

A sword is positioned vertically on the left side of the page. It features a black, cylindrical hilt with a silver-colored metal cap at the top. The blade is silver and has a simple, straight design with a central groove. The sword is set against a plain white background.

# *Warrior Class*

*The Crooked Path*

*by*

*P. T. Mayes*

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**The Crooked Path.**  
**Six Sample Chapters.**  
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## Prologue.

Keenly aware of the three wicked daggers sticking out of his body, the spy pushed himself on regardless of the pain that spiked through his body like cold lightning with every step he took. There was a terrible tightness in his chest, as if a band of iron had been welded to his ribcage and that with every second that passed the thumb-screw tightened just that little bit more.

Wheezing like an old man suffering from the black lung, he leant one shoulder against a lamppost, its rusty metal so cold he could feel its bite right through both his shirt and jacket, and darkly pondered his predicament. He was beginning to think the unthinkable: *The knife in his back, could it have pierced a lung?*

With a grunt of determination he shoved himself away from the lamppost and staggered across the street, his eyes darting left and right, high and low, searching desperately for somewhere to hide. Anywhere. He needed to find a place where he could lie low for a time; a place where he could tend to his wounds, if such a thing was possible, and maybe even rest a little before moving on. He needed the one thing he did not have: *time*.

His lungs ached and when he coughed into his curled fist he tasted iron.

He had been both expecting and dreading this day from the moment he had been smuggled into the city, almost three years ago to the day — he'd had nightmares about it; terrible, awful nightmares that made him wake in a cold sweat in the middle of the night, his heart thudding painfully inside his chest — but even his most appalling dreams had not been as bad as this. If only he had made that last sacrifice to the Fates as he promised he would, maybe then things might have turned out very differently. He silently vowed that should he manage to get out of this scrape alive he would enter a monastery and dedicate the rest of his life to the Fates, and especially to Resha, the Fate of mercy. He would sacrifice a whole year's earnings to her... no *two!* *Three!*

*Ah, there! I see it. Thank you, Resha.*

With the cries of his pursuers ringing in his ears like the baying of hounds the spy crawled thankfully into the stinking culvert, rudely scattering a family of rats in the process, and lay panting in the murky gloom. He did not mind the rats, nor the corpse of one very dead cat stretched out before him like a piece of petrified wood, as they were preferable companions to the crazed humans who hunted him with

such single-minded zeal. Those men knew no mercy. He had seen enough of what they were capable of to know that, and he also knew that they would neither stop nor turn aside until they had caught him and brought him before their master. The culvert seemed the ideal choice as no man in his right mind – indeed, not even a man in the *wrong* mind — would dare venture into such a foul and disease-ridden hole as this. Not even the wretched denizens of the Sump would venture here, for they knew all too well what lived down here in the gloom.

It had only been his instincts and the sheer will to survive that had saved the spy on Rankling Bridge. They must have got prior warning of his rendezvous to have been able to reach it before him, although how that was possible he could not guess. Was there another spy? In the dark culvert, the spy grunted and nodded his head. There was *always* another spy. They had intercepted him on the bridge, a neatly sprung trap; but with a burst of almost miraculous strength that had surprised him almost as much as it had surprised them he had fought his way through their ranks, leaving two men dead in his wake, and made a dash for the maze of dingy streets and derelict buildings known to the locals as Dreybridge Mews. From there he could make his way east to where his contact was awaiting him. Unfortunately he had not got away unscathed: the three knives were painful reminders of that. Despite his terror, the spy, seated on a pile of sodden ordure, closed his eyes and tried to calm his ragged breaths and his shaking limbs, counting slowly to ten in his head; but the count had only got half way when a terrible retching cough doubled him up.

*The knife in his back? It must be.*

Once the fit had passed he felt his back with trembling, probing fingers, reaching behind him until he felt his arm must break from the effort. High on his right side his fingertips found the hard handle of a small dagger sticking out of his flesh, and touched frothy, sticky blood oozing around the handle. He groaned out loud, feeling nauseous, dizzy and very afraid. He was losing blood fast and if he did not act now he might not have enough strength left to run when the time came for flight, or to fight, whichever came first. No, he had not come all this way to die now, his task unfulfilled. The rendezvous point with his contact was barely more than a quarter of a mile away to the east – he might just make it and successfully deliver his message if he refused to give in to weakness. Weakness meant death, and he could not afford to be weak for the sake of his king and his people. The eight names he carried in his head were too important to be allowed to die with him, if that was to be his ultimate fate. War was coming again. One could feel war

in the air, in the water; even taste it in the food one ate. And when the fifth Great War broke upon the weary world in a great flood of destruction and chaos, King Ashun would have need of such information as he possessed. As long as a single spark of life remained in the broken frame of his body he would not fail his king. He *swore* it.

Slowly, through the fabric of both the shirt and the jacket he wore, he drew forth the three knives from his body, wincing with each inch of serrated cold steel that came free. Throwing the last blade aside he stripped off his jacket and shirt and tore the shirt into long strips, chose the three cleanest pieces (not an easy prospect as he had been crawling in grime all night) and proceeded to tightly bind the wounds, beginning with the wound on his back, a tricky proposition at such an awkward angle. The dressings might not do much to staunch the blood, but at least they would give him a little extra time — although whether it would be *enough* time he guessed he would discover in due course. He prayed to the Fates it would be enough. They had heard him once, maybe they would hear him again.

Pulling his jacket back on he edged to the culvert's opening, one shoulder pressed against the slimy stone. Stilling his breath he listened carefully, at first hearing only the low moan of the wind gusting from the Ghagrive Mountains to the north, the shrill squeaks of rats behind him and the rusty creaking of an old inn sign in the next street.

*Hold on.*

He cocked his head ever so slightly to one side. The angry and frustrated shouts of his pursuers sounded further away than they had before. Either they were moving away from him, widening the net, or they had given up the chase and gone back to their master empty handed.

*No, they had not given up. They wouldn't dare give up, not with their master. They were moving away.*

Years of living life on the precarious edge of discovery had given the spy a keen appreciation of chance: he listened to his guts like other men listened to their doctors; and right now his gut was telling him that he should not hesitate. He must move before his pursuers returned. He must move *now*.

Head down he slipped from the culvert, dripping sweat, sewage and blood, and scrambled up the muddy embankment to the cracked pavement at the top. A quick glance up and down the street revealed that apart from a drunk sleeping in a doorway across the way he was quite alone. *Which way now?* He quickly

considered the limited options available to him and chose to head down Tothleet Row, towards the docks.

Despite his terrible weariness the spy hobbled to the street corner, thankful for the cover the frowning eaves of a pawnshop afforded him, yet with danger snapping at his heels he could hobble faster than most healthy men could walk.

Tothleet Row was no more than a narrow alley, a hole in the street, and like most alleys in the city it was forbidding, dank and squalid. Derelicts, mostly unemployed seamen or dockworkers, lay cocooned in their mud-splattered blankets which they had wrapped about them so tightly they looked like mummies from the lands of Sirit. They did not even twitch as the spy splashed past their sleeping forms, spraying them with a fresh coating of muck. After a short while the alley broke into a wide, brooding street, badly lit by flickering gas-lamps. Sliding along the wall, the spy peered around the corner and drew back quickly, flattening his shoulders against the mildewed brick. Two men were standing in the middle of the road, conversing together in hushed, urgent voices. Were they the spy's pursuers, or two innocent civilians out for a midnight stroll? In this city of the damned no civilian would be so foolish as to take something as innocuous as a midnight stroll; what with all the cutpurses and villains about; not to mention the dreaded Pillar Guard, who instantly suspected anyone out and about at such an hour of being a traitor. No, it could only be —

A yell, harsh on the damp night air, made the spy's heart leap and he quickly pulled back into the shadows at the sound of running feet. Five flickering forms passed him by. After waiting a few seconds he dared to take another peek around the corner and saw to his relief that the men were running away from him, heading down the hill towards the fountains of Leget; going in completely the wrong direction. A false alarm?

Maybe the Fates were looking over him after all.

Limping across the street as fast as his wounded leg would allow, the spy was soon scurrying down Yellow Canary Pass, which was more of a dungy brown colour than any shade of yellow known to man. Such was the smell from the sewers that no self-respecting tramp would sleep here, let alone venture here, but there were plenty of fat brown rats with matted fur and disease-ravaged tails who followed the trespasser with pink, suspicious eyes, for the feral cats from the nearby docks refused to hunt here.

Ignoring his unwanted followers, the spy carefully picked his way through the obstacle course of split crates, torn clothing and jumbled bones; kicking away any

rat that dared to make a dart at his ankles, until he emerged at the other end.

"Thank the Fates," he whispered. "Grimpton Square."

Oh, what a relief it was to be here at last — if not exactly in one piece then at least still alive and kicking. The coded message he had sent the day before, masquerading as an advertisement for a cure for alopecia in one of the city's many, and heavily censored, broadsheets, told his contact to meet him at the stroke of midnight by the light of the red lamp in Grimpton Square. Indeed one of the lamps on the South-Eastern corner of the square glowed warm red, an unusual spot of vibrant colour in a city known for being so dreary and dark. The lamp had suffered an unfortunate accident a few days ago and the cracked glass had been hastily replaced with a piece of red stained glass taken from an executed knight's dissolved estate, but it served the spy's purpose well. Just as the coded reply in that morning's classified section has suggested, a solitary man was standing beneath the lamp, his shoulders hunched against the chill wind, his hooded head peering nervously from side to side. The lurid vermilion glow from the lamp gave him a somewhat monstrous aspect, as if he had sprung straight from the pits of hell in search of fresh souls to eat.

Knowing there was no more time to lose, the spy limped his way across the square, heading straight for the red lamp and its fiery tenant. The man immediately caught sight of him and watched his approach nervously, his rather lumpy frame suddenly tense with anticipation. Could this be a trap? Nothing could be taken for granted in the sinful old city of Thestol.

"Good evening, sir," said the spy, trying to catch a glimpse of the face hidden beneath the sagging hood. "Do you know what time the White Dragon sails for Avania? I hear that they carry a shipment of fine white rabbit pelts that will fetch a fine price at market come winter."

The concealed man did not hesitate to give the correct answer to this rather peculiar enquiry. "Why, it is the White Dove that sails tonight," he said; "not the White Dragon, for that ship ran aground with the loss of all hands off the coast of Iprena last summer. And it is not rabbit pelts that it carries, but bear-muzzles! Alas, what's a merchant to do with bear muzzles?"

The spy relaxed a little, knowing that this man was indeed his contact, the man who was to carry his information back across the sea to the city of New Dolis, for the ear of the king and the king alone. But with the emperor's grand spymaster, watching the streets like a hawk from his soaring tower, he'd had to make sure. Nothing could be left to chance; the stakes were too high, for all involved.

He lowered his voice. "Thank the Fates it is you, sir, but I warn you now, I am being followed."

Dark eyes under the hood flickered nervously and a pink tongue moistened cracked lips. "Followed? Pillar guards?"

"No, worse."

"There's someone worse than the Pillar guards?" The contact sounded incredulous. "Where are they now?"

"I lost them a few streets back, but we must be quick for they are searching for me even as we speak, and eventually their path will lead them here."

"Then give me your message, friend, and let us depart in haste. Come close and speak."

