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SUMMER'S DAWN  
A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY  
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ABSTRACT  
SUMMER'S DAWN  
BY TYLER MAHER

*Summer's Dawn* is a fantasy novella set in the fictional world of Lothrium, which is modeled after Late Medieval England. The novel follows the protagonist, Quinten Wesker, a wine merchant from a once prominent house whose fortunes have so diminished that now their greatest asset is a single rickety wagon, which Quinten uses to travel through the bandit ridden forest of Hilgard. With him are two escorts: Draven, a quiet, yet fierce guard hailing from the icy northern tip of Lothrium, called the Frost; and Percy, a fiery youth sent by Quinten's potential business partner at the Alwyn Estate. But along the way, Draven proves himself to be a dark force that threatens Quinten's life. *Summer's Dawn* is a low fantasy novella, as it takes place in an ordinary world where magical forces are minimal—yet they do intrude at times, often to disastrous results. The novella explores the themes of heroism and redemption in the face of overwhelming adversity, as they are navigated by a psychologically atypical protagonist.

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## Chapter One

Quinten's wagon creaked with every bend and dip in the road. The piercing rays of the midday sun passed through its patched canopy and beat on the back of his neck. Each culture in Lothrium had their own god, but for Quinten Wesker all that was holy could be found in the Vinlands. Fed from eastern rains and year-round sunshine, the land brimmed with life. Quinten's team of two drays pulled the cart past fields overflowing with strawberries, squashes, and lettuce. New clusters of green hills peaked above the horizon and in the distance the King's Crown mountain range jutted even higher above the clouds, marking the western edge of the world.

Draven, his assistant, held the reins. Quinten was glad for this, as he could take in the natural beauty and doze without fear of the cart riding off the road. Draven was a Northerner from the Frost, the cold tundra that served as the seat of House Randel. Like so many from the North, Draven was content with silence. At first Quinten didn't mind these long lulls in conversation, but eventually he grew restless and found himself searching for ways to fill in the void.

"Do you have a son, Draven?" (No, he did not).

"Which Northern cuisine is your favorite?" (Of this he had no preference).

Draven answered in a tone so cold that it made Quinten regret having spoken at all. Still, he sensed no animosity coming from his assistant. The fellow came to Quinten when he needed his help most, and for that he was grateful. Draven was reliable and could lift casks of wine without assistance. His clothes were ragged and he wore a scruffy beard and unkempt hair; yet Draven had a princely demeanor, with high cheekbones and intelligent blue eyes to match. His eyes were not of a common blue either, but were as dense and deep as uncut sapphires.

Quinten racked his brain for a topic they could bond over. They would soon be traveling

through the forest Hilgard—a stretch of the trade route thick with bandits—where good rapport between them could mean the difference between life and death.

He'd heard stories of the exotic hunting the Frost was famous for. Word from that far north often became mixed with myth by the time it reached the Vinlands. Tales abounded of the trophy killings of eighty-foot serpents and bears with antlers and wings. Quinten was eager to learn of the truth straight from the source, and so he said:

“Tell me Draven, do you hunt?”

The Northerner's eyes narrowed. He offered no reply.

*“Of course he didn't hunt,”* Quinten thought. *“That's reserved for the Northern lords and ones visiting from neighboring kingdoms.”*

Draven was clearly of peasant stock, and if the rumors had any weight to them, his class were the ones at risk of being picked out and hunted by the Frost Lords. Such talk was enough to chill the blood in Quinten's veins, even here in the heart of the Vinlands. Still, he wasn't sure how much of it he actually believed. Legends told of the Frost Lords hunting with packs of wolves; while others painted them as demons who emerged from a hole at the northernmost tip of Lothrium. They were cannibals who drank the blood of their marks from chalices during feasts, and their children were born covered in fur like the wolves they hunted with. Perhaps Quinten would've asked Draven if he was more of a talker, but he didn't want to risk feeling like a fool when he was met with another long silence.

Still, Quinten was grateful to the Frost, for its inhospitable lands sent him his most reliable worker a mere week after he reached a life changing deal with the Alwyn Estate. The Alwyns, the richest wine merchants in Lothrium, were known for their generosity. Their grounds were tucked away in the forested land beneath the tallest peak of the King's Crown. Quinten

found himself staring at the snowcapped peaks in the distance while dreams of the prosperity that awaited him filled his thoughts; while the nightmare promised if he failed grew less threatening with each league traveled north...

Quinten and Draven reached Castow before dusk. The town was well-off, its buildings made of stone blocks and wood; the roofs of slate, since the constant rain in the Vinlands wouldn't allow for straw construction. Guards sent by the crown patrolled the streets in pairs, the blue of their steel helms and scabbards of their sheathed swords set them apart from those hired as escorts by nobles and merchants. A red phoenix spread its wings across the guards' chest plates, the sigil of the king's house. A group of local boys playing at swords with sticks shouted at the guards to join them, but the two men continued their march without paying the lads any mind.

Draven gave a tug on the reins and the wagon came to a stop. Quinten stepped down, his legs stiff from a day of riding. Draven said he would take the wagon and horses to the small storehouse the Alwyns kept in Castow and meet Quinten at the inn for dinner. Quinten noted the lack of "my lord" and "if it'd please you" in his assistant's speech. Still, he nodded his approval without correcting the Northerner.

They had been on the road for three days already and it would be another five to reach the Alwyn Estate. Robert Alwyn was kind enough to offer one of his guards as an escort, since the next leg of the journey was notorious for banditry and Quinten was glad to take him up on it. The month-long journey to the capital from the Wesker Vineyard had proven far too dangerous, even with armed escorts in tow. Travelers rarely ventured so far south when there were plenty of famous vineyards to visit closer to major cities. Alwyn gold would be the force that revitalized

the Wesker family; of this Quinten had no doubt.

He strolled down the cobblestone streets to the market square, enjoying the sights the town had to offer. A group of lords and their ladies passed him, wearing tunics and dresses made of fine silk. Their faces were pale, unlike the tanned skin of the farmhands who bustled through Castow bringing wheelbarrows full of potatoes and carrots to the marketplace. The nobles walked with an air of careless ease. A famous actor's troupe were in Castow through the end of the year and perhaps that was where they were off to. Quinten spotted a poster for "The Fall of the Vagrant King" plastered outside a shop. He shuffled forward to examine it. An emaciated man wearing a crown and patched robes sat on a stool while a plump woman with a prim face and a jester in motley stood above him. The woman held a pink pouch, the two marbles inside giving it a suggestive shape. The silhouette of a phoenix loomed in the background, foretelling the king's demise. Quinten didn't have the coin to see the show this year, but come next summer things would be different. His sons would be the ones dressing in silk and courting the highborn women of the Vinlands. Quinten couldn't afford to take his late wife, Elaine, to town; or to pay the doctor when the Plague ravaged the poorest households of Lothrium. The smoke from a blacksmith's chimney caught his eye. A painful memory arose—searing his thoughts—but he kept his head held high. The future of the Wesker family would be bright: he would make sure of that.

The sun hung low in the sky by the time Quinten reached the market square. It bustled with life as travelers and townsfolk went about their errands. The smell of apple pie from the baker's shop wafted into the streets. Quinten's stomach ached from the lean diet he'd taken up on the road. There would be a meal of roast beef and potatoes awaiting him at the inn; but it was on the other side of town and he was hungry now. He spotted an empty stall and leaned on it. He



felt sleep weighing down his eyes, but he fought back. He touched his coin pouch in his coat pocket. Its weight sent a jolt of electricity running through his body. He snatched it and looked inside and it was filled to the top with gold pieces! Quinten looked inside the luxurious inn. The sight made his mouth gape open. His sons were there, holding fat babies in front of a roaring fireplace. Their buxom wives were loading trays with pork and grapes and laying them at their sides. The women had lively flushes to their faces that brightened when their husbands pulled them in for kisses. The wives lifted their cherubic children to suckle and grow plumper still. Quinten's eldest son beckoned him to join in the laughter and drinking that roared through the hall. Quinten stepped inside to join them, but the moment his foot crossed the threshold, the heat from the fire licked against his skin. The fireplace roared, its flames singeing his sons' fine robes—then a dark hand shot forth to grip the hearth. A shadowy figure pulled its way into the hall. The Wesker clan rose to find their swords—shouting for their wives to escape with the children. Quinten tried advancing but his tunic caught fire. He patted the flames, but to no avail. A fat man formed of smoke stood laughing while the fire spread, turning the happy hall into an inferno. His sons screamed in anguish.

*“Damn you, Wyman... damn you.”*

Quinten awoke to the sound of cats crying in the alleyway. His hand immediately rose to his pocket to check that he hadn't been robbed while he dozed. He felt the familiar lightness of his coin pouch against his touch. He slumped against the market stall to take the weight off his feet. A guard approached to see if he needed help, which Quinten took as a sign to head to the inn.

The blue of Draven's eyes flooded Quinten with a wave of relief. Seeing a familiar face

after a troubling evening was exactly what he needed to take the edge off. Quinten strode through the crowded hall and sat next to his worker. The heat inside was stifling; still, he chose to keep his coat on rather than risk the chance of another boarder making off with it on their way out the door. Catching the eye of a serving maid, Quinten signaled with his hand that he needed a plate. Draven had already been served. The precision with which he cut and chewed his meat was odd for one with so wild an appearance. The Northerner had hardly touched his flagon of mead, the amber liquid threatening to spill over the top with every bump from their livelier neighbors. The men were busy with their drinks and eyeing the serving maids. Quinten was glad they weren't forcing conversation upon him, for he had grown to appreciate his reflections since taking Draven into his service. Silent observation taught him why the Northerners stayed quiet: drunken words often exploded into fights and had lost many men their lives. At his age, Quinten would rather save his talk for the bargaining table.

