emma would be pleased to see him and his brothers’ would be green with envy when he told them about his recent adventures. Initially he had felt obliged to accompany Vastra, after he had paid for his lodgings, but now he felt that debt was paid, especially after helping to defend the farm against the wolves.

Just as Kaplyn was about to say something, Vastra broke the silence and this time Kaplyn detected a note of sadness. “I was brought up on such a farm with my mother. I never knew my father and, until recently, I did not know who he was. Can you imagine a small boy growing up in such a close-knit community without a father? Bastard they called me.” His face flushed red and his eyebrows beetled.

“I was later told that my father was a traveller who stayed the night, requesting lodgings — as we just did. He was with a group of men. Rich men at that, possibly even nobles — or so many thought. The sight of their wealth no doubt turned my mother’s head. I questioned others in the village and one man claimed to have seen a crest on their saddles. He drew it in the dirt and I copied it. Later I discovered it was the royal crest, no less!”

Kaplyn’s heart lurched; he had a terrible premonition of what was to come. A crow rose from the bushes to their side and cawed shrilly into the air as though voicing its own anger.

Vastra’s eyes blazed with suppressed rage. His eyes flickered briefly to the crow as he composed himself before continuing. “Some years later I found out who my father was.

He seemed to be waiting for them to ask whom, but neither did.

“It was the King!” Vastra announced.

Kaplyn’s breath caught and he stared at Vastra, not wanting to hear any more.

“He was in his early forties then, but there was no mistake,” Vastra continued.

Kaplyn was stunned. His heart was beating furiously and he felt his face redden. “You cannot be sure it was the King,” he stated firmly.

“Oh, but I *am*,” Vastra sneered. “Much later my mother, amongst others, described him to me and I have since seen him with my own eyes. There is no mistake.

“Also, do not forget, I am a *wizard*,” he spat the last word as if it was a rotten taste in his mouth. He glared angrily at Kaplyn. “I have ways of finding out the truth — ways that you could not imagine.”

Kaplyn could not believe it and he wanted to protest.

“That is not a reason to hate the farmers,” Lars interrupted. “They work hard. You saw their homes. They have so little and yet they were willing to share their provisions with us.”

“They are happy to live their lives as slaves and have neither the intelligence nor wit to seek a better life!” Vastra snapped.

“You were lucky to be able to escape such a life, and you should not

begrudge the farmers theirs. Not everyone is capable of magic!” Lars replied.

Vastra looked furious. However, he bit his lip and refrained from a retort.

Kaplyn also remained silent—his feelings in turmoil. He had kept his origins a secret from the other two men and now, more than ever, he must guard that secret. His gaze kept going to Vastra and he realised that, if he spoke the truth, then they were half-brothers. He *couldn't* believe him, nor the coincidence that had brought them together. He was perplexed, but reasoned that he had better stay with Vastra—if only to keep an eye on him.

Was Vastra a threat to his father? The venom in Vastra's voice suggested he was, and a premonition of fear sent a shudder down Kaplyn's spine.

ENJOYED THIS EXERT?  
THEN PURCHASE A COPY FROM  
ONLINE BOOKSELLERS

The three volumes are:

Book 1 - Legacy of the Eldric  
Book 2 - Dragon Rider  
Book 3 - Shadow of the Demon

Visit <http://prophecyofthekings.com/>

Contact the author at [Legacyoftheeldric@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:Legacyoftheeldric@blueyonder.co.uk)

By the same author

## Drachar's Demons

A tale of the Eldric, how Drachar came to power and the Krell Wars.

Drachar, banished by his own people, forges an unholy alliance with the demons by offering them ten thousand souls, but the demons demand one hundred thousand and without quibbling Drachar accepts. Only all out war will deliver so many souls and the old enemy Trosgarth is his only potential ally, but he must cross the land to confront their king and persuade him to his cause. Drachar has the power of the demon world at his command, but madness threatens when the demons plague his dreams, demanding souls.

His people, the Eldric, realise that they must learn to combat the growing threat by summoning demons themselves to exploit any weakness they may find. However, it is an exceptionally brave man that confronts a demon let alone tries to kill one. Their scales are impervious to blades and any mistake results in the demon claiming another soul for eternal damnation.

The race is on for war threatens; a war like no other for sorcerer will battle sorcerer and demon set against demon.