The spy stepped forward, only to fall wearily against the lamppost with a groan of agony as his wounded leg collapsed beneath him. He had to hold onto the cold metal post with all his strength to stop himself from sprawling on the floor like a drunkard.

"You're wounded!" exclaimed the courier in horror. Under the hood his pale face grew paler still. Instead of helping the injured man to his feet he fell back a few paces and looked about him nervously, his head moving jerkily.

"No, don't go!" cried the spy, holding up a hand in an appeal. "You must first hear what I have to say and then make your way to Avania in all haste."

"What then?" asked the courier, wishing to be off as quickly as possible.

"In Avania you shall receive further instructions. Now, listen carefully, for the information that I am about to impart to you is more important than both our lives."

"Not mine it isn't," answered the scared man smartly. He was ready to flee at a moment's notice. He was rubbing the soles of his booted feet against the flagstones, warming them up.

"Then just listen."

The spy knew he had lost a lot of blood and that he would soon be dead, which oddly, was a rather calming thought — but first he must pass on what he knew, before his breath was stilled and his power to speak was lost forever. "Do not fret. When you reach New Dolis your reward will be substantial." He was glad when he saw the contact hesitate. Clearly the man was greedy. "Big information brings big rewards, and this is the biggest yet. Come closer and let me whisper in your ear. It

will only take a few minutes, I promise it."

The hooded man turned away and for a moment the spy feared he was going to run after all, only for him to hesitate again – clearly the promise of such riches was too much even for a coward such as him to pass up – and then he hurried back, dropping his covered ear so that it came close to the spy's mouth.

"Tell me."

And so the spy whispered the eight names into the courier's twitching ear, and made the hooded man recite the names back to him thrice before he was confident that he knew them all by heart. As the last syllable was uttered an echoing cry close by made the sleeping seagulls rise off the nearby rooftops with a great rush of flapping wings, their nervous cries hanging in the frigid air like the laments of phantoms.

*"There! There he is! Don't let him get away! Move! Move! Move!"*

The spy looked back, roughly shoving the contact away from him as he did so. "Get to the port!" he cried. "I will hold them back for as long as I can! May the Fates guard your every step! Go man! Flee!"

As the contact dashed away, heading for the ship waiting to take him south, the spy drew his dagger and stumbled towards the sound of running feet. He knew he was too weak to fight them off, but if it was to be his fate to sacrifice his life so that the courier could escape, then so be it. Once that task had been accomplished, his job would be done and he could die safe in the knowledge that he had done his duty to king and country. Surely there were worse ways to die than this?

They were on him before he even had a chance to lift his weapon. Four black-garbed men took him down and a knee on his wrist forced the dagger from his hand. The spy grinned, welcoming the blow that must come at any moment to end his misery — only it did not come. His grin faltered, cracked, and then died on his face.

"No!" he cried in horror. "You can't do this! Kill me! Kill me I tell you!"

The men just looked down at their struggling captive and leered darkly. They were silent as they dragged him away. The spy struggled and tried to kick away the many hands that gripped him, but he had no energy left to fight them off. He prayed to the Fates that he might die of his wounds, but this time the Fates had turned their backs on him. They had more important things to occupy them at that time of night. It was with a terrible feeling of utter despair that the spy realised that he was going to live after all. And if he lived then he would talk. Oh yes, sooner or later

the men would make sure he talked.

As dawn broke, wan and feeble, over the old city, seven rich men in positions of power in the emperor's court (it should have been eight, but one was mysteriously missing) knew that their secret was out – not only out, but fleeing south to the lands of their enemy. Fast riders and boats were sent out in a desperate bid to intercept the ship and its dangerous passenger before it reached the open sea, but as they knew neither the name of the ship nor the name of the passenger that they were looking for the chartered ship made its way out to sea unmolested.

When news of this disaster got back to them, the seven powerful men — now seven very scared men — met again behind doors so thick that even an ear pressed tightly against it could not make out so much as a whisper of what was said inside. It did not take them long to decide what they must do next, and for the first time in many, many years they were in total agreement. Their plan was as audacious, as expensive and as murderous as it was desperate, but as each man in the room faced the highly unpleasant prospect of being hung, drawn and quartered for treason should they be found out, they were more than willing to take the risk. Indeed, they would have sacrificed the lives of every man, woman and child in the city to protect their wretched lives, for they cared for no-one but themselves and their wealth and, above all else, their power. They would have even killed each other if it would have made a difference.

An urgent message was drafted and sent out by the fastest rider, bare two days after the courier's escape from the city. Wheels of destruction had already been set in motion and it did not matter if all the gold and gems in both the Goldlands and the Greenlands were sacrificed to the Fates, nothing could stop them now. The age of the fifth storm was approaching.

## Chapter 1. The Guest of Honour.

The tall, grim-faced man sat stiffly at the place of honour in the great hall, his broad back turned to the huge mouth of the granite fireplace, the fire spitting sparks and smoke up the gaping chimney of granite. A slender vessel of salt had been placed on the table before him, a potent sign of his importance and his cup was filled to the brim with ruby red wine. All about him the other guests, fine lords and ladies and gentlemen from the lands around, talked noisily amongst themselves and laughed gaily, yet the man did not appear to notice them. Their frivolous words and laughter passed over his head like clouds drifting over a still lake on an icy morning. Unlike the gaudy gowns and robes of silk, satin and gold thread worn by his companions, the man's britches and tunic were coarse and dusty from the road. He could have been their social inferior, nothing more than a beggar dragged out of a ditch to make up the number at table, yet he shone with some inner strength that clearly set him apart from his haughty fellows. He was calm, even serene, as if he felt that this little moment of peace was something to be savoured, treasured; for he knew in his heart that it would last no longer than the blinking of an eye. Duty and danger were his constant companions on the long road that he had been ordered the tread, and he bore them with admirable fortitude. His large, rough hands, placed before him on the table, were still.

A crash from the hall's mighty doors silenced the wagging tongues and cut short a braying guffaw from one flame-haired lord. All heads turned to the latecomer who stood panting in the doorway. Only the grim man's eyes shifted to take in the boy whole; the faintest ghost of a smile haunting his chapped lips. He shifted his weight slightly in the chair, folded his hands before him on the table, resting, observing.

"Er..." said the boy, gazing in startled confusion from one end of the long banqueting table to the other, taking in all the staring faces in-between. Behind him his muddy footprints glistened on the highly polished stone. "Sorry, I didn't mean to... It was an accident... The wind caught the door." There was a rising note of panic in his voice.

Lord Kites, who was seated at the head of the table, as befitted his rank of Lord of the County of Shadiff, stiffened at the sight of his young ward. He set his jaw into such a hard line of disapproval that the grinding of his teeth could be heard, even over the loud crackling of the faggots in the fireplace. "Bey Gren-Liet," he

demanded loudly as he rose to his feet. "What is the meaning of this? I clearly remember requesting that you dress appropriately for my guests tonight, not parade before them as if you have come straight from playing leapfrog with the pigs in the sty! Your appearance is not seemly for this gathering."

He did not have to point out that his young ward had embarrassed him deeply in front of such important guests, for that was clear for all to see. An uneasy silence settled over the once-jovial hall.

The boy shuffled his feet back and forth, only to decide that such a childish act was beneath him, even though he was still but a child of thirteen. Nothing but a child. Instead he stood straight with his shoulders thrown back and faced his audience with what he hoped they would take for bravery. It was all he could do to salvage a little dignity from this disaster.

"Lord Kites, I apologise most deeply to both you and your guests," he said, his voice both clear and strong.

He wished that he could explain to the guests that he had been out playing with his friends down in the moat hollows when a guard had shouted to him that his guardian required his presence in the great hall, but the guard had failed to mention anything about dressing or washing for guests. Quite simply he was in the wrong, and he knew it. He had been out too long; night had fallen and he should have reported back to his guardian or Maid Griffin at least once in that time – only he'd been having too much fun to give it a single thought. Opening his mouth to make an excuse in the most obsequious language that his startled mind could muster, his eye fell upon the guest of honour for the first time and his honeyed words died in his mouth.

A ripple of anticipation ran through the hall like the first stirrings of spring after a particularly long and cruel winter.

Bey hungrily took in every detail of the stranger's appearance, the flecks of grey in his neatly trimmed beard and moustache, the thin battle scars on his chin and forehead, like white threads (although if they had been made by blade or claw he could not tell), and the intelligent, watchful green eyes that were taking him in at the same time with equal interest. When the boy saw the insignia on the man's dusty breast, the three waxing moons encircled by thorns, he knew instantly who this man was and why he was here. Bey's throat became as dry as a stone on a hot summer's day and he felt both exhilarated and terribly afraid all at the same time. His heart began to race in his chest and he was frightened that he might either let out a cheer raucous enough to embarrass both himself and his guardian more than

they were already, or be violently sick on the floor. Luckily he did neither.

The royal insignia meant that the man was Asteel – of the steel – he was warrior class.

How long had Bey waited for this day? A lifetime it seemed. So long in fact that at times he believed that it was nothing more than a childish dream that would never come to pass; that he would languish in the home of his guardian until he became as old and as feeble as the retired guards that played dice and drank wine in the cobbled courtyard when the sun was setting low over the castle walls and the brown leaves fell from the autumn trees. Now that the day had finally come he wasn't sure he was ready for it.

Lord Kites decided to break the awkward moment. "Bey Gren-Liet," he said, pointing to the door; "Go and get dressed this instant, and do not return until you are respectable."

"My lord," said the stranger suddenly, making all the heads in the hall turn away from the boy so suddenly that they looked like soldiers on parade being ordered to *look left*. "My lord, if you would permit me to speak for a moment."

"Indeed, my lord," said Lord Kites courteously, bowing his head a little. "You are my guest of honour tonight, Lord Corvaine, you may speak whenever it pleases you."

*So that's your name,* thought Bey. *Lord Corvaine.* He rolled the name around his mind like a connoisseur rolls a fine wine around his mouth.

*Lord Corvaine .*

It was a good name, a famous name synonymous with much heroism and valour, for Lord Corvaine was known for his great and selfless deeds throughout the lands of the south. Lord Corvaine, *warrior class*, just like him, although Bey knew that he had a long way to go before anyone would call him *Asteel*. Bey felt such a flood of such intense pride run through his body that it was a wonder he managed to keep a grin of insufferable smugness off his face. To show naked pride at this time would simply not do; it would be considered arrogant, even vulgar. Just like arrogance and greed, the warrior class held pride in low esteem. Such base emotions were for commoners and merchants, not the haughty and regal Asteel, the defenders of the Court of Ashun.

Lord Corvaine politely returned his host's bow. "Lord Kites," he said; "I am sure there must have been a grave misunderstanding, for surely, no ward of the realm would show his guardian such disrespect as he has just shown you, if he could help

it. No, I sense that the boy is innocent. If he is guilty of any crime then it is of nothing more serious than over-enthusiasm; a crime of youth that all of us here must have committed at some time or other."

The assembled lords and ladies chuckled and smiled for the wanderer had spoken the truth. Even Lord Kite's lips, normally so rigid and straight, involuntarily twitched at the edges — if only for an instant before he regained control.

"The boy shows great spirit," said Lord Corvaine, his voice warming a little; "Which pleases me and shows you great respect, Lord Kites; for so eager is he to meet his new guardian that he has even forgotten to clean off the clump of mud sticking to his posterior!"