“I have a letter for Robert Alwyn.”

Quinten jerked his head to the source of these words with such force that it strained his neck. It had been so long since Draven spoke that he had forgotten what his voice sounded like. His tone had a sharpness to it that Quinten didn't like. It was like icicles snapping overhead—compelling him to move or be run through by their frozen points.

“What kind of business could you possibly have with Lord Alwyn?” Quinten said.

Draven didn't answer this. Instead, he reached into the pocket of his travelworn coat and produced an envelope. It was in immaculate condition and stood in stark contrast to the raggedness of its owner. Its paper was white, with the faintest hint of blue, like ice lining a windowsill on the first morning of winter. But it was the waxen seal that made Quinten's stomach sink. On it, three silver spears jutted up towards a crescent moon. Quinten was not

learned in heraldry, so he couldn't name the house the seal belonged to; but what he did know is that nothing good could come from mixing himself up with the affairs of the Frost Lords.

Draven must've seen the fear flash across Quinten's face, for he said, "I'll forfeit my share of the profit if you get this letter into the hands of Lord Alwyn."

The Northerner's face was expressionless, save for his eyes, which gave Quinten a searching look. Quinten took the letter from his hand and stuffed it into his coat pocket beside his coin pouch.

"We'll have this transaction notarized before leaving Castow," Quinten said.

Draven flashed him a grin. There was something wolfish in it; like the exchange was nothing more than a game to him, of which he'd known the outcome before he started playing. The Northerner rose to head in for the night. While not the tallest man in the room, there was something in Draven's presence that made men step aside when he passed. Quinten was glad they'd booked separate rooms, for he'd had quite enough of his worker for the time. He could go without seeing Draven until they left on their journey to the Alwyn Estate two days hence.

Quinten pursed his lips and thought. While unexpected, this development would save him a fifth of his profits from the exchange. Every gold piece was another brick with which he would rebuild House Wesker. He would hand one of the servants at the estate two gold coins and instructions to place the letter in Lord Alwyn's study—and that would be the end of it.

Quinten sank into his seat and lifted Draven's untouched flagon for a gulp of mead. The serving maid arrived and eyed the empty plate and the flagon in his hand.

"There's not enough meat left for seconds," she said. "It looks like you've already eaten your fill, but if you lay a silver piece down, I'll see what else is in the kitchen."

Quinten felt the heat rush to his head. That old feeling of rage that came with hunger

flooded through him—but he didn't have the energy to argue with her. He reached into his pocket and placed a silver coin onto the maid's fleshy palm.

When he was finally served, the meat was old, the mead watered down, and Quinten couldn't get comfortable with Draven's letter digging into his side. He stared into the fireplace at the other end of the hall.

It was going to be one of those nights.

Quinten awoke in the afternoon with a splitting headache. He'd forgotten to close the curtains and the sunlight streaming into his room burned his eyes. He tried rolling over and covering his face with a pillow, but the dust in the room and the heat made it feel like he was suffocating. Quinten forced himself from bed, stumbling towards the window. He gripped the dresser to steady himself and found his eyes fixed on Castow's busy streets. Farmhands carted fresh vegetables over the stone bridge to the market square. A group of guildsmen talked shop on their way to a dining hall; the chaperons on their heads setting them apart from the cap wearing commonfolk. All the motion made Quinten queasy. He popped the window open and closed the blinds. Quinten slammed his knee against a post while shuffling back to bed.

"Ah, Hell," he said.

Pain shot through his body. He fell into bed with his back aching and stabbing heat running up his thigh.

The room was too small—too run down—for someone of Quinten's birth; for as much as he'd grown used to the indignities of poverty, the memory of opulence lost only served to enhance the pain. The wooden walls were termite eaten, the ceiling above creaked with the pacing feet of another tenant. Quinten found the sounds unbearable, like hornets stinging at him

any time he felt settled in. His neighbors seemed to have awoken from Quinten's yelp. He heard a woman giggling and the steady boom of a man's voice. Then the giggles turned to moans—and Quinten couldn't stand it any longer. The room smelled like piss, the sheets scratched at every exposed nerve on his body. He needed to get out now or he would go crazy; he needed to leave or he would start thinking of his Elaine, and of the Plague, and death, and raging fires, and he wouldn't be able to stop.

Quinten must have looked half mad hobbling down the street on his hurt knee; his hair in tangles and his beard unshaven. People kept out of his path and he liked it that way. Even the beggars tensed and reconsidered when they caught a look at his eyes. At first he walked aimlessly in the direction of the town square. He couldn't focus and he ended up bumping into a pair of urchins. It was still light outside and the streets were crowded. Quinten reached into his right pocket to grip the dagger he carried. Sensing trouble, the youths kept walking without causing a scene.

Quinten had been dealing with this nervous streak for years and he knew he'd be in trouble if he didn't do something fast. He would be shaking hands with Robert Alwyn in six days' time and the trip up the bandit-ridden road to the estate would be tense enough. Quinten looked from left to right for a solution. The restaurants across the canal wouldn't do: the gentry dining on the patios in their fine silks said as much. A jolt of electricity shot through Quinten's head. He bent forward, cupping his forehead in his hands. When he opened his eyes after the pain subsided, he saw a familiar flier lying on the ground. It was a bill for "The Fall of the Vagrant King", advertising admission and a turkey leg for the price of four silver pieces. Quinten's hand rose to weigh his coin pouch, but he stopped the reflex midair.

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Quinten felt the tension leaving his body while sitting in the stands overlooking the Castow Theater's stage. The turkey leg was delicious, its juicy flesh tearing off with ease. It was spiced with a savory herb that hit the spot. Quinten hadn't felt so calm since the Plague devastated Lothrium six years hence. Watching from the crowd reminded him of his youth, when his father took Quinten and his little sister to town to see plays. They came so often that Quinten was sure he had sat in this very seat before; only this time he purchased a cushion for an extra copper piece. The Weskers were certainly affluent enough to afford the cushions back then, but Quinten's father used the opportunity to teach his children that while they had plenty, they should not expect everything from life. If he hadn't learned this lesson in his childhood, then the years since the Plague had certainly hammered this point home for Quinten. But tonight he felt no guilt for the extra comfort the copper bought.

The show began with the Vagrant King and his generals glowering over maps in a war tent. Roland Fenix, a lord from the Highlands, the mountainous lands on Lothrium's eastern coast, had declared himself a king, and powerful lords from across the continent were flocking to his cause. The mood on stage was tense—that is, until a jester hopped onto the table and pulled his pants down, revealing his undergarments. The crowd laughed, and the gag made Quinten smile. In the next scene, the king begged his wife to convince her father to lend the crown the gold needed to pay off their debts. The queen agreed, but said she'd lost all respect for him as a man. Then she pulled a turkey leg from beneath her dress and slapped him across the face with it. This made Quinten laugh. He bit into his own turkey leg, enjoying a night away from his troubles.

The second act of the play highlighted the vices of the Vagrant King's court. One minister bathed in a tub of gold coins while chugging jugs filled with red wine. When the

emaciated man playing the king begged him to stop his extravagant spending, the royal jester betrayed him by tying a blind fold around his eyes and pulling down the king's pants. The minister whistled and the stage filled with courtiers, who pointed and mocked the king. The jester cartwheeled to the bathtub, and the minister filled his pointed cap with gold coins.

The crowd burst into applause when a handsome man with flowing red hair stepped onto the stage. The actor playing Roland Fenix pulled a sword from his scabbard, challenging the king to single combat to put an end to the war. The Vagrant King flinched away from the blue steel, stumbling over his own feet to fall flat on his face. The jester rushed on stage and lifted the king over his shoulder to carry him away. It was at this point that Quinten felt himself nodding off again, despite his enjoyment of the performance. He tried fighting off sleep, but his head kept dipping down against his will, and he couldn't keep his eyes open. Quinten fell into a dreamless sleep. It was a restful one, but he felt disoriented by the shouting coming from the stage and the cheers from the crowd when he awoke. The Vagrant King was being roasted over a live fire on stage. He fussed with his bindings and begged for his life in a girlish voice. To his left, the jester swam laps in a giant cauldron. Quinten felt his chest tighten at the sight of the fire.

"No, no, no," he said.

His seatmates were looking at him, but Quinten didn't notice—he couldn't take his eyes from the flames.

"I didn't want to set the fire," he said. "I tried putting it out—it was an accident!"

"What's this guy on about?" a tradesman said to his friend.

"Maybe they're planting actors in the crowd," his friend said. "I hear they did that for the last production."

The two men stared at Quinten, grins spreading across their faces. Quinten squirmed in

his seat, tugging at his shirt collar to cool himself. The two men laughed at his response. He looked at the pair with wide eyes.

“Excuse me,” Quinten said.

He rose to his feet and headed to the stairs leading down from the stands. His feet were numb from sitting and his knee burned with pain, so he had to use the railing while shuffling to the exit. The curtains closed and the crowd clapped, but he could still hear the laughter of the two men coming from behind him.

Quinten was a wreck of nerves by the time he made it back to his room. His dark thoughts were always hardest to fend off in the nighttime. He tried closing his eyes, but he was right there at the lodgings of the Layton Vineyard with a torch in his hand. The plan was to break his competitor’s windows with a rock to wake up the family and then shout “fire”. He’d light their adjoining office on fire and ride off into the night. Quinten decided better of it in the end: it wasn’t worth getting ahead if it meant he had to lower himself to such vile standards. But the torch slipped from his grip when he turned to walk to the well. The bushes on the side of the lodgings caught flame. Quinten tried fanning the fire out with his coat, but it was no use. He screamed and broke the windows like he planned, but he heard no stirring coming from within.