Bey secretly ran a hand over his backside, hoping that nobody would notice, and found nothing there; it seemed that the warrior had been teasing him. He suffered the wave of laughter from the assembled guests with good grace, knowing that Lord Corvaine had saved him from something much worse than mere humiliation.

The warrior smiled. "I wouldn't wish see the boy punished further as I believe the embarrassment that he is feeling right now is punishment enough. That the boy's appearance is unseemly, there is no doubt; and while I am certain that your honoured guests are hungry and impatient for the banquet to begin — as am I — I am sure that we can all wait a few minutes more while the boy 'corrects' his appearance and returns to us refreshed."

Lord Kites considered the grim man's words for a moment and then, turning to Bey, nodded curtly.

Without wasting another second the boy threw open the doors and fled from the great hall, his running footsteps echoing along the long corridors of stone. Up the twisting staircase he dashed, his face as red as an overripe apple, wondering if it was possible for a person to actually die of acute embarrassment. To allow his guardian's hungry guests to wait a second longer than they needed to would heap shame upon him greater than he feared he could endure in a single day. Such was his haste that he almost bowled over two guards as they patrolled the chilly passages, and made a maid scream and drop the pail of fresh milk she was carrying down to the kitchen. "Sorry," he called over his shoulder as he raced up the stairs, heading for the far turret with the blue ceiling decorated with gold and silver stars that had been his private room since he had been a baby.

"By the Fates, where have you been, boy?" cried Maid Griffin, holding out a freshly pressed tunic of the deepest crimson to him as he burst through the door. "It

seems like I've been waiting forever for you to arrive! You should have been here a good halfhour ago! The banquet has already started... and on your big day too! Lord Kites will be furious; in fact he might have to dangle you from the walls by your toenails for bringing such shame upon his house. Here, put this on quickly... no, don't worry about that now... here's your tunic, and where did I put that cape? ... Put your arm through the hole... not that hole... oh my, look at the state of your boots!"

Bey decided against informing good Maid Griffin (who was known to fly into frightful hysteria at even the smallest mishap) that the damage had already been done. She had already suffered enough for one day. Although it took Bey only minutes to dress, knowing that Lord Kites and Lord Corvaine were waiting impatiently for him in the hall, it felt like hours. Done, Maid Griffin sent him scurrying with a smack to his rump and a cry of "Run, you silly chick!" As he flew back down the stairs he could imagine his guardian's distinguished guests muttering amongst themselves and rolling their eyes in impatience as Lord Corvaine grew quite red in the face, wondering what a tardy and incompetent squire he had been lumbered with. Such was his haste that his legs almost overtook his body and it was only good fortune (and skill, he thought) that prevented him from skidding to a halt outside the hall door on the point of his chin.

He straightened his wind-ruffled hair, smoothed down his tunic and standing as straight as he could possibly manage without dislocating his spine, pushed open the doors. He marched into the grand hall as coolly as any man who'd had all day to dress and preen before the mirror. He looked good and he knew it.

"Ah, there you are!" said Lord Kites. "At last we can proceed!" And before the boy could seat himself beside his master, Lord Kites clapped his hands thrice and a dozen servants dashed into the hall, carrying great bowls of steaming soup, platters of bread and yellow butter, cheese and pickles. They had been waiting for the signal for so long they were all quite glad to be rid of their delicious cargoes — to be able to see and smell such gorgeous food and yet not be allowed to taste it was torture indeed! Bey had to run to avoid being trampled under the servants' boots and as he pulled himself up onto his padded chair, down went the bowls of soup amid great exclamations of delight and much loud smacking of lips. This was only the first course of seven that would take the best part of the night to consume, and Maid Griffin had warned Bey to eat only a little of each course, just in case his stomach exploded from the excess.

Count Voys, sitting directly to Bey's left, tore a whole loaf of bread asunder,

trowelled a wedge of butter onto one end as if he was intending on building a wall with it and dunked the whole thing into his soup so vigorously that he dunked most of his hand along with it.

"Whoops, pardon," he said, proceeding to lick the soup off his dripping fingers. "Hmm, water-swine with field oysters, a very rare and tasty dish!" He rolled his eyes thoughtfully. "And this is the best I've ever tasted! Oh yes, it is the very best indeed!" He turned to his host. "Lord Kites, your table is renowned throughout the land for its bountifulness and for the skill of your cooks, but this exceeds even the stories I have heard... and I have heard some rich stories indeed" He raised his goblet, ruby-red wine spilling over the side. "Your good health, sir!"

Clearly pleased by such high praise, Lord Kites took up his own freshly filled silver goblet and stood to make a toast of his own.

"Lord Corvaine, Lords and ladies, friends... and not forgetting Bey, of course," he bowed to his guest of honour, who each responded in kind. "Eat and drink your fill and find what peace you can, for tomorrow the world ends."

"Until the world ends," said all the lords and ladies in unison, standing and drinking from their cups, and for the first time Bey Gren-Liet joined them in the ancient, solemn toast. He had never tasted wine before; even wine as watered down as this (on his guardian's orders) and he did not much like it. He looked slowly around at the faces at the table and felt honoured to be included amongst such important folk; although he knew in his heart that he was nothing like them. He was thirteen, soon to be fourteen, and despite his ancient and famous name he was a rather plain and insignificant boy. Everything that he could be and might eventually become – if the Fates allowed it to pass, of course – lay so far in the distant future that it could have been at the end of a rainbow for all he knew.

The assembled group stood in silence for a few moments, their glasses still raised (Bey thought that they looked like a very strange group of statues indeed) until Lord Kites said in a singularly grave and powerful voice: "May the Fates protect King Ashun."

"King Ashun!" cried all the others together, their voices ringing loud and clear in the hall, and Bey's enthusiastic voice could be heard over them all. And then they all drank deeply and did not lay down their cups until they were all completely drained. The clatter of a hundred cups being slammed down on the table made the windows shudder in their frames and the prowling hounds flatten their ears against the sides of their heads.

"Now, eat!" cried Lord Kites and the lord and ladies turned on their food as hungry wolves turn on a wounded animal. Bey was stuffing a hunk of bread into his mouth when he looked up and saw that Lord Corvaine, who had barely touched his food, was watching him with an expression of deep interest on his weathered face. The warrior smiled, nodded, and picking up his silver spoon, sipped his soup, savouring the flavour. Surprised at the acknowledgement, Bey nodded back, and turned to his own plate, but this time he tried to eat with a little more decorum.

## Chapter 2. The Second Course.

The soup and cheese course did not last long, what with so many hungry mouths nibbling away at it. Lord Kites clapped his hands again and the guests sat in trembling silence as all the empty bowls and platters were swept away and replaced with great dishes piled high with roast game: venison, pheasant, pigeon and hare, served with great hunks of granary bread and a brown gravy so thick people mistook it for a pudding and tried to slice it with their knives. Whole boiled chickens and wild boars with apples stuffed into their mouths were placed in the centre of the table, while fish, grilled, fried and poached, sat at the ends. Between them were placed overflowing bowls of dried fruits, nuts and many dainty savouries from far offlands. Bey took one look at the feast and wished he'd heeded Maid Griffin's words of warning: if only he hadn't eaten quite as much bread and cheese. And to think that the banquet had barely even started! There was still the swan course to come, as well as the first pudding course, the blood sausage course and then the second pudding... Surely even the fattest lords must give up by the time they reached the second pudding course; but they all looked quite determined to tackle anything and everything that might be placed before them over the course of the evening. One portly gentleman was rubbing his even sagging belly in circles, as if preparing it for the onslaught to come.

"Friends," said Lord Kites, passing a hand over the food. "Please, the food is getting cold."

And so the second course began. Hands reached across the table in every direction to grab the tastiest morsels. Fingers bumped against fingers, thumbs against thumbs, and apologies were begrudgingly given. Bread was torn to shreds, meat was skewered upon silver forks and deposited into gaping mouths; gravy was spilt and one fine lady even drank the sluggish brown liquor straight from the jug, wiping her white cuffs across her dripping lips. The juices from the meat spotted beards and clothes, and bones, fat and skin was unceremoniously thrown to the ground for the prowling dogs to scrounge. Entire hocks of ham were ripped apart by bare teeth and the fish were stripped to their pearly bones in seconds. It wasn't a feast, it was a massacre!

Bey was so overwhelmed by the feast that he did not know where to start. If he could have put a little bit of everything in his mouth at the same time he would have done so without hesitation. Lord Kites could not be seen for the side of beef

he was gnawing on, while to his right Lord Vazeles was attempting to squeeze a whole leg of wild fowl into his mouth, sideways; yet Bey noticed that Lord Corvaine's plate was almost empty. There were several grapes upon it, bread, a few scraps of smoked fish and chicken and nothing more. The warrior took his time picking at his frugal meal, choosing each morsel with care and chewing it thoroughly before swallowing, as if he was more comfortable with hardship and that such a display of plenty both unnerved and disgusted him. To Bey's eyes, wide and shining with admiration, the great warrior seemed the only civilised human being in the hall, surrounded by a vast horde of barbarians. Even the women, so haughty and proud in their fine dresses and furs, were stuffing their faces with every dish their bejewelled hands could reach and washing it down with gallons of mead, as if fearing that if they hesitated, even for a moment, the men-folk would leave them nothing but the scraps (which, indeed, they would). Never before had Bey been so ashamed of his adopted countrymen as now, for this was the way things were done in the land of Shadiff. He felt deep embarrassment for such a display of wanted gluttony and wished that all the lords and ladies would disappear in puff of foul-smelling smoke. He wished that he and Lord Corvaine were the only two people in the great hall. His head was bursting with so many questions that he wanted to ask the warrior he felt his skull would burst asunder and all his thoughts would fall out onto his plate in a messy jumble.

"Not eating, lad?" observed Lord Vazeles, his lips so greasy with fat that they gleamed in the candlelight like two munching iron bars. "Well you should be because the food is excellent!" He burped loudly to make his point. "And it is in your honour just as much as Lord Corvaine's, so you should be enjoying this moment and not looking like someone has just stuffed a radish up your...!"

"Now, Rathebert," interjected his wife, an oblong woman with cheeks like polished cherries. "Mind your language, we're not at home now."

Bey flushed deeply as all the lords and ladies burst out into such loud and piggish snorts of laughter that the two dogs who had been gobbling up the fallen scraps quit the room with their tails between their legs.

"Ladies, gentlemen, enemy spies!" called Lord Kites, laughing so much that he sprayed half-chewed chicken into the air. He had uttered a topical joke that was popular in some less civilised circles, although a few found it insulting; even treasonous. "Be good to the poor lad now, for I am very fond of him, as I hope that he is fond of me. Thirteen years does not seem such a long time now that it is almost at an end, but let it be known that Bey Gren-Liet will always be looked

upon as a son of the House of Kites, and that this castle will be his home for as long as he lives." He raised his glass in a toast. "Here's to Bey Gren-Liet, born of the House of Liet, Warrior Class and soon to be Asteel! The best lad I have ever known." He looked rather melancholy as he drank his wine to the bitter dregs, and bitter it was for at last he knew that their long relationship was finally at an end. "To the boy!"