The guilt for his crime and a growing paranoia that someone had witnessed it haunted Quinten for three months afterwards. He often couldn’t rise to perform his duties at the Wesker Vineyard. His sons cut into what little savings they had left to hire a doctor to pay him weekly visits. Quinten prayed that death would grip him in her skeletal hands, offering him the sweet release of her embrace.

The *relief* Quinten yearned for came at last with the arrival of the spring months; yet it



only marked the beginning of a new miserable chapter in his life. A stout magistrate with three chains to match the gold chains that hung about his neck came knocking upon Quinten's door. Quinten still remembered the sound with haunting clarity; for while it was delicate, it preemptively summoned a dread in him that had not left since that day.

Magistrate Wyman of Cullfield was sorely disappointed when he failed to receive the taxes owed to him by the Layton family, who headed the most profitable business in his jurisdiction. He sent his riders into the foothills where their vineyard was tucked away—and Quinten could only imagine how shocked he was to learn of the tragic fate that befell their beautiful family. His men surmised their home burned down three weeks prior, with the odd tracks around the grounds suggesting foul play was at hand. Of course, Magistrate Wyman did his due diligence and spent the last two months tracking down the party responsible for such a heinous crime—for he found no higher fulfillment than seeing justice served.

“I'm not saying you're the one who did it—Lord Wesker—but I have enough evidence to put the heads of you and your entire family on spikes today if I wished it,” Wyman said. The magistrate wore a smile when he spoke, yet his eyes gleamed with satisfaction. Quinten squirmed in his seat. The magistrate stroked his chains, satisfied by his discomfort. Wyman leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers over his chest, and said, “Still, I'd prefer to avoid such unnecessary cruelty. I'm going to offer you another solution: get your hands on three hundred gold pieces before the first day of summer dawns and I'll extend clemency to you and your clan.”

Three hundred coins was a small fortune in Lothrium, her histories filled with accounts of high lords raising their banners to contest lesser sums. For weeks Quinten worked his figures, calculating ways to squeeze every drop of wealth from the estate to meet Wyman's demands. But

good fortune came at last to the Wesker Vineyard when a wine connoisseur working for the Alwyn Estate took a particular liking to Quinten's vintage. He agreed to buy twelve casks of wine immediately, upon the condition that Quinten could deliver the wares to Lord Alwyn's grounds—at which time the two men could discuss a larger shipment to be transported north by the Alwyn's men. And while the agreement was by no means a guarantee of salvation, Quinten had never shaken hands with such vigor before in all his life.

The cries that came from the Layton family as they burned alive still haunted Quinten every night before he went to sleep. While he hoped a day would come when he could grow old in peace—without the threats of poverty and dismemberment hanging over his head—Quinten doubted the nightmares would ever stop.

*“I deserve all this misery,”* he thought. *“It's my punishment from the gods.”*

## Chapter Two

Quinten awoke the next day to an argument raging above, the words muffled by the wood ceiling; the occupants' voices like the groaning of rafters in a storm. Their pounding feet thundered without end, grating on his nerves. Still, he focused on the duties that lay ahead, running through an inventory of tasks in his mind. The first rays of light filled the streets of Castow with their luminance, giving Quinten a hopeful feeling for the journey that lay ahead. He felt detached from the shabbiness and smell of his lodgings which had so irritated him the day before. The south facing window opened onto a view of the shops and canals lining the streets. Already peasants bustled about, their raggedness apparent in the warm light of dawn. Quinten watched them from his bed until he felt he could no longer stand the weight of the sheets upon him.

He rose and dressed himself in his warmest traveler's coat, along with a wide brimmed hat to protect himself from the blazing midday sun to come. Quinten grabbed his satchel and headed for the door—only for the pounding above to resume—accompanied by the shattering of glass and a yelp of pain. Then came the footfalls of someone running down the hallway. The brief silence that followed was interrupted by a set of heavier footsteps and the booming voice of a man yowling in pain.

Feeling bold, Quinten cracked the door open and peered down the length of the hall. A young woman with cinnamon brown hair rounded the corner wearing a white gown meant for her bedchambers. She banged on the inn's doors, hoping to find one good soul willing to help her.

“Someone let me in,” she said. “Please—he’s gone mad from the wine!”

Quinten regretted his curiosity, for when she spotted his door standing ajar, she bolted

forward and wedged her shoulder into the gap.

“Please, let me stay with you until he settles down—he’s a mean drunk—but I’ll be safe once its passed.”

Quinten looked down at his shoes; keenly aware that a single misstep could mean the difference between him making it to the Alwyn Estate to close the deal or failing and facing Magistrate Wyman’s wrath. Still, there were other things that would make him unable to live with himself if he turned a blind eye to them. He pulled his weight back from the door, causing the woman to nearly tumble forward as she entered. She looked around his room with frightened eyes, ensuring she hadn’t stumbled into a more dangerous situation yet.

She took Quinten by the hand, saying, “Thank you! You’ve saved my life and I mean—”

“I can’t stay with you,” Quinten said. “I’m sorry, but I have a meeting to make.”

“You can’t leave me alone in here!” she said. “He’ll be absolutely brutal if he finds me here.”

“I really must leave. I’ll tell the innkeeper to send up help. Lock the door and don’t open it for anyone but him.”

Quinten left her alone looking scared, like a child separated from her father. He waited outside her door only long enough to hear the bolt latch. He felt awful for not being able to stay and comfort her, but there was much to be lost by putting himself in harm’s way unnecessarily.

Castow’s streets were slick from a downpour that drenched the town while Quinten slept. He had grown used to the stiffness in his bones that came with the constant rain in the Vinlands, but this was offset by the deep sleep he enjoyed when it stormed outside. The nightmares he dreaded did not visit Quinten last night, which was a blessing, since they tormented him in his

sleep more nights than not since his wife passed. The morning air was crisp in Castow, so Quinten stuffed his hands in his pockets and headed alongside a canal to the Alwyn's storehouse on the east side of town. The water in the canal shone brightly, summoning an image of flowing gold to Quinten's mind. His footsteps slogged against the cobble stone streets; his pace rapid so as not to keep his escort waiting. Quinten held himself tall and walked with purpose in a way that reminded him of Draven. His assistant's letter still grated on him; its edges pressed into Quinten's ribs through his coat pocket. Quinten doubted he would get a straight answer from the Northerner if he pressed him on its contents, so he decided before hand not to mention it. Besides, the Alwyn guards had a reputation for their loyalty to their sire, and Quinten thought better than to raise the topic near prying ears. A pair of crows resting atop a shop sign squawked to each other as Quinten passed. He could hear the flapping of their dark wings when they took flight behind his back.

Draven made for a splendid sight perched high atop the wagon in the early morning light. He spent the day since Quinten last saw him washing the grime from his clothes and person, his hair and beard neatly trimmed and flowing. The Northerner sat statuesque, not a muscle stirring in his body, his hands grasping the reins like they were an extension of his arms. He gave a slow nod and tip of his hat to Quinten as he neared, then returned his gaze back to the horizon, a peaceful expression on his face. Quinten hoisted his luggage into the canopied cart where the wine was stored. The thud of the bag hitting wood made the horses stir, stamping their hooves in protest to the disturbance.

A man in leather armor holding a kettle hat under his arm emerged from behind the storehouse and headed to Quinten. He was a youth of around twenty years with wavy blonde hair

and a flush to his cheeks like a drunkard. There was something boisterous in the way the youth walked, his short sword and buckler swaying along with his every step. He looked Quinten up and down as he approached. When he stopped, he nearly crushed Quinten's hand with the strength of his grip.

"The name's Percy," the youth said, "and I take it you're Quinten Wesker?"

"That I am," Quinten said. "Did Lord Alwyn brief you on the road we're taking?"

"No need for that," said Percy, grinning. "I've traveled through Hilgard with my uncles since I was but twelve. No surprises between here and the estate I haven't seen twice over."

"It sounds like we're in good hands," Quinten said, claspng the youth on the shoulder. "I've made the crossing twice in the years prior so I've seen my share of the forest, too."

Percy placed his hand over Quinten's, which still rested upon his shoulder, and winced, saying, "They say three's the Witch's number." Seeing Quinten's startled expression, he chuckled and added, "but she's only trouble if you don't have a spear as long as mine."

And with that, Percy turned from Quinten and pulled himself into the wagon. He extended his hand to Draven, but the Northerner only nodded his head to acknowledge the youth's presence. With a huff, Percy settled in beneath the wagon's canopy and lit his pipe.

Quinten made his rounds about the wagon, inspecting the wheels for cracks and the bed for new wear. He caught a smell of tobacco while he bent to check the tightness of a front spoke. While he couldn't be sure of Percy's temperament, the lad was young, strong, and well-trained in combat and scouting by the Alwyn's master at arms. Quinten had long dealt with hired soldiers and he knew it was best to remain indifferent to their testing natures. Percy would serve, and Quinten would do what he must to dampen the youth's fiery spirit when it flared up. Percy could smoke and swear as much as it pleased him, so long as he was ready to lay down his life when

trouble arose.

Quinten took the clear skies above as an auspicious sign for the journey that lay ahead. Such cloudlessness was a rarity in the Vinlands, where flooding from the constant downpours was the foremost threat to life. Their path took them northwest, drawing ever closer to the King's Crown mountain range, which blossomed with green life from abundant watering. The mountains reminded Quinten of a colossal shrub set before the blue sky: a sight fit for an artist to capture in a landscape painting.

Quinten armed himself with a dagger, which he kept prominently displayed in a sheath upon his chest. Draven wore his sword at his hip and Percy sat at the front of the cart, making himself visible to the opportunistic eyes watching the road. The threat of banditry was real, but with three armed men it would take a bold group of brigands to test their might. This need for guards meant only the rich could afford to travel north from Castow, since the Hilgard Forest that lay between the South and the capital was teeming with cutthroats. Women, the elderly, and those in small numbers dared not make the journey, instead trading locally and with the bogfolk in the Wetlands to the east. A trader could make an honest living in the Southern economy, but the wealth Quinten yearned for lay further north at the capital and with the Alwyns. On his next journey, Quinten would use his gold to hire two more guards, and then he could rest easy.

The Hilgard Forest loomed ahead like a wall of oak and pine, a silvery mist obscuring it with a phantasmic haze. Although it was Quinten's third crossing, the sight of that lawless wood never failed to test his nerves. The knowledge that two days stood between himself and civilization while at the heart of the forest was like a dagger of fear twisting inside his guts. Quinten was fortunate enough to have avoided bandit attacks in the past by the strength of

numbers. One time when he traveled with a single guard, a group of three bandits harassed them from the side of the road with threats of torture and dismemberment. Quinten saw the aggressors were young and more scared than he was, so he offered them a cask of wine for safe passage, to which they agreed. He could still picture the boys struggling to roll the cask uphill back to their camp—and the icy look on his escort’s face as he asked Quinten if he’d like him to retrieve the goods—his sword hilt tight in his hand.

It wasn’t the bandits that Quinten feared in Hilgard, but the element of chaos that bred in the untamed corners of the world. A single broken wheel or man fallen ill had the potential to turn a five-day trek into a nightmare from which they may never return. The depth of darkness at night without firelight was like nothing Quinten had experienced prior to his first crossing. That darkness and the unaccountable stirrings in the forest were enough to breed terror even in battle hardened men, and there were many stories of travelers breaking and butchering their companions in the dead of night. The Southern folk called it the Witch’s Wood, pinning the horrors in their folktales to a crone who retreated into the heart of Hilgard after her husband and son were killed by bandits on their return home from Lothrium’s capital. Quinten was not apt to believe legends, but the thought of a red eyed witch stirring travelers to madness in the depths of the forest stuck with him since his nurse told him the story in his boyhood.

Draven, usually the image of calm, was growing tenser with every league they passed. Percy warned that bandits laid low, obscured by the slope of hills, and picked out their targets before they ever entered the forest. He emerged from the cart and stood behind Quinten and Draven, smoking his pipe. He cradled a spear in the crook of his elbow and blew clouds of white smoke.

“Best to keep steel bared from here on out,” Percy said. His helmeted head swayed with



the rocking of the wagon; his eyes mild, like he was perfectly at peace with the surroundings and had retreated into himself. Draven scanned the horizon for movement, his head turning from side to side like a weathercock on a stormy night.

Quinten sat still, his palms laid flat across his thighs to keep them from clenching into fists. That sense of purpose that spurred him forward this morning had left him at the sight of Hilgard, and in its place came the two days of frayed nerves he suffered in Castow. Quinten was content to let his young guards enjoy the warlike vigor that flooded through a man standing vigil in enemy territory. Their party would enter the forest regardless of whether they were spotted by bandits lying in wait, and Quinten didn't see the use in straining his neck in a vain effort. No, the true terrors in the woods were those beyond the control of men. Quinten would focus on steadying his hands so he didn't break beneath the curse of Hilgard-witch's or otherwise.

The wagon wheeled towards the pines that stood like green giants: sentinels at their post before a new world that lay just ahead. The horses whinnied at the prospect of breaching the threshold before them. Quinten was glad he wasn't the only one dreading the journey before them, and he knew he wouldn't find comradery with Draven and his icy silences. The three-men sat without speaking. The only sounds for miles around were the crunch of gravel beneath the cart and the beating of the horses' hooves. The party would need to speak in hushed tones (if they spoke at all) going forward so as not to draw unwanted attention from predators lurking off the path. This quiet made Quinten feel desperately alone. The urge seized him to turn the cart around and return to the Wesker Vineyard empty handed; to seek out new contacts in the Vinlands and forget his dreams of fortune that lay due north. Quinten's youngest son was but twelve, and his life would be made all the more meager if he grew up without knowing his

father. If only there were figures he could calculate to know his chances of making it through Hilgard alive. The unknown filled him with more dread than if he were to be handed a four in ten wager on his death by some ghastly gambler. His shoulders and neck had grown so stiff that they felt like stones, and his hands trembled upon his thighs. Quinten stuffed them into his pockets and kept his gaze straight ahead. A touch on his right shoulder nearly made him jump. He jerked his head to the left to see Draven grinning at him. The Northerner's teeth shone against the green backdrop like freshly fallen snow.

“We must push on,” Draven said in a hushed tone meant to be shared between them. This brought a smile to Quinten's tense mouth. Although Draven was a generation younger than him, the Northerner's presence made Quinten feel protected in the same way he did around his brothers and father during his youth. Draven gave a nod of his head and fixed his gaze back upon the road. A gulp sounded behind him, accompanied by the sharp smell of liquor. Quinten let the moment go by without reprimanding Percy. He passed into Hilgard at ease, knowing that at the very least he was with men who were strong in arms.

By midday the rain fell in torrents. The wagon's worn canopy only caught so much, the rest soaking into their wool coats and gloves. Quinten felt the bloated material weighing on his skin. He envied the wine casks behind him, untouched by the downpour. Still, there was a beauty to the forest in the middle of a storm, the mud soaking up water and swelling with life; the oaks and pines dripping with perspiration like living things. Mockingbirds cried out, scrambling to find shelter in nooks and hollows above. A deer darted ahead on the road. Percy made jest that he'd hurl his spear and make a kill. He prodded at Draven with his words too, hoping to get a rise, but the Northerner seemed to have a place within that could not be disturbed by the outer

world: a glacier surrounding his very soul.

“Where’d you find a mute like this one?” Percy said. He gave a huff, the flush of his cheeks now creeping down his neck. Water streamed off his helmet like thin waterfalls.

“Draven’s a fine helper,” Quinten said. Thinking it best to change the subject, he added, “I see you carry a short sword and a spear. Which one would you use in a bind?”

“A bind?” Percy said. “Never been in one of those.” He smirked, hefting his spear higher up on his shoulder. “Been using these since I could first walk. The sword’s standard issue, but give me a spear and I’ll have a knight running home to his wife—I would.”

“Makes me glad to have a man of your talent on board,” Quinten said. Percy gave a nod in response, but his expression remained uninterested. Quinten reached into his coat pocket and produced a velvet pouch. “There’s some leaf in there for you to chew during the rain,” he held his hand out to the youth, “to take the edge off.”

Percy grinned and snatched the tobacco from Quinten’s palm.

“You aren’t half bad, old man,” Percy said. He ripped the leaf from the pouch and shoved it into his mouth. The flush from his neck soon subsided, turning from red to a pale pink.

The path wound ahead like a silvery snake, slithering onward to the heart of Hilgard. The crown had once favored its Southern farmers and wine merchants, funding the construction of a stone road that ran through the woods. Hilgard was free of bandits in the years before the Plague and the usurpation of the crown by House Fenix plunged the realm into disarray, with guards patrolling the length of the road. Families like the Alwyns stepped in to fund the transfer of goods from south to north, acting as middlemen and reaping the profits for their enterprise. The road remained fit for use, except in the spots where bandits removed stones and dug holes to catch wagon wheels. Still, these traps were few and far apart—the brigands seeming to have

reached the consensus that a sturdy road was more inviting to their prey than one laden with snares.

The party was making good time and Quinten hoped to pass the remnants of a guard house that marked the end of the first leg of their trip before nightfall.

“The trick is to get in the most miles on the first day,” Percy said. “You set up camp near that guard house and your throat’ll be cut before first light.”

Percy bragged that he made the trip in three days once with his uncle, which Quinten knew was physically impossible with a team led wagon. The youth also alluded to a secret path that would save them a day’s ride; one that was unknown to Hilgard’s bandits. Quinten only chuckled and shook his head when Percy offered to show him the path for the price of fifty gold pieces.

“Suit yourself,” said the youth. He spit a clump of tobacco over the side of the wagon. When he grinned at Quinten, his teeth were brown from the leaf’s juices. “It’s not on me if the bandits cut off your cock while you’re pissing in the bushes.”

Still, Quinten had grown to appreciate his guard, whose knowledge of Hilgard was deep enough to support his bragging. Percy barked an order to stay silent and bring the horses to a cantor when they passed beneath a low hanging oak branch that framed the road like a gate. Draven cracked the reins and the horses sped ahead. The men held their tongues. Percy gave Quinten a knowing nod when the faint sound of laughter and crude singing carried to the road from within the forest.

“More likely than not one of their scouts spotted us by now,” Percy said, breaking the silence, “but if we put a couple leagues between us and them, they won’t bother following us so far up the road.”

The sun set and Quinten's eyes hung heavy from the toils of the day. He imagined travelers setting up camp for the night, unaware of the threat that would soon visit during their sleep. The party would push on in the night, only settling down when the moon hung low in the sky and the birds filled the air with the song of morning. Darkness and the wet of rain hung around the men like thick sheets. Percy substituted his spear for a blazing torch, but it only lit up the next couple paces in front of the horses when held at full arm's length.

In this night world, sound and the ever present cold and wet reigned supreme. The rustling and cries of beasts summoned visions of bears and boars emerging from the darkness to make headlong charges at the party in Quinten's mind. The howling of wolves sounded in the distance, a desolate noise that awoke a primal fear in him. The torchlight that danced upon Draven's face revealed that the Northerner's lips were parted into an impish grin. Quinten had never noticed how long and pointed Draven's canines were before. Sensing his stare, Draven turned his head and met his employer's gaze, his sapphire eyes glowing like glass panes in a cathedral during sunset. Quinten recoiled at the sight and Draven laughed in his deep voice.