Again they all drank, pretending not to have noticed the tears in the great man's eyes.

Lord Corvaine's turn to speak had arrived. He stood and cleared his throat with a loud phlegmy snort. The assembled ladies, gentlemen and enemy spies (for they were there, and revelled in the fact that their closest neighbours did not suspect them in the slightest, the fools!) became quiet and laid down their glasses and knives with some reluctance. Respectfully they wiped their greasy fingers on beards, sleeves or skirts, respective of sex, turned to the warrior and took heed with what scant shreds of concentration they had left in their heads to what he was about to say. Even a highborn lord or lady dared not talk or eat while an Asteel spoke; it simply was not done. An Asteel who had taken offence was not a nice prospect at any party. People who failed to show proper respect often found themselves missing a head, or at least a limb or two.

"Good lords and ladies of Shadiff," Lord Corvaine said in a voice that rose above the group like a hawk. "As you can see I have come fresh from the dusty road, and yet the comforts of this fine hall have already swept months of fatigue from my bones, if not years. When I am next in New Dolis, I shall sing the praise of Lord Kites hospitality and the kindness of his esteemed guests (who aided him so heroically in consuming such a magnificent feast) to all I meet! King Ashun will be impressed indeed at your lusty appetites." At this a great cheer went up, as did a few eyebrows. "Let it also be said that Lord Kites' table is one of the purest magic, for as soon as anything is eaten, it becomes whole once more, and any glass that is in the most hazardous danger of finding itself empty miraculously becomes full again." Even the servants, waiting along the sides of the hall, grinned at this, for the warrior was praising their skill. "All I need to know now — to crown Lord Kites the king of hospitality in the whole of the Greenlands — is that the bed I sleep on tonight will be as wide as the sea, as warm as a maiden's bosom and as soft as a hundred doves in flight. Friends, drink deeply to Lord Kites, for tonight he does us all proud!"

Everybody drank gladly to that and immediately a latticework of arms formed as

guests reached for dishes, platters or jugs, only to be swiftly retracted when Lord Kites stood once more, his eyes even more dewy than before. The guests sighed to themselves, casting weary glances at their friends and at the food.

"Maybe Lord Kites' table is magically replenished with all the finest foods in the world," Lord Hurrant grumbled under his breath to his neighbour, peering longingly at the roast rack of lamb. "But it means nothing when you can't get a dratted opportunity to eat any of it! Will these damn toasts never end?"

Lord Kites wiped a tear from his eye, pretending that it was a particle of dust. "I clearly remember the day I first laid my eyes on Bey Gren-Liet," he said, his voice as thick as his corded neck. "Oh, he was so small; a babe so tiny that when I held him in my hand I was afraid to open my fingers lest he slip through them! My dear wife, who was weaning my own son at the time, took him to her bosom as if he had been born to her and the little lad clamped his lips around her tit as if he was starving. My word he was a hungry one, was young Bey! What an appetite for life."

Bey hung his head and prayed that nobody could see the colour of his face by the candlelight. He was certain that an egg could have been fried on each of his flaming cheeks and a rasher of bacon cooked black on his forehead.

Lord Kites carried on; oblivious to the acute embarrassment he was causing his young ward.

"Such a tiny, puny little child, I didn't think that he was going to survive the night... but look at the boy now! See what a difference good clean air, fresh water and wholesome food can do for a lad. See how tall and strong he has grown! Why, give him another year or two and he'll be almost as big as me! Maybe even bigger!"

Love him as he did, Bey could not help but wish a mysterious bowman would appear at the window and shoot his guardian dead before he could say anything more to increase his humiliation.

Of course, nothing of the sort happened and so Lord Kites rambled on and on for some time until Bey was quite cured of any embarrassment, for it had quickly become tiresome, and many of the guests around the table began to feign the sleeping sickness, or panic attacks. A few of the more rotund guests even began to succumb to the wasting disease.

Lord Kites had begun to tell them about how he knew that the baby was Asteel because of the martial way he wielded his rattle in his crib, when he suddenly

stopped dead and an odd expression floated over his wine-flushed face, like a memory made of cobwebs and dust, something none too pleasant to recall. "And to think that I may never see him again," he muttered in a small voice and sat down heavily, his quivering chin sagging onto his chest. His own son, who like Bey had been sent away in infancy to be raised by another family, was far away and he could not help but think of Bey as his real son. When his real son returned home he would be a stranger, just as Bey would be a stranger to his own family.

A melancholy silence fell over the hall. All thoughts of grumbling bellies and parched throats had departed, leaving only an air of loneliness that no food or drink, however rich or kingly, could assuage.

Slowly Lord Corvaine rose to his feet.

"Tomorrow Bey Gren-Liet will turn fourteen years of age," he said. "Fourteen is the age when all boys born into the warrior class must begin the Crooked Path. It is my duty, as warrior class — as Asteel — to take him from this place and make him my squire for a time. We will follow the Crooked Path to New Dolis, by whatever road the Fates decide for us, and on the way I will teach him the ways of the Asteel, for that is Bey's heritage, and my duty. He was born Asteel and will die Asteel; it is our blessing and it is our curse.

"Lord Kites has, according to the customs of this land, raised the boy as one of his own, and now it is my painful duty to take Bey away from him; away to the City of New Dolis; where his next of kin impatiently await his return. Lord Kites, you have treated Bey as your own flesh and blood, for which kindness you shall be greatly rewarded. Over the many years that you have had together, you have taught Bey many useful skills: how to ride, to fight, to fire a bow and... well, I am sure I shall hear all about it all in due course. What I can see right now, what is right in front of my eyes, is what a fine, upstanding boy Bey Gren-Liet has grown into; and I am sure that the fine, strong man who will swiftly follow will be greater still; for it is said that the boy is but the ghost of the man, and that the promise inherent the boy, if encouraged and nurtured, will blossom into something richer and stronger than mere flesh and bone. Truly, Bey is a living testament to Lord Kites' care and guidance." Lord Corvaine took a deep breath and when he next spoke his voice seemed to fill every corner of the hall. "Let it be known now that Bey Gren-Liet, born of Lady Kay and Lord Louth Gren-Liet, in the great and royal city of New Dolis, here becomes what was known in ancient times as *leberet*, the state between child and Asteel, and that I, Lord Minnon Corvaine, am now his sole guardian; protector, teacher; and, if the Fates so will it, friend. In several days time Bey will

accompany me from this place and we shall travel on the Crooked Path for as long as I deem necessary. In that time I will teach Bey much about the ways of the Asteel and the laws of this great realm. If the Fates so wish it and Bey survives the journey, he will become an Asteel warrior, and he will bring great honour to both the House of Kites and the House of Gren-Liet. He will be entrusted with the Oath that all Asteel must make, the Oath to protect the House of Ashun and uphold justice and law in the Greenlands, defending it from all who would seek to do it harm." He raised his goblet. "*Bey Gren-Liet!*"

To Bey's surprise the guests all rose as one, turned to him, raised their cups high in the air, and, calling his name, drank deeply. He did not know if it was seemly for him to join in his own toast, and so he sat and shivered like a mouse caught in an icy draught. Yet secretly he was pleased as his name echoed around the rafters and rose up the chimney and rang along the long stone galleries and halls that made up the castle he had known for so long and was soon to leave forever.

"Yes, here's to Bey Gren-Liet," repeated Lord Corvaine and winked at the boy. "Be ready," he mouthed and only Bey saw it, "for the road is long and hard."

Bey nodded in answer. He was ready.

### Chapter 3. A Vision in the Sunlight.

Much to Bey's great disappointment he saw little of Lord Corvaine over the next few days, even though he had since turned the magical age of fourteen.

He had been looking forward to talking with the warrior and finding out what the future held for them on the Crooked Path to New Dolis, only to discover that Lord Kites had taken the opportunity to pick the warrior's brains on numerous matters of security. Lord Corvaine was given an extensive and lengthy tour of the North-Eastern ridge, which was frequently attacked by bandits during the harvest season, and shown the new additions to the castle's defences, all of which pleased Lord Corvaine greatly, although he made a few suggestions to improve the defence of the castle against invaders, or worse, treachery from within. The Asteel warrior even took it upon himself to drill the castle guard, which raised their self esteem so such an extent that they toasted his name every evening for twenty years afterwards; such was their great respect for the man. But as the days and nights dragged by, Bey grew more and more restless and frustrated. It seemed to him that they were no closer to leaving Castle Kites than when Lord Corvaine had first arrived; yet what else could he do but wait? The only times he saw his future master were at meal times, for the warrior had taken it upon himself to integrate himself into the smooth running of the castle as seamlessly as possible; so much so that many of the castle's folk started to forget that he was still their guest and began to believe that he was just another warrior in Lord Kite's retinue and treated him as such. It was lucky for them that Lord Corvaine was a more genial Asteel warrior than most, for a typical warrior would have summarily asserted his authority and superior rank over his inferiors quickly and bloodily.

"We will speak later," was the typical brush-off Lord Corvaine gave Bey when he tried to talk to him; or... "There will be plenty of time to talk on the road;" but for the time being he said little more than pleasantries and the occasional observation about the weather.

Equally, Lord Kites was so engrossed with the opportunity to pick his esteemed guest's brains on every matter, from the best way to store grain during the winter, to how to disarm a swordsman armed with nothing more than a piece of string, that he seemed to have entirely forgotten about his ward. And so, after being so excited about the prospect of leaving home for the road and the promise of adventure, Bey allowed himself to slip back into his old life once more. It was like putting on an

old, comfortable pair of slippers: safe, warm and boring.

"You're never going to leave here, that's what my da' says," pointed out Pechra, dangling her long legs over the side of the old well. Her father, who was a guard in the castle watch, had warned her more times than she could remember to stay away from the well close to the keep's eastern wall; not that she took any notice of him. When she had first found out that Bey was leaving Castle Kites she had cried for a whole week, taking breaks only to blow her nose, and now that he hadn't left she was feeling somewhat annoyed and cheated — people should always do what they say they're going to do and not toy with people's feelings. That was just plain rude.

"Yeah," added Cisp, who could not resist adding to any conversation, even when he had nothing meaningful to actually add to it. "You're going to spend the rest of your life stuck right here with us, Bey. You'll be an old man with a long white beard and a walking stick by the time Lord Corvaine gets a move on! Life's just too good for him here — and I'm sure I saw him wink at Maid Griffin the other day. She blushed so hard a passing bird mistook her for a redcurrant and tried to carry her off!"

Bey harboured a desire to defend Lord Corvaine's name, although he could not understand why; after all the man had promised him so much and had so far delivered so little. Lord Corvaine was as full of hot air as a kettle boiled dry.

"That's not true!" he snapped, his hand curling into fists, although he knew in his heart that he would never hit either of his old friends. "That's not true and you both know it! There's a lot of preparation and important stuff to do before we can leave. It's just taking longer than we thought. We'll be off the moment everything is sorted out, and I'll be glad of it!" He managed to stop himself from adding *and never see you two ever again!* He was really very fond of Pechra and Cisp, and knew he would miss them both terribly in the future. He sighed deeply. Oh, when were they going to get moving? Anything would be better than this awful waiting. Anything! Never had he known days to go by so slowly. "We're going at the end of the week, for certain," he said, nodding his head. "And from then on it'll be nothing but high adventure and fighting dragons for us!"