*"Fucking Northerners."*

Quinten could still feel Draven's gaze upon him for what felt like hours afterwards. He dared not turn his head and look, fearing the Northerner would turn and bite into his neck with his sharp teeth. Quinten prayed that the letter, now stored in his satchel within the cart, was safe from the rain that barraged the party. He sensed a malice in his assistant darker than any force that might assail them from within the forest. Quinten wondered what kind of evil he would be delivering into the life of Robert Alwyn when he reached the estate four days hence. He was not a religious man, but he found himself beseeching the gods for salvation to be his only comfort in that foul hour.

*“Gods be good and protect me and I’ll make offerings at every temple I pass from this day on!”*

The moon hung low in the sky when the rain stopped. Not a minute passed before a puff of smoke and a sigh came from Percy’s mouth.

“This is as good a time as any to turn in for the night,” Percy said. “Trees are sparse about these parts, so pull off anywhere.”

Draven nodded and maneuvered the cart into a clearing off the left side of the road. Quinten feared the horses would walk headfirst into a tree and the cart would tip over from their fright, but Draven handled the wagon with uncanny skill. The torch light shone brighter without rain beating down upon it; still, it was not enough to see more than three yards ahead at any given time. Somehow Draven could anticipate the obstacles ahead and steer the cart clear of them.

When they stopped in the clearing, Draven stayed fixed to his seat as though he were a statue while Quinten and Percy stepped down to stretch their legs before setting in for sleep.

“Like a bloody gargoyle, that one,” Percy said in a hushed voice to Quinten. The youth shook his head in disbelief, then pulled a tarp from his pack and spread it on the grassy earth below. He handed Quinten a woolen blanket.

“Looks like we have our first volunteer for watch,” Percy said. “I’m up third,” he added in a louder voice, for Draven’s sake.

Quinten sank to the floor. He sighed in relief when his legs loosened after a long day of riding. The blanket was wide enough to wrap around his back for padding, and for this he was grateful.

Quinten lay awake for a long while after Percy began snoring. He watched Draven sitting alone on the wagon with his palm resting on his sword hilt. Not once did the Northerner rise or so much as stretch to make himself comfortable. The rain started again. Quinten pulled the blanket up over his face. He forced his eyes closed and did his best to relax, but sleep would not come. His mind kept returning to Draven sitting at his lonesome vigil.

Once in the night a great thumping came from within the woods, drawing closer and closer to their camp. Each time the sound grew, and Quinten's stomach tightened into knots. He feared he'd retch from the pain it caused. When the thumping became so loud that it seemed to be coming from behind the nearest row of trees, a snarl came in reply from high above, as if in the treetops. So sharp was its tone that Quinten's ears rang. He jolted upright and recoiled from the sight before him. Three wolves growled from the outskirts of the camp. They looked up into the treetops and retreated back into the forest. Quinten sat frozen in fear. The wolves disappeared, swallowed up by the darkness of Hilgard; yet, the screeching above continued. He looked up and his eyes were drawn to two blue orbs silhouetted by an enormous black form. Quinten pulled his blanket tighter over his head. He dared not look up again and be met by the terrors that crept about in the night. He lay as still as a fallen watchtower, and when he finally did sleep it was filled with horrible visions.

A man with a wolf's head and an axe in hand chased Quinten across the Wesker Vineyard. Quinten ran for the farmhouse, desperate to find a sword and the strength of his four sons to rid his lands of this abomination. Quinten sprinted. He was terrified—but felt young and alive in a way he hadn't for decades. The wolf at his heels laughed, a guttural sound so dense that it seemed to wrap around Quinten's ankles and bring his dash to a halt. On hands and knees,

Quinten crawled to the farmhouse door. He was so close now; the golden doorknob glistening in the moonlight. Gold—yes—that was what Quinten needed! He reached out, his fingers seeking salvation. The wolf grabbed his heels and lifted his legs from the ground. Quinten’s hand grasped, searching through space for the doorknob. Wolf teeth pierced through flesh and bone. He howled in pain. His hand found the doorknob. It was blazing hot and seared the skin from his palm. The farmhouse was on fire.

“No,” Quinten said, “Not my boys—not again!”

His hand turned to ash, fading into the night air like fine mist. The wolf flipped Quinten over, its glowing eyes looking through him.

Quinten awoke with a jolt. The sun had risen and hung low in the sky, its lower third concealed by the horizon. Quinten looked to his right to see Percy still sleeping, his woolen blanket pulled tight around his body like a grey cocoon.

*“Did he take my post so I could sleep through the night?”* Quinten thought. Such generosity seemed unlikely from the brash youth.

After a moment’s hesitation, Quinten looked up at the wagon, only to see the seat was empty. Fear gripped him and he bolted upright; but seeing the light of dawn brightening Hilgard calmed him just as quickly as he’d panicked.

*“He must’ve wandered off to do his business.”*

And as soon as this notion entered his sleepy mind, the impulse to relieve himself gripped Quinten. He walked into the forest.

Quinten headed down a trail, looking for a thicket of bushes where he could heed nature’s call. For some reason, privacy was of much concern to him. A voice in the back of his mind told



him that he was alone and it didn't matter where he chose to piss, since no one would see either way. Still, Quinten ignored it. The path was calling to him; a short walk to stretch his legs and then he'd turn around and follow it back to camp.

*“Bandits attack in the dead of night, drink themselves to sleep, and wake up at midday to do it all again.”*

These words sounded wise at this early hour. Perhaps Quinten heard them from the last guard he'd hired; or it might've been part of a rhyme his nurse told in his boyhood, which the years had distorted.

And then Quinten saw it: the perfect bush to relieve himself on! It was tucked away behind a thicket of trees, its leaves neatly shaped, giving it an inviting appearance. He shuffled forward and unbuttoned his pants. The cold morning air prickled his skin, but he liked the sensation—he'd take it any day over the wagon seat on his backside. Quinten let out a sigh of satisfaction and closed his eyes, enjoying the fresh smell of the forest. The woods murmured with the rustling of leaves and the chattering of squirrels and birds. And then there was another sound—denser, deeper—embedded within the soundscape. It made Quinten tense all over; yet, he found his ears seeking the noise out. Suddenly, a guttural chant rang in his mind, summoning images of ruined cathedrals and lonely graveyards. He yanked up his pants and fought the urge to slump to the ground—to curl into a tight ball and ride out this assault on his mind—to make himself insignificant, like a rock kicked underfoot, yet unregistered by the predator prowling above. Possessed by the sound, Quinten found his feet moving him into the woods.

*“No,”* he thought, *“I'll lose the path. I don't want to go in there—please!”*

Never before had Quinten been so surefooted. His feet dodged roots and carried him down hills and over fallen trees. The chanting roared in his mind. He couldn't make out a single

word of it. It set every nerve in his body aflame. His mind screamed for him to crumple to the ground, but his feet wouldn't allow it. The acrid taste of bile filled his mouth—his skin oozed sweat—his body fighting to expel a toxin it knew it would not survive. Quinten closed his eyes. He felt his movement: he ran, leapt, and climbed, going further towards the source of the sound. And all at once, the chanting stopped. Quinten stood rooted in place like a tree springing up from the primordial depths of the earth. His eyes opened like curtains being drawn apart—slowly, steadily—for the grand spectacle that awaited him.

A corpse sprawled out at the bank of a river, a black form hunched over it. The man spoke to the body tenderly, as if he were a lover. A gash ran from the corpse's neck to thigh, but no blood ran from the wound, from which rose silvery steam. The corpse seemed to enjoy the conversation, for it smiled as it would in the company of a friend. Quinten wanted nothing more than to be at the side of the man—to be cared for and loved as the corpse was. He could set aside the toils of the day and the threats hanging overhead to lie still and be loved by one so lordly as the man before him.

Quinten shuffled forward, now moving his feet of his own accord. The man knew of his presence all along, but he shook his head; his eyes weary and filled with shame. It's not your time, they seemed to say. It wasn't the corpse's time, either, but pressure and motion and expectations unfulfilled led to a different outcome than was his fate. Quinten hung his head in shame. He yearned to move forward. Tears streamed down his face. He collapsed onto the gravel below, broken and unable to rise.

When Quinten awoke, the sun still hung low in the sky. Percy was asleep in his woolen cocoon, and Draven sat atop the wagon, his hand still resting on his sword hilt. Sensing

movement, the Northerner turned his head and stared down at Quinten.

## Chapter Three

The dagger grip dug into Quinten's flesh, its virgin leather biting at his palm to fray at his nerves. All that stood between him and a purified mind were two motions: the unsheathing of the blade and the slashing of a throat. Hilgard's heart opened itself to the party, the canopy of leaves above eclipsing the midday sun to create a dusky world of misshapen shadows. The road wound its way uphill, the angle distorting the ordinary until tree branches hung like the claws of great beasts; the rabbits skirting the path their messengers, running ahead to alert some malevolent overlord of the party's coming. Even sound was warped in this stretch, the cawing of ravens above calling to mind the cries of dying men.

Quinten's head thundered from pressure. His hand felt like it would burst from its strain upon the dagger hilt; or maybe his bones would crumble beneath the burden. All signs pointed to his demise unless he pulled the blade and slayed the bastard beside him.

The road leveled off. The horses snorted with relief from their lightened load. The urge to inspect the wagon's bindings and wheels for damage nagged at Quinten from the back of his mind. The dagger called to him, too—a metallic voice yearning to be quickened. Quinten realized the left side of his neck was stiffer than iron, for he had been craning his head to the right to avoid the haunting blue of the eyes sitting beside him. The Northerner sat so still that it was like a ghost guided their team into the depths of the forest.