"You? Fight a dragon?" scoffed Pechra, shaking her head.

"I didn't say that *I* would be fighting the dragon," said Bey hurriedly. "Lord Corvaine will be doing that, after all that's what Asteel warriors do every day of the week."

"Dragons don't exist," said Cisp, with an air of sickening superiority. "Everybody knows that."

Bey knew his face was turning bright red. "Yes they do! Just nobody sees them around much these days; and those that do see them usually wind up getting eaten; so they don't get a chance to tell anyone, do they?" He thought his logic was sound and smiled to himself, but Cisp always had a knack of popping his friend's arguments, however strong they seemed. Cisp had something of a talent for it.

"It is said that the city of Thestol was built over the bones of the last dragon that ever lived," said the boy smugly. "So if that was the last dragon, then how can there be any more, eh? Answer me that."

"You shouldn't talk about Thestol like that," said Bey, lowering his voice to a whisper. "The Goldlanders live there and everybody knows that they lie through their rotten teeth. They'd say anything if they thought it would make them look bigger and more powerful than us; even that their city is built over the bones of the last dragon. Don't talk about Thestol ever again, Cisp. It's treason to talk about Thestol!"

There was an awkward silence, which Pechra quickly dispelled by saying: "So, what about the Greydean wurm then, eh? I heard that it ate over two dozen maidens and burned down at least three villages before King Ashun sent a dozen Asteel warriors to slay it. They discovered that the wurm was nothing more than two brigands hiding under a green blanket, pretending to be a dragon so that they could rob travellers on the road."

"From what I heard the mask was really scary," added Cisp with an exaggerated shiver. "And they used a Minotaur's horn to make it bellow. But it still wasn't a real dragon, was it."

"Alright, alright, I admit it, maybe dragons don't exist here in the Southlands anymore!" Bey snapped, kicking a stone into the well in frustration. There was a long delay before it fell, with a faint *plop*, into the dark water below. "Anyway, everybody knows that dragons prefer living in cold, mountainous places, like the Goldlands; not here in the Greenlands. This place is far too boring for dragons!" *It's too boring for me*, he thought. He frowned; he was looking past the broken wall to the line of old chestnut trees that bordered the stream outside of the castle's grounds. Something was there.

"Of course we've got wyverns instead," said Pechra enthusiastically. "Everybody knows about them... and... and serpents and gargoyles, and lots of other horrible

creatures besides, although they've mostly been driven into the mountains or into the Lower Greenlands so we never get to see them." She actually pouted for a second, as if actually disappointed by this bit of good fortune. "But then there's also the Collubus. I've never been there, of course, but whenever I read about it it really gives me the shivers."

Cisp waved a hand dismissively in the air. "Pah, wyverns are nothing! The real nasty ones are wraiths and deaths-heads and sighs; all the things that should be dead but aren't. I bet even Lord Corvaine would run away from a sigh if he saw one; wouldn't he Bey? Hey, Bey, are you listening to me?"

Actually Bey was not listening to Cisp; he was staring at a boy standing in the distance, sheltering beneath the spreading branches of a chestnut tree. This wasn't the first time he had seen the Thin Boy, as he liked to call him, but it was certainly the clearest view of him he'd had in many years. He only ever saw the Thin Boy at a great distance, and as strange as it seemed, the boy never seemed to get any closer or any further away. One moment he was there and the next he was gone, sometimes in the blink of an eye. Bey had never seen the Thin Boy's face close up and he didn't think that he wanted to, for there was something "not really there" about the boy that scared him a little, as if he was no more than the shadow of a branch or a textured bump on the tree's rugged trunk; yet at all times he remained distinctly a boy, a thing of arms and legs and body and head. Bey could not say exactly how long he'd been catching glimpses of this phantom boy (often out of the corner of his eye), but it seemed to have been all his life. He had never tried to approach him; he knew in his gut that the boy would never allow that — he would fade away long before Bey got close enough to speak to him.

"Bey? Bey?" said Cisp, rudely snapping his fingers before Bey's eyes. "Are you still with us, Bey? Hello there!"

Bey ripped his eyes away from the tree, knowing from experience that when he looked back the boy would be gone. "I thought I saw..." he began and decided not to go on; there seemed little point. "It was nothing; a bird or a squirrel, I think."

Pechra was looking at him strangely. She had seen Bey look like this before: distracted, distant, as if he was somewhere else entirely. She was about to ask Bey a searching question when Cisp interrupted her.

"Hey, isn't that Maid Griffin over there? Looks like she's searching for someone, and I think I can guess who that person might be."

Sure enough Maid Griffin was standing at the top of the old keep's steps, gazing

about her in her usual agitated manner, as if she was trying to find something important that she had misplaced, and then her eyes fell on Bey and a smile of relief itself spread across her wide face as soft butter spreads itself across a toasted crumpet.

"Bey, at last!" she called, beckoning to him. "I've been looking all over the castle for you. Why do you always insist on being so late! Come on, quickly! This way!"

Leaving his friends discussing who would win in a fight between a Cyclops and a unicorn, Bey followed Maid Griffin back inside the castle, along winding stone corridors and up dizzying staircases. As he scurried through the Castle it hit him that this might be it; this might be the last time he ever saw Castle Kites, the place he had called home for as long as he could remember. No more would he drink warm milk, delivered straight from the cow's udder on cold winter mornings in the kitchens; or play hide and seek in the wine cellar with Cisp and Pechra; or watch the castle guard practicing their archery and combat skills on the fallow field; or anything else for that matter. Sadness welled up in him like a dark bubble and a tear might have slipped down one of his cheeks had he not had the self-possession to control himself. The Asteel, as Lord Kites had often instructed him, do not cry. *Ever*. Still, it was all too much for him to take in. He resolved in his heart that he would tell Lord Corvaine that he had changed his mind; that didn't want to go away on this "Crooked Path" any more; or any other path for that matter; that he no longer wished to be Asteel, or a great warrior, or a lord, or any of those grand things that most men aspired to. He wanted to remain in Castle Kites with Lord Kites, Maid Griffin and all his friends for as long as he lived. He wanted to...

"Ah, there you are Bey. Come in, sit down," said Lord Kites, a welcoming smile on his rough-hewn face. He was sitting with Lord Corvaine by the fire in his small study, a goblet of wine in his hand. The room was filled with books and maps and records, for Lord Kites was a great scholar of all things and enjoyed nothing more than pouring over old tomes full of obtuse facts and figures when matters of governorship did not demand his full attention. In fact he had often stated that he would have preferred to be a scholar than the governor of the County of Shadiff, if he had been given the choice, for he found more excitement and contentment in the world of words and ideas than he did in the bloody theatres of war and power.

Above the tiny, but greatly warming fireplace, there hung a portrait of his late wife, Lady Kites; a beautiful young woman with red hair and kind eyes, the only

woman Bey had even called mother; while against the far wall there rested an axe and a battle-scarred shield bearing the crest of House Kites: three hawks hovering over a fountain. This axe was the very weapon that Lord Kites had used to defeat Grathil, the great black bear who had terrorised the land, when he had been only sixteen years of age; only a few years older than Bey himself. Between the two great warriors a game of *jetel* was in progress, the game of wheels, and one glance told Bey that Lord Corvaine was winning. He was surprised for his guardian was a shrewd and skilful player. He chose to say nothing on the matter.

"Don't just stand there with your mouth hanging open," said Lord Kites, beckoning the boy over. "Pull up a seat and join us."

Bey pulled over a high-backed chair of oak. The chair was so solid and heavy he could barely shift it, but neither of the seated men made any move to help him. At last he flopped down on the chair, restraining a grimace of fatigue — it would not do to allow Lord Corvaine to see any weakness in him. The chair was as comfortable as sitting on a cold slab of stone and he could feel the bones in his backside grinding against the unyielding wood, but he made no complaint. If the tales he'd heard of the Crooked Path were true, then this chair was a luxury he would soon pine for.

Lord Corvaine made a move on the circular board, not looking at the boy. "We leave tomorrow," he said. "I trust that you have had enough time to prepare and say your goodbyes?"

Actually Bey had been prepared a whole three months before Lord Corvaine's arrival, but he simply said yes; he was ready. Oddly, now that it came to it he did not feel at all prepared; in fact he felt decidedly unprepared. All his thoughts of staying, of declining his heritage and remaining a normal boy at Castle Kites, evaporated like fine rain on a warm afternoon. He could no more his future any more than he could deny growing up.

"I am ready, my lord," he said. "Have you any further instructions for me?"

"Only that you should say farewell to those you love tonight; your friends and colleagues, for tomorrow we ride at first light. You will not get a second chance."

Bey nodded. "At first light, I understand."

"Good." The grim warrior massaged his chin between forefinger and thumb, considering Lord Kites' reply to his move. "Are you ready for this, Bey Gren-Liet?"

"Yes, my lord," answered the boy without hesitation.

The warrior smiled, which added an unexpected softness to his face. He could have been a kind uncle or a godfather, rather than one of the most revered Asteel heroes of the age. In that instant Bey knew that he desired nothing more than to be as great as this man when he grew up. Lord Corvaine had much to teach him, and he would allow himself to be taught by no other, for it was said that none could match Lord Corvaine in martial skills and tactics. He was, in all matters, the consummate warrior.

"Go now and enjoy yourself, for tomorrow your life's work begins in earnest," said the warrior. "Do not doubt me when I say that it will be hard, for it will be the hardest thing that you will ever do... but it will also be the most rewarding. I will see you again at the hour of the opening eye."

But Bey Gren-Liet did not move. "I have so many things to ask you, my lord," he said. "Can we not speak together for a time?"

"We will have time enough to speak on our travels;" came Lord Corvaine's reply. "In fact we will have more than enough time... possibly even years. Leave your questions until tomorrow, when I am more suited to answering. Now go and play with your friends for one last time and say your farewells... and remember, the hour of the opening eye."

"Yes, my lord," said Bey. He bowed and ran from the room. It wasn't too late for one last game of hide and seek with Pechra and Cisp before bed. They would make the scant hours last.

## Chapter 4. The Two Gifts.

As he headed down the passage, deep in thought, Bey heard an anguished cry from behind him and knew that his guardian had fallen. He smiled to himself, and yet the old uncertainty was beginning to resurface again in his mind, the knowledge that from tomorrow morning everything would be different, that his life would bear little resemblance to what he had known since he had come to Castle Kites. It felt like a step too far, even though he had been given all his young life to come to terms with it. He wanted change and he did not want to change. He didn't know in his heart what he wanted. And then he reminded himself that there was nothing for him to think about: his path had been mapped out for him long before he had even been born and he had little say in the matter. Tomorrow he would leave Castle Kites as Lord Corvaine's squire, and that would be that. He was warrior class; one day he would be Asteel; and this future lay before him with the inevitability of a clock striking twelve.

"You look mighty down in the mouth there, son," observed a passing guard. It was Pechra's father, a wide man rather than tall, with a large moustache that wasn't quite large enough to completely conceal his genial face. "What ails you, lad?"

"Tonight is my last night in Castle Kites," explained glumly Bey; "And I know in my heart that I will never come back to see this castle, my family and my friends ever again."

"'Never' is a very big word," said the guard with a reassuring smile. "It should be used with great care for who knows where our paths will lead us. Sometimes they take us to unexpected places, maybe even dangerous places, and sometimes, just when we least expect it, they lead us home again. Don't say 'never' Bey, for it is so final a word, and life is never final while breath yet remains in our body. Rather say 'unlikely', for there is always a small chance that what we fear may not happen." He ruffled the boy's hair playfully. "Good luck to you, Bey Gren-Liet, for the road of an Asteel warrior is not an easy one. May the Fates keep and protect you!"

Saying their goodbyes the two parted and Bey went looking for Maid Griffin to tell her the news that was both happy and sad all at the same time. She was not to be found in the scullery or in her little room by the kitchens, or even in the great hall dusting the mantle, and so Bey decided to look for her in the last place she that might be at that time of day, which was not yet mid-afternoon: the stone room.

Bey shivered, for the stone room was the only place in the castle that he did not like to go at any time of day, even on the brightest summer morning. Strange stories and rumours abounded (which always seemed to be told only on the darkest, stormiest nights) that many hundreds of years ago a man had been murdered most horribly in the little cellar and his lifeless body buried under the stone room's brown tiles. It was said — or whispered more likely — that the man's restless spirit haunted the stone room, waiting to point a pale phantom finger at his slayer; although as Cisp pointed out, he was in for a very long wait as the murderer was long dead by now.

With his tongue curled tightly at the back of his throat, Bey hurried to the top of the staircase that led down to the stone room, and peered down the narrow flight of steep, rather clumsily built steps, into the chilly darkness. As always a funny smell rose to greet him, the stink of mould and damp stone and something else he could not quite put his finger on, accompanied by a feeling that an unseen hand was very slowly, very gently, squeezing his heart. Why did he always feel this way when he came here? Was it really the presence of a ghost that made him feel so suddenly cold and clammy, or was it just his imagination, fired-up by all the lurid tales he had heard over the years?

"Maid Griffin?" Bey called out in a childish voice — he could not help himself. "Are you down there, Maid Griffin? If you are, please answer me. Hello?"

Nobody answered, but something *clinked*, a sharp stony sound like two plates falling against each other. Maid Griffin was notoriously hard of hearing; she rarely replied when her name was called, even if the caller was standing only three feet away for her; although she did have an unnerving knack of knowing when someone was talking behind her back, even when at a great distance. Could Maid Griffin be down there in the stone room, rummaging through the bric-a-brac that had accumulated there over the years? There was only one way that Bey could find out: he would have to go down those forbidding steps and look for himself. As he descended the steps a damp, stony feeling enveloped him, as if an icy cloak had been thrown around his shoulders. The ends of his fingers and toes tingled and the short hairs on the back of his neck prickled.

"Maid Griffin!" he called again, hoping that she would hear him and come up the stairs to meet him half way, only this time there was complete silence.

Down Bey went, his heart thumping dully in his chest. He desperately wanted to turn and leave this awful place, but what would Lord Corvaine say if he knew his future squire was scared of a mere *room*? He doubted that Lord Corvaine would

understand if he had fled the place simply because of its spooky reputation and that it felt "all wrong". It was, after all, just a room — nothing more and nothing less. There was no reason for him to be scared of it, at least no rational reason.

In no time at all he reached the door at the bottom of the staircase, which lay half-open. Taking a deep breath he stepped over the threshold and felt the cold intensify around him. The stone room was a small dome-shaped basement, squashed against the castle's draughty eastern wall and overhanging the moat. Stepping into the cellar was like stepping into a place forbidden. An arrow slit high in the far wall allowed in a single shaft of grey light which illuminated barely more than a small lozenge-shaped spot on the floor — the rest of the room disappeared into an ochre shaded gloom that felt ten-times heavier than it should. Shelves on all four sides were crammed from floor to ceiling with old crockery, pieces of broken glass, ugly ornaments, tarnished silver dishes and all sorts of sundry odds and ends; all of them broken or ruined in some way or other. Nothing was thrown away in Castle Kites, and this was where all the broken and unwanted things came to rest.

Maid Griffin was not here, that was obviously clear. With a sigh of relief Bey turned to go, but as he put his foot on the bottom step a chill gripped him and sent an icy shiver through his body. Now it was the turn of the skin on his back to crawl.

*Someone... or something... was in here with him! He could feel it!*

Bey did not want to turn and see who or what was standing behind him — even though the stone room had been empty when he had first entered, he was certain, *he knew*, that it was empty no longer — and yet he could not stop himself from turning on the spot on reluctant heels and taking two steps forward. It was as if he had lost all control over his body. Something unnatural had stepped inside his skin and decided that the one thing *he really did not want to do*, was exactly the thing he *would* do.

Silently the door closed behind him.

At first the room appeared unchanged, normal even. Bey began to sigh in relief — only for the sigh to die in his throat. A smoky figure... no, not really a figure at all, actually little more than an opaque outline, was crouching in the darkest corner, skulking there like a common thief trying to conceal himself from the eyes of the unwary. Bey was sure that nobody had been there a moment before. The room had been empty.

"Who are you?" he demanded, speaking loudly to hide the fear in his voice as he took a step back towards the door "What are you doing down here? Who are you? speak!"

The figure said nothing and did not move.

"I said, who are you? All I have to do is shout and a hundred guards will be down here in a flash, and then you'll be sorry." If the shadow-man heard him, he made no sign of it. "Show yourself!"

It was the wrong thing to say, for the thing *did* show itself

Bey's eyes felt like they had swelled to the size of chicken's eggs in his head and his mouth hung open in shock. It was no man that stepped out of the dark, nor was it a thief, it was the Thin Boy!

Bey froze on the spot, too scared to run. Never had he been as close to the Thin Boy as this, and he realised with a jolt of fear that he could see no more of the phantom than he could before — for where the boy's face should have been there was only the vaguest outline of features: a thin, delicate mouth, a long nose and hollow, brooding eyes. It was as if the boy was made entirely out of glass, or very thin ice, and when he moved — which he did little — his edges blurred and smudged. His blank eyes were locked on Bey's, and Bey, much to his surprise, discovered that he was no longer scared. The fear in him had all but evaporated, although a deep unease remained.

Bey studied the boy as well as his blurry features would allow, and guessed that the Thin Boy was a few years younger than him, if such a thing as age could be applied to a ghost. It was a bit like looking in a ghostly mirror.

"What do you want with me?" Bey demanded of the spirit in a voice that did not waver. "Tell me what you want. Why do you haunt me so?"

The Thin Boy made no movement. There was no expression on his crystalline face; no sorrow, no happiness, no fear, no hatred, no love; nothing at all. He appeared to be as dead inside as he was out. He was as hollow as a pot.

"Say something!" Bey demanded, taking a daring step towards the apparition. "Why appear to me now if you have nothing to say? Speak!"

The boy's eyes moved so slightly that Bey almost missed it. They were directed at the ground to his right, into the very corner of the room in fact. Bey turned and looked but could see nothing more than a collection of dusty green bottles and earthenware jugs, all left to collect dust.

"Is something there?" he asked, intrigued.

The apparition neither nodded nor shook his head, but his transparent eyes never left that one spot on the floor.

"Do you want me to look?" Was it his imagination or did the ghostly head nod ever so slightly? "Alright, I'll look. Just don't you dare jump on me while my back is turned!"

Knowing that he was doing the right thing, but unsure quite how he knew it, Bey got down on his hands and knees and began to search the grimy corner, moving the clinking bottles and jugs aside. He yelled out in surprise when a long-dead spider the size of his hand rolled out from behind one of the jugs and lay there like a dried-up ball of legs. With an utterance of disgust, Bey flicked the little corpse away, shuddering. He hated spiders. On he searched, fearing that a live spider might be lurking somewhere close, waiting to pounce on him for disturbing its brother's grave, but in that respect he was lucky. There was enough dust and dirt in the corner to make an elephant sneeze and the cobwebs were thick and sticky, like spun sugar, and as Bey swept them away they stuck to his hands and caught on his clothes and, much to his disgust, in his hair.

"There's nothing here," he said irritably, accidentally knocking over a bottle as he turned. "I don't know what you expected me to find..." Even as he said it he laid his hand upon something that was not a bottle, a jug or a spider — it was a small key. Falling silent, Bey picked up the key and held it up to the feeble shaft of light, examining it closely. The key was small and curious, apparently made of iron. He could see lateral scratches along the shaft where it had been held in a vice and the three jagged teeth were scratched and worn from heavy use. There was something etched upon the round, flattened end; a marking so worn that it was difficult to make out at first, but if Bey held it just *so*, the markings could have been shooting stars flying into the sky; sticks or a bundle of hay. The symbol meant nothing to Bey. It was nonsense. There was also a small hole where the key could be attached to a chain, or a strap of thin leather.

"What is this? What does it open?" he asked, holding the key up for the Thin Boy to see, only to find that he had gone. The stone room was empty and he was alone once more. He was not at all surprised. "Well," he said to himself, gazing at the key resting in the palm of his hand; "You must be important indeed for a ghost to point you out like that." He slipped the key into a pocket. "They don't do things like that every day of the week."

He jumped violently when a voice boomed at him from the doorway.

"Well, Master Bey Gren-Liet, what a merry game you're playing with me this

time!"

He span around to Maid Griffin standing in the doorway, her hands on her hips, although the expression on her face was not one of anger; it was the one she used when she was pretending to be annoyed with him; a sort of amused scowl.

"Every time you're wanted, you disappear in a puff of smoke! It's almost as if you don't want to be found." She allowed her features to soften into a smile. "A feast is to be held in your honour tonight. Everybody in the castle is invited, and this time I am determined that you will be dressed and groomed for the occasion... even if it kills me!" She stuck out her hand to him. "Now come along. Everything must be perfect for tonight, and if we start scrubbing at that face right now — I don't think it's been touched by water in over a month — we might just see some skin showing through come evening. I could probably grow potatoes behind your ears if I wanted to! Come on, hurry up!"

"Oh, Maid Griffin, I'm not a child anymore!" Bey complained, but without rancour.

"You may have turned fourteen, my boy, but to me you're still a child," she scolded him playfully. "Now *come on!*"

As Maid Griffin had promised, everybody in the castle (with the exception of the kitchen staff and the few unlucky guards who had picked the short straw and had to patrol the grounds) were at the feast. Unlike the ceremony that had welcomed Lord Corvaine to Castle Kites, this was to be an evening of song, laughter and tall stories, for a travelling tale-spinner had come at Lord Kite's request. The bearded, gaily-clothed man held the audience in the palm of his hand for hours on end as he recounted bloodcurdling stories of murder, man-eating monsters and vengeful spirits (here Bey touched the key nestling in his pocket and felt an unnatural chill pass through him), all the while gulping down gallons of mead, wine and ale. Nobody could recall ever seeing so much food and drink in one place at one time and it was a wonder to all that so little of it went to waste. Bey sat at the head of the table, in what should have been his guardian's place, while Lord Kites sat to his right and Maid Griffin — who had been as good as a mother to Bey since Lady Kites' death — sat on his left to wipe his greasy lips with a lick-dampened handkerchief or to remind him to breathe when he laughed too hard. Pechra and Cisp sat close by and he was glad for their company, and a little sad too, for their eventual parting was drawing close; but his eyes frequently wandered to the seat where the guest of honour should be sat, hoping to find Lord Corvaine there, only to find it empty and aloof amongst such gaiety. While a juggler filled the air with

tumbling fruit and flaming brands, Bey leant close to Lord Kites and asked him where the warrior was. He had to shout his question three times before his guardian heard him over the roar of enjoyment and the thumping of fists on the trestle tables.