Quinten couldn't make sense of what he saw at the riverbank. Perhaps it was a maddening vision—the work of the Wood Witch—or the burden of the journey and Magistrate Wyman's threats. Quinten awoke from it like a nightmare, the sun peaking above the horizon in the same place it stood when he rose, as though in limbo. He would be happy to blame the vision on his nerves and push it to the back of his mind, but a voice deep within screamed that it would

be madness to do so. This was not one of the ordinary nightmares that plagued him. He could feel the tightness in his legs from bounding through the forest like a wildcat. His mind hummed, the chant having carved alien ruins into the tender flesh of his brain. The sadness in Draven's eyes haunted Quinten, forcing him to fight an overwhelming urge to breakdown and weep. Madness had its cruel jaws around his throat, threatening to clamp down the second he faltered.

And then the smell of pipe smoke coming from behind called Quinten's mind back from the brink of ruin. The forest became green again; the slope gentle, the sounds mild. His hand dropped from the blade to his lap. The urge to latch onto this normalcy seized him. He broke the long silence.

"That leaf has a sweet scent, was it grown in the Vinlands?"

"Sure was," Percy said from behind him. "It's not the leaf that's special, you can get it from any shop from here to the Frost. My woman found a market that sells herbs brought in from the Jewel. She makes a blend of it."

The Jewel was the walled kingdom north of the capital that served as a bulwark in the space where the King's Crown mountains lapsed. The kingdom stood as an unspoken buffer zone between the nomadic tribes of the Plains to the north, and the Frost Lord's forces at the tip of the continent. The Jewel was a haven for aristocrats and mystics alike, renowned for its verdant gardens where rare herbs were grown amongst dancing butterflies.

"Mind if I try it?" Quinten said. Percy nodded and thrust the pipe into his hand. Quinten inhaled, tasting lavender and berries along with a mild tobacco. He passed the pipe back and slumped in his seat, relief washing over his body. Years had passed since Quinten last smoked, his nerves unable to stand the smell that lingered on his clothes and hands and the earthy taste it left in his mouth. He felt a rush of energy and happiness flowing through him; and while he

knew it wouldn't last, he was content to linger in this moment before his distress returned, throwing him into limbo once more.

The hill steepened, causing the wagon to groan in protest. Draven tugged on the reins, slowing down the horses to brace the load behind them. The road burrowed down before them into a stretch darkened by a canopy of trees, resembling a dark pit at its depths. The team dug into the road with each step. Quinten was transfixed by the sound of wood weighing upon itself; protesting as gravity and steel and the thumb of some meddling god pressed down upon it. He saw Wyman in his mind's eye, the absurdity of his three chins softening his eagle eyes and the hard line of his mouth. Quinten felt red rage boiling within. His palm went back to the dagger hilt, but he caught himself and shoved his hands into his pockets. The team was strong, but the burden of the load was taking its toll. The horses snorted—and Quinten screamed—then the beasts' steps quickened and all at once a horse was down and the wagon barreled forward. Draven yanked the reins and the remaining horse dug in its heels.

“Hold this,” Draven barked and the reins were in Quinten's trembling hands. He pulled back, tugging with such force that his back might break in two. The bellowing of the fallen horse awoke something wild within Quinten. He screamed along with the pained animal, his arms controlling the wagon like an impotent puppeteer.

Then all was still.

Percy and Quinten stood in the clearing, daring not to break the silence first to proclaim the wretchedness of their situation. The cries of the fallen horse were constrained by a muzzle, a necessary cruelty in a bandit ridden forest. The horse's eyes were wild in pain, searching in all directions for predators; its screams squelched in its throat, a cacophony of sound and vibration.

Draven bent over the horse, his searching hands locating sites of pain by its loudening cries. The sight was a mirror image of what Quinten saw at the riverbank.

*“This is not happening—it’s another nightmare—that’s it!”*

But the pounding in his head and burning in his bones were too richly painful to be anything but reality.

Percy handed Quinten his spear. The guard looked like a boy without his weapon, his arrogance replaced by fear in the face of danger. He hoisted himself into the wagon and a minute later he hopped down with a bow in hand and a quiver upon his back. They would scout the edges of their makeshift camp for bandits; hopefully bringing a deer or rabbit back as spoils of their efforts. If the horse’s leg broke, it would be kinder to end its misery, since the animal would never be able to walk again. The thought of putting down a horse he’d cared for twelve years filled Quinten with an unutterable sadness—like losing one of his last remaining friends. A faint memory of picking out the horse with his wife flickered in his mind, only to blow out like a candle’s flame in a raging storm.

*“How did it come to this, my dear Elaine?”*

Numbness radiated through Quinten’s body. He followed Percy into the forest, sticking close to the trees and crouching to stay hidden. It was the most natural feeling to crouch low like that for all that weighed upon his conscience. They moved like this for what felt like miles, Percy pausing to carve notches into the trees: glyphs to guide them home. The pair came to a cliff and Percy motioned for Quinten to drop to the ground.

“Get on your belly and keep your head low,” he said.

And so they crawled, the stone beneath chaffing Quinten’s ragged nerves. He wanted to scream again and let his anguish echo throughout the damned forest. He clenched his jaw and

shimmied higher still. Clutching the spear was awkward and he worried he'd cut the side of his neck open on accident. They peaked their heads over the cliff's edge like two meercats emerging from their dens. The view was disorienting to Quinten. He saw the wagon at the camp, when it felt like they moved in a straight line and should be looking at the other half of Hilgard instead. Quinten realized he would be as helpless as a newborn babe left in the woods if something befell Percy. The spear may as well be a stick for all the good it would do him when he hadn't the faintest notion how to navigate the forest or find food and shelter.

“Up ahead on the right—do you see it?” Percy said.

Quinten strained his eyes, searching the land below for signs of life. It didn't do any good.

“What am I looking for exactly?” Quinten said.

“There's a cave and something moving by it.”

Quinten squinted, but couldn't find the cave. He saw what looked like a hill, but his sight wasn't good enough to make out more than that. In truth, it might've been nothing more than a cluster of dying trees.

“I see it,” Quinten said. “Do you think there's bandits in there?”

“Hard to tell,” said Percy. He shimmied down and shifted his head to look at Quinten.

“Come on, let's go. They're too far away to be a bother anyways.”

Quinten nodded and crawled his way back down the cliff. Percy led them back to the forest, keeping well ahead of him. It made Quinten feel like he was following a hound as it searched for foxes for its master to hunt.

“Percy,” Quinten said.

Percy grunted, but kept going without slowing his pace.



“Percy... there’s something you need to know about Draven.”

“What’s that?” Percy said, his tone flat.

“When I woke up this morning I heard a strange chanting. I followed it to a river and Draven was there crouching over a body.”

Percy stopped dead in his tracks. He whirled around to face Quinten, his expression dark.

“What’re you talking about, old man?”

Quinten’s nerves flared. His mind went blank, but he kept talking.

“I followed Draven to the river. I think he killed that man. It was so strange... a silver mist was rising from his body and Draven was chanting and—”

“Why are you telling me this now? You’re telling me some fantasy you had when we’re stuck out here down a horse?” Percy said, his face a violent shade of red. Quinten regretted his mistake and shoved his hands into his pockets. He looked down, hoping this might soothe Percy’s rage, but the youth went on.

“You cried out and spooked the horses over this... dream you had?” he said. “We’re facing death out here and you’re talking to me like a fool!”

“Percy, you’re screaming,” Quinten said, too afraid to raise his eyes from the ground. Percy caught himself, his face twisting in dismay when he realized his folly. He turned from Quinten and jogged off in the other direction, heading back to camp.

The pair kept up this pace, putting distance between themselves and the place where they argued. They passed the last marked tree. Percy thought it best if they returned to camp from a different angle. Quinten’s knees burned from running, his legs threatening to give out from under him. It was dusk and the space off the path looked like a dark labyrinth from which he’d never

return if he lost the trail. He could see the faint outline of Percy weaving about and ducking under low hanging branches. Quinten's energy was drained, his mind numb—but still he followed.

At last, they emerged into a clearing. Quinten expected to see Draven and the wagon, but instead a white deer stood looking at them; tense, ready to bolt. Percy pulled an arrow from the quiver and knocked it. He raised the bow and pulled back on the string. The deer only stood there, too petrified to move. Percy released his hand and the arrow took flight. It sped through the air, only to miss the deer and land in a pile of leaves with an impotent thud.

“Shit,” Percy muttered.

The deer only stood there, its eyes bright and filled with dread. Percy's hand rose to the quiver, but something hit him in the back and he fell forward, his bow thrown from his hand.

“Stay still or the next one's going through your throat.”

Quinten jerked his head to the left—he couldn't help himself. Upon a low hill stood three bandits in ragged leather armor. They were only boys, no older than fifteen, and two aimed bows at Percy and Quinten. The youngest, a child of eight years, held a dagger in his hand, his face made mean by a scowl.

“Run and get father,” said the eldest, a gangly boy with pale skin and black hair cropped at his forehead in a jagged line, as if shorn by crude razors. The child sheathed his dagger without a word and ran off into the forest. The strides of his tiny legs reminded Quinten of tales of goblins his nurse told him when he was young. The third boy was built like a troll, every bone in his body big and his flesh thick and yellow, like a man sick with jaundice. He wore an axe at his hip and snarled at Quinten through his wide mouth.

“Are there more of you?” said the gangly boy. “Don't lie to me either—I'll know!”

Quinten turned to Percy, who was struggling to his knees, the arrow still lodged in his back.

“Answer now!” came a deeper voice that must’ve been the troll’s. The deer stood still in the clearing—it didn’t move at all—or breathe for that matter.