"He said that he has much to do before tomorrow," Lord Kites shouted back. "I'm sorry but I do not think that we shall be seeing him tonight." And Lord Kites smiled, but however much he tried he could not remove the look of anxiety from his eyes.

And so the evening sped on and speeches and toasts followed quick upon each other's heels until nobody knew who was speaking and who was drinking and didn't much care to know. Pleston, the miller, who had drunk enough wine to drown a small village, toasted Bey's health at least a hundred times before collapsing into a slumbering heap underneath the table. But as is always the way – for it is a simple fact of nature that happy hours pass quicker than those of any other type – the time soon came for the revels to end and for the guests to depart home to their waiting beds. Suddenly there were tears in the eyes of the women (and the men, too, although they rubbed at their eyes and complained at how dusty it was in the hall) and smiles on faces that hurt the wearer's cheek muscles, such was their sheer determination to display happiness rather than the sadness that they all felt in their hearts.

Lord Kites' speech, the last speech in a long evening of speeches, was full of heartfelt sentiment and, unusually for him, emotion. There was silence in the great hall as everybody listened to his carefully chosen words, nodding at points and whispered amongst themselves that what he said was very true. Lord Kites sang Bey Gren-Liet's praises until the boy felt quite nauseous with it all, like he had been forced to eat spoonful after spoonful of sugar, and finally, with dewy eyes and a frog in his throat, raised his glass in one last toast. All the people of the castle stood and raised their glasses, be it wine, mead or apple juice, and drank deeply to the boy who had become such a dear part of the family and who was now going away, maybe even forever.

As he raised his own glass in a toast to Castle Kites and to all his wonderful friends, Bey felt that he loved each and every one of them; even Magnus the gardener, who still gave him the evil eye for trampling on his roses six years ago. Bey hugged Pechra and shook Cisp's hand, and then he was climbing the stairs to bed and he felt like he was floating up the stairs on a cloud. Everything was moving too fast and he wanted it to slow down; but he'd had so much fun and was so tired that the moment he'd changed into his nightshirt and laid his head down

on the pillow, he fell fast asleep.

## Chapter 5. The Intruder Strikes.

*"Wake up Bey Gren-Liet!" Wake up!"*

The harsh whisper struck at Bey like a serpent striking through the gloom of a nightmare. His eyes snapped open. He was awake, wide-awake. Someone was looking down at him from the darkness, eyes shining, shaking him.

*"There isn't a moment to lose! Wake up, you lazy boy!"*

It was Lord Corvaine, standing beside his bed, shaking him roughly by the shoulder. The warrior kept on glancing nervously over his shoulder at the shadowy doorway, as if he expected to see something very bad come through it at any moment and the sight of it made Bey's heart shiver in his chest — anything that could scare an Asteel warrior had to be bad indeed.

"What...?" he began, beginning to rise, only for Lord Corvaine to press a fingertip to his lips, silencing him.

"Say nothing," the warrior whispered urgently. "Now listen to me carefully, Bey. Get dressed quickly, dress for the road. We are leaving... right now. If you wish to live to see the sunrise, you will do exactly as I tell you, and without hesitation."

What could Bey do but follow his new master's orders to the letter? He dressed in silence although a million questions were buzzing furiously around inside his head. He pulled on the rugged tunic, britches and boots he wore while out hunting with Lord Kites. He tied a tough waterproof cape around his shoulders.

Lord Corvaine slipped silently beside the door, his back pressed against the wall and his head turned towards to the opening. He was little more than a lumpy shape in the gloom and he appeared to be listening for something outside. Bey was uncomfortably aware that he was holding a dagger in his right hand.

"I'm ready," he said quietly.

"Good," whispered the warrior; "Now grab the mattress from your bed."

Bey blinked. "What?"

"You heard me, boy. Rip the mattress from your bed, and be quick about it. Time is short... he will be here sooner than we hope."

Bey wanted to ask who "he" was; instead he did as he was told, even if it did sound like madness. With a single heave he pulled the heavy straw-stuffed mattress from his bed and onto the floor, revealing the bare wooden boards of the base. If

Maid Griffin saw him doing such a bad thing, throwing a clean mattress onto the dirty floor, she would turn puce with fury and box his ears. Why was Lord Corvaine telling him to do such a nonsensical thing? The warrior must have drunk too much of Lord Kites heady wine.

"Now rip up the wood. You will need this."

Bey felt the dagger being pressed into his hand. He looked down at it, feeling foolish.

"You heard me, lad. Rip up the wood... *quickly!*"

Having been commanded, Bey set to work. Using the dagger as a lever he managed to pull up the boards, one at a time. It was not hard as the wood was soft and the nails were shallow. To his amazement that there was a hollow space beneath his bed... and resting inside it...!

"*Oh!*" He gasped; "*Oh my Fate!*"

Oh my indeed.

Bey knew instinctively that the sword in the scabbard of black leather that lay in the hollow was an Asteel blade. Only members of the warrior class were permitted to wield the famous Asteel blades, forged in secret by the mysterious Ironmongers in the depths of Mount Kaven; it was their ancient right, secured by King Dolis himself. Even in the dark of his bedroom, Bey thought that the sword was calling to him, the spherical pommel giving off a supernatural glow that pulsed like a heartbeat; or were his eyes playing tricks on him? He desired to grab the sword up, to remove the scabbard and see the naked blade shine in the moonlight — the magnificent blade made of a strange metal that only the Ironmongers knew how to mine and work.

"There is no time to gawp at it," said Lord Corvaine. "Pick it up and be quick about it."

Bey grasped the sword by its leather-bound grip, expecting it to be heavy. It was not. The blade was firm but light in his hand; it felt natural resting there, part of him. He marvelled at the fact that he was holding one of the most sought-after and dangerous weapons in the known world — for everybody knew that an Asteel blade could cut through rock and steel. And to think that he had been sleeping only inches above the sword all his life and had never suspected a thing! *How?* He gripped the leather handle to pull the sword from its scabbard.

"No," said Lord Corvaine firmly. "You are not ready. Use the dagger if you must. Come, Bey Gren-Liet, follow me, and do not stray from my side."

The warrior led Bey through the shadow-filled castle, lit only by flickering sconces at the intersections. When the harsh night wind infiltrated the castle through its innumerable cracks, fissures and hidey-holes, the flames guttered violently, turning their elongated shadows into madly capering figures that made Bey shake with fear. He had never liked the castle at night; it was no place for living people. Only yesterday he had been walking through these very same corridors and passageways, saying hello and good-day to the guards and the people he passed; playing games with Pechra and Cisp — now night had twisted it into a place of danger, of secrets, and all he wanted to do was crawl back into bed, pull the sheets over his head and forget everything — but hadn't he destroyed his own bed? Hadn't he torn it apart to get at what was hidden inside? There was no going back now, no returning to the life he had grown into so easily; he could only go forward, onto the Crooked Path and into danger.

"Bey!" snapped Lord Corvaine. "Stop dreaming! Look sharp! We don't know what danger lurks around the next corner."

"I don't understand," said Bey, shaking his head. "What danger?"

"I'll tell you soon, but not right now."

On they hurried, passing the shadows of guards, slumped in their seats or lying on the ground with their arms thrown above their heads, their faces flushed and lopsided with gravity.

"They're asleep!" cried Bey, aghast. "I don't believe it, they're all asleep!"

"And so is everybody else in the castle, I hope."

Bey did not hear him. "If Lord Kites finds them sleeping on duty, he'll have them flogged a dozen times! This is unforgivable! *They're drunk!*"

"They're not drunk, and neither are they to blame," said Lord Corvaine simply. "They have been drugged."

It took Bey's mind a moment to understand what the warrior had just said. "Drugged? How could this happen?"

The warrior did not answer at first. He took Bey down a narrow passage, passing two guards lying back-to-back, their heads lolling on their heaving chests, their snores deep and content.

"A little something in the wine can work wonders."

Bey stopped dead, staring at his new master in amazement.

"You did it!" he exclaimed. "You did this, didn't you?" He shook his head in

disbelief. "It was you who drugged them! *You're* responsible!"

"Yes. Yes I did it, I am responsible," said the warrior, beckoning wildly for the boy to hurry up. "Now come on. We don't have long."

"No, I won't come. Not until you tell me why."

"Because it was the safest way, believe me. I'll tell you everything once we're out of the castle and somewhere safe; but until then..." Sensing the boy's reluctance to follow him, he hardened his voice. "Move, Bey Gren-Liet, and that's an order!"

But Bey could not forgive Lord Corvaine for his reckless and criminal actions. An assault against Castle Kites and its people was an assault against him too. He dug in his heels.

"Did you drug Lord Kites as well?"

"Of course I did. He was the first. Now..."

"Then you have insulted Lord Kites, and you have insulted..."

"Halt!" a husky cry came from down the passage.

Lord Corvaine stiffened. He held up a splayed hand behind him, indicating for Bey to stay back, while the other hand went for his sword.

Pechra's father blocked the passage with his angular frame, sword in hand, a strange expression of mingled fear and confusion on his face.

"Put down your sword and let us pass," said Lord Corvaine, his voice calm and commanding.

The guard shook his head fiercely, "Only by my lord's assent!" He took a nervous step towards the warrior. "There has been trickery here. I think the wine was tampered with. It is a good thing that I do not drink wine." He took another step forward, even though he was but a mere guard while Lord Corvaine was a hero who had slain a thousand ferocious enemies in battle. Few men who dared to challenge an Asteel warrior lived to tell the tale.

"Stand aside, man," said Lord Corvaine, his eyes steady, like the eyes of a dangerous predator. "I have no quarrel with you, soldier. Stand aside!"

Instead Pechra's father took yet another step forward. Bey wanted to shout at him, warn him to get away while he still had the chance, but his tongue had frozen in his mouth. He had known the man for as long as he had known Pechra; the diligent guard had taught him how to track deer, fight with the quarterstaff and fish for trout in the stream; he had even played games with them when his guard duty was over. Pechra's father was a good man.

"I don't want to hurt you, but this is your last warning" said the warrior. "Stand aside."

Pechra's father was not perturbed. "No, my lord," he said boldly. "This is my master's home and I am in the pay of my master, and in his debt too. I cannot stand aside." He took a deep breath. "Now, please, return to your quarters before..."

Lord Corvaine moved so fast Bey almost missed it. In one step the warrior's sword was free of its scabbard, flashing brightly with the flickering flames; with a second step it was drawn back, ready to strike the man down. Pechra's father did not even have time to show fear; he was just as surprised as Bey by the warrior's sudden lunge. He raised his own sword to deflect the obvious blow, only for Lord Corvaine to sidestep with such agility that Bey thought he must be dreaming. Even before Pechra's father could recover his stance, Lord Corvaine moved in for the kill, and then, twisting like a top, slipped behind him.

"No, don't!" cried Bey. It was all he could do. There was no time to say more.