Quinten felt himself focus, his survival instincts kicking in. His last brush with bandits left him feeling confident.

“One more of us, tending to the wagon,” he said. “We have casks of fine wine. I can give them to you if you let us go unharmed.”

“You’ll give them to us regardless,” the gangly boy said, his tone imperious. “Father will be the one to decide whether you live or not.” He examined Percy, his mouth twitching. “And this one’s your guard?” he said.

Quinten didn’t like the cold look in his eyes. Perhaps he was wondering if Percy would be a threat, or if he was lowborn and wouldn’t be worth the trouble of ransoming.

“He’s my brother,” Quinten said. “We’re both wine merchants of wealthy Southern families, and they’d pay well to see us back safely.”

The gangly boy chewed on his lip, considering the offer. The troll next to him had a vacant expression on his face, ready to move only when his partner gave the order.

“Okay,” said the gangly boy, “tell him to lie on his stomach and there won’t be any trouble.” Then he added, “You hear that, brother? Get on the ground and you’ll stay safe.”

But Percy didn’t respond. He was on his hands and knees, doing his best to find his feet.

“Give me my spear,” he said in a low voice. “I’ll handle them—just give me my spear.”

“Brother,” Quinten said. He raised his hands in the air in a show of good will and stepped towards Percy. Hearing no sound of protest, he took another step closer. “Brother, you’re hurt.

These young men will get us back to our families. All you need to do is lay down and we'll handle the rest."

Percy had one foot on the ground, bracing his leg with his hands to rise to standing. His face was covered in dirt and sweat, but the defiance in his eyes was clearer than ever.

"Quinten," Percy said, "get me my fucking spear."

"What's he saying?" bellowed the troll.

"Get him on the ground now or we'll feather the both of you," said the gangly boy.

Quinten rushed at Percy, hoping to flatten him with his weight, but Percy only hunched forward upon impact. He swung his arm, catching Quinten in the jaw with a gloved hand. The taste of blood erupted in Quinten's mouth. He could hear the bandits running at them. Then something blue flashed from within the forest and faded from sight. The lighter set of footsteps was almost upon him, but then a groan came from behind.

"Henry, get off me!"

Quinten spun around, searching for the spear, but he couldn't find it. Then a scream pierced the air. He turned towards the boys. The troll had his axe in hand, swinging it from side to side. The gangly boy held his shoulder, where a gash leaked blood, staining his tunic. The troll's smile radiated malice and he taunted his companion with swings that fell just short of his head. Then he gripped the axe with both hands and swung down into the gangly boy's knee. Steel bit through flesh and bone with a sickening crunch.

"I'll kill you—Henry—I'll," but his words morphed into a scream when the axe came crashing down again and Henry cleaved through his knee, severing it from his body. The gangly boy tumbled over and then Henry was upon him, slashing into him with one blow after another. Flecks of gore covered Henry's face. He smiled a hideous smile. His eyes shone an unearthly

blue-trails of the hellish hue hung in the air with every swing he took—a wicked spell manifested by motion. Henry reared and swung the axed so that it split through flesh to eat at the gangly boy’s heart. Then he stood over the corpse, staring at his hideous work with eyes that blazed like a funeral pyre. All at once, the tension slackened from his troll-like form and the fire in his eyes went out. A look of puzzlement covered Henry’s face as he tried to make sense of the abomination before him.

“Brother?” he said. He fell to his knees, grasping his brother by his mangled shoulder. He shook him. “Brother!”

And then his head sank to the gangly boy’s chest. Henry wept, his sobbing choked by his thick flesh—and the flesh of his brother.

Quinten turned his head from the grim sight, hearing footsteps approaching from behind. It was Percy with his spear held high, ready to thrust down for the kill. He looked at Quinten, his eyes tired, the red flush drained from his face. Quinten only shook his head. An understanding came between them and they turned back for camp, leaving Henry to his misery. The white deer watched, now fallen on its side; its carved eyes wearier than before.

The fallen horse was on its feet when they returned to camp. Draven sat at his perch atop the wagon, only acknowledging their arrival with the turn of his head. Quinten rushed to the horse, overcome with joy at its swift recovery. Only, his excitement left him and in its place came dread.

*“The cuts—they’re all gone!”*

But it wasn’t just that—the horse seemed to have grown taller—its muscles bulging, its coat turned black when it was once brown. Sensing Quinten, the horse snorted and stomped its hoof

in anger.

Percy sank to the ground by Quinten's side. The arrow came loose on their return to camp, releasing blood that soaked his tunic. Percy ripped off his armor and tried touching the wound with his left hand, but it was too high up on his back. Luckily, the arrow missed his spine, landing in muscle instead. Quinten rose and pulled a medical kit from the cart. He bent low over Percy. The wound was shallow, his armor to thank for that. Quinten busied himself cleaning the wound; but while he did, he couldn't help but look up at the Northerner, his eyes glimmering that accursed blue beneath the torch light. At times Quinten thought he could hear goblin feet running through the forest, searching for its lost kin.

## Chapter Four

“I always knew I’d die in these damned woods.”

Percy lay beneath the morning stars, his skin bone white; his stark complexion made all the more pronounced by the absence of his characteristic red flush, which once burned beneath his skin like undying embers. The only color on his face was the blue of his lips, which deepened with each passing hour. Percy’s forehead was damp with sweat, but his skin was colder than a wind blown southward from the Frost. Quinten had never seen anything like it, the sickness coming on within hours of treating the arrow wound. He awoke in the night to Percy’s howls of pain. The youth shouted that something wicked had made its way inside him and was ripping his innards apart. Draven produced a cloth to gag Percy, but this made him wheeze and turn purple in the face. They lifted him into the back of the wagon and covered him with a woolen blanket to dampen his cries. After that Quinten couldn’t fall asleep for the life of him. Percy’s shrieks and the memory of the young bandit Henry sobbing over his brother’s corpse wreaked havoc on Quinten’s nerves. He tried covering his ears, but visions of the butchery he’d witnessed only hours prior haunted him and would not allow him to sleep. The memories came as a flurry of images and sounds, scrambled in their sequence and severity. They repeated without end, the shapes and colors distorting then redefining themselves in unflinching clarity—until Quinten couldn’t take it anymore. He stared into a hostile sky, the clouds overhead promising to rain heaven’s tears down upon them on the morrow.

He stared into that bleak sky, thinking of Henry’s unprovoked fury. Gone was the lazy expression in the bandit’s eyes, which instead glowed an unearthly blue. Everything broke into chaos when Quinten tackled Percy, but there was an unmistakable flash of blue light that lit the clearing first—a shade of blue he was all too familiar with.

*“There’s devilry afoot here... I’m sure of it.”*

Of this truth Percy was of the same mind. The youth gripped Quinten by the collar when he came to check on him during the hour of the witch.

“Don’t let that bastard take me too,” he said, his voice reduced to a hoarse whisper.

“Who’s going to take you?” said Quinten.

“Him...” Percy said, pointing his hand outside to the cart where Draven sat at his silent vigil. “The Northerner.”

Quinten hadn’t slept at all that night. His hand shook as he guided a spoonful of soup into Percy’s mouth. The youth lay stiff as a fallen sapling, his eyes gazing at the treetops above as though transfixed.

“This will bring back your strength,” Quinten said. “It always went that way with my boys. Their sickness would pass after some food and rest.”

“Not this one,” said Percy. “It feels wrong—I can feel it in my bones.”

“Do you want me to light your pipe for you?” Quinten said.

Percy shook his head and closed his eyes. The camp was silent as a graveyard. Only the trilling of distant mockingbirds entered the clearing, their songs like the impish laughter of foul spirits. Quinten lit the pipe and drew in a mouthful of smoke. Some water must’ve made its way into the tobacco stash, for the leaf tasted musty and it sizzled as it burned. While the wave of euphoria that washed over Quinten yesterday eluded him, it did stop his hands from shaking, for which he was grateful. He hoped the smell might breathe some life into Percy, but he only lay there motionless, his blonde hair stuck to his forehead in clumps.

“Think he’ll put a hex on one of us now?” Percy said in a small voice, like a timid child.



Quinten's head jerked towards the wagon, despite knowing that Draven was out hunting in the woods. Percy's eyes were open when he turned back, the irises ringed by purple veins that crept inwards like wicked vines seeking to constrict his vision.

"I don't think so..." Quinten said. "He could've done that already if he wanted to. And he has business with Robert Alwyn that I'm seeing to."

These words awoke something in Percy. He tried sitting up, but lay back, groaning in pain from the effort.

"What's the matter?" Quinten said. He brought the water skin to Percy's mouth, but the youth turned his head away.

"I'd kill the bastard before letting him near Lord Alwyn," said Percy. "He's a good man... Lord Alwyn."

"It's nothing like that," Quinten said, placing a hand on Percy's shoulder to settle his nerves. "He gave me a letter to deliver to Lord Alwyn's study, that's all."

"Can you open it?" Percy said, a strain of hope in his voice.

"Not without breaking the seal," Quinten said. "It's no common seal either—it's silver with three spears beneath a waxing moon."

"A nasty crest, that one," Percy said. "My grandfather schooled me in heraldry. He got the idea in his head that it'd do me some good one day." Percy closed his eyes again, his hands gripping the blanket. They were drained of all color, except his knuckles, which reddened.

"That's the seal of House Grimald. When it comes to the Frost Lords, it doesn't get much worse than them."

Quinten suspected the letter was from a Frost Lord since laying eyes on it, but orders from House Grimald could mean the moving of thousands of gold pieces or thousands of armed

soldiers ready for war.

*“What business could they possibly have with Robert Alwyn?”*

A look of recognition crossed Percy’s face. The excitement was becoming too much for him and he started coughing. He was wheezing again when it stopped and his lips had darkened, now approaching a light shade of black.

Quinten stood. “I’ll let you get your rest now,” he said and turned for the cart to make his inspections. However, the sight of the hell horse sent a jolt of fear running through his body. It was staring at him, clouds of mists rising from its nostrils; its eyes burning the faintest blue. Quinten stood rooted in place, then sunk to the ground by Percy’s side.

“There’s been a rumor going around the guards for years that Lady Alwyn is a Northerner. She tries to hide it, but you can hear the ice in her voice whenever she talks.”

This was news to Quinten. That Lord Alwyn had taken a wife three years ago was common knowledge, but seldom did one hear actual details from his personal life. The Alwyns kept to their own company, entertaining traveling merchants at the estate and seldom leaving the grounds themselves.

“A real beauty, that one,” Percy said, “with violet eyes to make your heart stop.” A faint smile came to his blackened lips. He fell silent, drifting off into his memories.

Quinten sat by Percy’s side for what felt like hours. He’d fill the pipe to the brim with the spiced tobacco, then fill it again the moment it turned to ash. He felt at peace for the first time since leaving Castow, for the darkest force in the forest seemed to have need of him, which oddly enough made Quinten feel safe. Wyman’s threats, the Wesker Vineyard—his wife and sons—they all seemed a distant dream from a life separate from this one.

The sound of rustling leaves coming from behind Quinten failed to alarm him, for he’d

grown familiar with the weight of its owner's boots. Draven came into sight, a huge deer slung across his shoulders. He lay the animal down near the wagon. There were no signs of injury on the carcass, its fur immaculately white and free from blood. The Northerner pulled a skinning knife from his hip and set about preparing the beast.

The urge to converse with Draven came over Quinten, who rose and shuffled to the Northerner's side like a lost child to his father. Draven gave him a sidelong glance, still cutting into the deer with steady strokes. Quinten was unsure of what to say, so he stood there watching Draven at work. His knife flowed across the deer's hide, creating an intricate map of incisions along its ankles and legs. Quinten had to look away when Draven turned the animal on its back, for the incision running down the length of the deer's chest called to mind the injuries the gangly boy endured at the hand of his brother.

Quinten searched his memory and at last found a question he'd longed to ask Draven since they first met.

"Is it true what they say of the hunting in the Frost?"

"What of it exactly?" Draven said.

"There's talk that the people of the villages are..." Quinten's voiced trailed off—his idea suddenly seeming quite foolish.

"That they're hunted by our lords?" Draven said. He let the question hang between them like a wall of ice; yet, there was the slightest edge of pride in his tone. "Rumors, spread by our foes in the Highlands." Draven set the knife down and rose to his feet. He met Quinten's gaze. "But there's often truth hidden in lies. We hunt our prisoners taken on the fields of war. They're given a sword and three day's provisions. They earn their right to live by surviving the hunt."

These words invoked such dread in Quinten that it felt like every nerve in his body had

turned to ice. He felt his heart pounding in his chest like a prisoner trying to escape his ribcage. His hands clenched into fists. A ringing sounded in his ears—the sound fraying his mind—reducing him to a stupor. Quinten felt like he might collapse at any moment, but he dared not look away from his wicked guardian.

Draven’s cold eyes pierced through Quinten, leering at his feeble state. “I see how you look at me like a monster stands before you—yet how could one who’s never wielded a sword understand my words?” Draven picked up his knife and went back to work skinning his kill. “There’s much you Southerners don’t know of the elden race—of the Blood of Ylva.”

Quinten stood there like a schoolboy called on by his master to rise before the class with no answer to give. He would embrace death if she extended her merciful hand to pluck him up from this realm of torment into which he’d entered. He felt his feet dragging him towards Draven; his hand back to the dagger hilt. There were no thoughts left to think—only anger and pain screaming within—crying for him to release them through violence.

“Be gone, wretch,” Draven barked, his sapphire eyes glinting—and as suddenly as Quinten’s wrath came on, it abandoned him. He hung his head and sulked back to Percy’s side and lay down like a whipped dog.

The wagon moved silently through the bowels of Hilgard, the strength of Draven’s hell horse all but levitating the vehicle above the mossy ground. Percy lay in the back, screaming in agony. Quinten sat at his side, since Draven said he had no use for him ‘til they reached the Alwyn Estate. Quinten did his best to comfort Percy; but more oft than not his only choice was to gag the youth to keep him from bringing the fury of the forest’s bandits down upon them with his screams. Percy’s skin—which remained ghastly white—was now lined with bulging blue veins

that seemed to throb with every convulsion that rocked his body.

Stress overwhelmed Quinten. He lay down, resigned to his fate. It was dark in the back of the wagon, save for the tendrils of light that crept through the patched canopy above. It felt to Quinten that he was aboard a spectral chariot transporting his soul to the land of the dead. He looked at the casks of wine and wondered why he'd grown so ambitious, risking life and limb—and that of his family's—to restore the name of House Wesker. If only he'd packed his belongings into this rickety wagon and headed to the Wetlands with his sons. There were good people in the East who would've taken in a weary refugee seeking new beginnings. He could've lived a simple life trading amongst the Bogfolk while in the company of his family. It would be an existence of little fortune, but one in which Quinten could grow old in peace. The sorrow of the realization that his happiness was lost forever paralyzed him. He lay there like a broken thing, the dim light in the cart growing fainter with each passing hour.

Quinten awoke to the sound of many hooves and the shouts of men without. He climbed out of the cart as though in a trance and sat beside Draven at the reins. The stimulus of torchlight and rain on his skin sharpened Quinten's senses. They were in a clearing. At the opposite end was a tree's hollow, much like the cabin of a wood's witch. Quinten couldn't believe his eyes, for the tree was massive, its opening lined with ivy. It seemed to extend for endless leagues; a portal into which one would learn the wonders and horrors of nature. Quinten rubbed his eyes to see if this sight was an illusion to be chased away, yet the tree remained a reality. Then all at once Quinten saw death looming around him. Two mounted soldiers flanked the cart, their spears pointed at Draven's neck. The Northerner sat still as ever, his blade drawn and resting across his lap. In his hand he held a torch. The steel of the sword was pale blue. Now unsheathed, it seemed

to revibrate in the open air, emitting a song that promised misery to any who would test its master. The soldiers scowled, but made no move to strike. One lowered his hand to his saddle bag and produced a curved horn. It appeared to be made of bone and was lined with dark inscriptions along its length. When he blew upon it, it released not a booming call, but a sharp noise, like the shattering of steel. Within moments a woman in a white cloak sped into their midst upon a glistening palfrey. She dismounted and smiled at Draven; her expression so gentle that it melted away all tension from Quinten's body. Tussles of honey blonde curls framed her face. She was the most beautiful woman Quinten had beheld in all his days. Draven, however, sat rigid; his jaw clenched, his blue eyes searching amongst the trees for—what? Quinten knew not.

“You're a long way from home, Alexander,” said the smiling woman. She walked towards the wagon with ease, as though to embrace a dear friend.

A blue light shone forth from Draven's eyes in a blinding flash. Quinten blinked, and when his vision returned, he saw Draven had leapt from his seat and was running towards the woods. The two riders' eyes burned blue. The one who'd blown the horn charged the other, his spear point catching his ally in the shoulder and knocking him from his steed. When Quinten looked back Draven had disappeared into the darkness of the forest. Then Quinten felt a heat against his legs. When he looked down, he leapt to his feet in panic—for Draven dropped the torch in his flight and the cart was on fire. Quinten jumped from the cart and found his feet leading him in the Northerner's direction—'til he remembered Percy lay ill in the back of the wagon. Quinten stood frozen in place, too terrified to move in either direction. He heard the smiling woman whistle, then give orders to her men in a melodic tone. Her voice was like honey molded into sound waves. Quinten found himself walking back in her direction. A third soldier was climbing into the burning cart. The hell horse was conspicuously absent from the wagon, its

harness laying tattered in the mud. One spearman lay dead; the other standing over him, staring at his hands, which gripped his bloodied spear shaft—its point thrust into his ally's guts.

*"They're saving Percy—that's why they've gone in!"* Quinten thought.

But his heart sank when the soldier hopped out of the burning cart, not with a body in his arms, but with Quinten's satchel instead. The bag fell open upon his landing, spilling its contents to the muddy earth below. The woman came forward and seeing the object she desired, bent to the ground to pick it up. Quinten shuffled forward, too worried for Percy to remember his own fear.

"There's a man in the back," Quinten said. "Please, can you save him?"

The woman turned away without so much as a second glance at him. She tucked Draven's letter into her cloak, then mounted her palfrey. When she paused to look back at the cart, Quinten thought she might reconsider and save the youth. Instead, she reached into her saddlebag and produced a brown pouch commonly used in Lothrium to carry coins.

"For your wares," she said, then tossed the bag at Quinten's feet. She dug her feet into her palfrey's side, riding off in the direction Draven fled.

Quinten let the gold lay where it fell. He turned back to the wagon, its canopy now ablaze. His mind screamed for him to take the gold; to cut his horse loose and ride north to the Alwyn Estate for refuge. Perhaps he'd keep riding from there, starting life anew in the walled city of the Jewel, where a merchant's talents were a prized commodity; or to the mountainous Highlands, where a bag of gold could buy him acres of land and the servants needed to farm it. He could live off the fat of the land and take a comely maiden to wife.

Instead, he faced the inferno raging before him. Quinten crept to the wagon, forcing himself to lift his feet for each step. Every time he moved his legs it felt like a death wish being

fulfilled. He braced himself for what lay ahead when he reached the wagon. Then he pulled his hands from his pockets and hoisted himself into the blazing cart.

The fire scorched his skin, cleansing Quinten of all fear.