With a move of astonishing swiftness, the warrior brought the pommel of his sword down hard on the back of the guard's helmet. The guard's face tightened briefly and then he crashed to the floor, dropping his own sword in the process. Lord Corvaine kicked the plain iron blade away, sending it spinning into a corner, where it clattered noisily against the stonework. The whole battle was over in a matter of seconds.

"Alright Bey," said Lord Corvaine, holding out his free hand to the boy. "Let's go."

But Bey could not move. He could not tear his eyes off the man sprawled on the cold, hard stone. "You didn't need to kill him," he said in a voice that sounded very far away. "He was a friend."

"I don't kill good men if there is another way," said Lord Corvaine, beginning to grow impatient. "He is not dead, he is merely unconscious. He will wake tomorrow with a headache and the knowledge that he faced an Asteel warrior and lived. He is a very lucky man. *Now come!*"

Still reeling for the suddenness of it all, Bey followed the warrior down a flight of steps that led into Lord Kite's personal stable, where Forby, Bey's beloved pony, and Lord Corvaine's own great grey warhorse were waiting for them. The impatiently snorting mounts were already on their feet with saddles on their backs and bits between their teeth. Quite clearly Lord Corvaine had visited here before seeking Bey out. While Bey climbed onto Forby's back, who stamped his hooves

grumpily at being woken so rudely in the middle of the night (he'd been having a lovely dream about carrots and sugar lumps), Lord Corvaine threw open the stable doors, revealing the moonlight-flecked courtyard. A crow nesting in one of the old apple trees by the well croaked, its sleep disturbed. Bey noticed that there were no guards either by the gate or on the walls, where there should have been at least four men on patrol at all times. Clearly they had also partaken of Lord Corvaine's treacherous wine and were slumbering soundly.

Stepping out into the courtyard and stopping, the warrior glanced about himself keenly for a moment, sniffing the air for strange scents, and then beckoned for Bey to come forward.

"Don't worry, Forby," Bey whispered into the agitated pony's ear as he gently spurred him on. "I'm sure everything will turn out alright in the end." There had to be an explanation for this odd sequence of events. Could it be some sort of strange test? No, not even an Asteel warrior would go so far. Whatever it was that was happening here, it was for real.

The sound of the pony's iron-shod hooves on the damp cobbles would have woken the dead from their eternal dreams, let alone a group of snoring guards, and yet nobody raised the alarm or challenged the two sneaks as they moved across the courtyard to the drawbridge, which had been drawn up for the night. Bey heard the heavy clip-clops of hooves behind him and turned to see that Lord Corvaine was following, leading his own horse by the reigns. High above them the full moon, peering out curiously between stormy clouds, grew bored with the intrigue and slipped back into hiding, and as she did so the courtyard changed from being silvery bright to dark and cold; a place that treachery and skulduggery could truly call home. A slight figure moved up on the battlements, flitting from behind a water barrel to hide behind a weapons rack. Bey missed it, but Lord Corvaine did not.

"Up there," the warrior whispered quickly, indicating to the place with a flash of his eyes.

Bey looked hard; looked until the darkness became almost luminous, but he could see nothing untoward or threatening. By now his heart was skipping beats now. If Lord Corvaine said that something was there, then something was there; Bey did not doubt it for a second.

*"Don't stare, by the Fates!"*

Bey snapped his head around to face ahead.

"When I give the signal, ride for your life," said the warrior in a low, urgent voice. "Stay low in the saddle and whatever you do, do *not* turn around. Do you understand me?"

Bey nodded his head once; to do more than that would give the game away. He glanced nervously at the battlements, feeling the presence of the lurker there like an itch at the back of his eyes. He was sure that they were being watched, examined, scrutinised by the man skulking in the dark like a fox. He had eyes that could see in the dark... see through walls... see a flea jump on a dog's tail a mile away! That the stranger was not one of the castle guards, Bey was certain, for he would have challenged them by now. Lord Kites always trained his men to be brave and confront intruders head-on, not to hide and cower like cowards.

Pretending to scratch his legs, Lord Corvaine ambled close to Bey. "Act as naturally as you can," he whispered. "I don't think he knows we've spotted him. Give me your dagger." And then he said out loud. "My horse has a stone caught in her hoof, the poor beast. Give me your knife so that I might prize it loose."

Flustered, Bey fumbled in pocket after pocket, trying to find the dagger Lord Corvaine had given him in the bedroom, only to pull out some fluff, a soiled handkerchief and a few old coins. Where had he put the wretched thing?

"Come on, Bey!" hissed the warrior between his clenched teeth. "Give it to me."

Feeling very hot and muddled from all the pressure he was under, Bey searched his pockets again and laid his hand upon the dagger's hilt almost immediately. Why hadn't he found it the first time around? There was no time to wonder about such matters; he passed the knife to Lord Corvaine with a shaking hand. The warrior gave the boy a quick smile to reassure him.

"The stone won't take a moment to dislodge, and then we will be on our way."

Playfully holding the dagger by its tip and whistling a little ditty, Lord Corvaine was sauntering back to his horse when abruptly he stumbled on a cobblestone.

Bey's heart stopped. For one terrifying moment he believed the warrior was going to fall flat on his face in full view of their mysterious enemy, only for the warrior's stumble to turn into something very different indeed.

With a smooth, studied twist and turn of his body that was both graceful and precise, Lord Corvaine threw the dagger hard. Bey blinked as the dart of steel flashed across the courtyard towards the gate — no, not at the gate, but at something to the side of it. The wooden drawbridge shuddered as the rope twanged

– the blade had severed one of the taut ropes holding the drawbridge up, while the other rope had already been partially sawn through, weakening it substantially – and then crashed down when both ropes broke with a crack of snapping fibres, forming a bridge across the moat to the road beyond. For the first time Bey realised that the portcullis had already been raised, and the portcullis was never left open between the hours of sundown and dawn. This had all been carefully pre-planned.

*"Ride, Bey! Ride!"* Lord Corvaine yelled, drawing his sword as he swung around the face the shadow that had broken cover and was now running swiftly across the battlements towards them. "He's coming! Ride or your life!"

Bey did not need to be told again. He cracked the pony's reins hard; harder than usual. Leaning forward until his cheek was resting against the pony's musky mane, his legs pressed into the pony's flanks, he cried, *"Yay, Forby!"*

Out of the corner of his eye he caught the flicker of something sinister approaching with the stealth and speed of a stoat. Panic sent jolts of electricity racing up his arms and down his legs.

*"Come on, Forby! Yah! Move! Yay! "*

They were off. Something whistled close by Bey's ear and glancing back he caught sight of Lord Corvaine, his Asteel blade bright in his hand, moving into the shadows to confront the intruder, and then he was thundering over the drawbridge. Behind him he heard a strangely high-pitched scream of frustration, so shrill and twisted it sounded almost inhuman, and Lord Corvaine's guttural shout of defiance... and then the wind in his ears silenced them both. From here on he was on his own.

## Chapter 6. The Path Begins.

Bey and Forby cleared the drawbridge in seconds and were soon galloping down a road bordered with fields and scrub, the distant foliage shifting black humps in the breezy night. The castle grounds were always kept clear for as far as the eye could see to prevent the enemy creeping up on the gate undetected, but this tactic now worked against them: anyone watching from the castle's battlements would easily be able to follow Bey's escape to the fork.

"Faster! Faster!" Bey urgently whispered into the pony's flattened ears. "Don't let me down now!"

He knew that the road would soon split into two, but which direction should he take? Should he take the right fork, the road that led into town, which was closer, or turn left and take the Eastern road, which would take him to the Howellen Forest, and seven miles beyond that to the town of Howestern? He had little time to ponder the decision, the split in the road was approaching fast. Lord Corvaine had simply told him to keep riding; he had not instructed him to go in any particular direction or to wait for him at a particular spot, so Bey could only assume that the warrior would find him whichever direction he chose to take. And so the final decision – left or right – was completely down to him. He had a nasty suspicion that whatever he chose to do, it would be wrong one.

*Come on Bey, he thought; make a decision, you fool!*

The town of Kites was no more than a three-minute gallop away. He frequently walked it when running errands for Maid Griffin and had many friends there who would willingly offer him shelter and protection for the night. But what if the shadow came looking for him? He did not want to put the lives of innocent people in danger. The forest? He could easily find a place to lie low there if need be. During the long summer months, Pechra, Cisp and he would often spend all day in the forest, playing hide and seek in the maze of holly, briars and hawthorn, climbing high into boughs or leaping over their tangled roots. He liked to think that he knew the woods as well as any of the Howellen charcoal burners, but he was sure that everything would look very different in the moonlight. But surely (Bey assumed) there was less chance of a man finding him in a deep, brooding forest in the middle of the night than in the narrow lanes of a small town — and so the choice was made.

At the fork in the road Bey turned Forby eastwards, towards the forest, which crowned the top of the distant hill like the silhouette of an army of fern-headed giants gently swaying, standing guard, protecting some mystery to be found in the centre of the forest. He cracked Forby's reins and yipped loudly in an attempt to make the beast gallop faster, which failed, for while Forby was good for short dashes and playful jousts, he had never been tested in battle and was beginning to find the urgency of the situation rather tiring. The poor pony wasn't the only one to be tested this night: Bey's own mettle was being tested too; only this time it was no childish game, no challenge that his master had set him. Someone in the castle had tried to kill him. Danger came quickly on the Crooked Path, it seemed.

Despite Lord Corvaine's warning, Bey glanced over his shoulder. Behind him he could see nothing but the road diminishing behind him like a meandering white tail. In the distance the outline of Castle Kites stood out starkly against the troubled sky, no longer his home but a place of danger and intrigue. There were no horsemen on the road; nobody appeared to be following him – but then Bey remembered at how skilful the stranger was at keeping out of sight. He listened and was glad that he could not hear the distant galloping hooves of someone giving chase; unless the shadow had some means of muffling the sounds of his steed's hooves on the stones and shale? No, he thought that was unlikely.

But what if the man was not acting alone? What if he had an accomplice waiting for him along the road, concealed behind a tree or a bush? What if he had *accomplices*? Bey rode on fiercely, driven on by uncertainty and the fear that prickled and rustled in the pit of his stomach as if he had swallowed a ball of needles. He was going to keep on riding until he had found a safe place to hide and gather his thoughts, figure out what to do next; until then he was not going to stop for anything. A straggling hedgerow abruptly appeared out of the dark on their right; Forby dodged it neatly, but several thorny twigs caught and tore at Bey's face and clothing, as if trying to pull him from his saddle.

"Come on Forby, don't fail me now!" he yelled, giving the reins another snap. "Show me what you're made of!"

Forby could no more understand his master's words than any animal could, but he understood the cracking on his reins, the knees pressing tightly into his flanks, and he could sense his master's urgency — as tired as was, he tried harder. By now they were fast approaching the edge of the forest, shadowy and mysterious, and Bey could hear the wind rustling amongst uncountable leaves, the sound low on the night air like the breaking of the sea on a distant shoreline. And then they passed

beneath the dense canopy of trees and blackness swallowed them whole. Confused and frightened, Forby came to a skittering stop on the dirt track, sending stones and dry leaves spraying ahead of him. No ray of moonlight could penetrate the great swaying roof of interlaced leaves and branches; steeping the whole forest in a frightening darkness that Bey had never experienced before. Not only would the stranger be unable to find him in here, Bey hoped, but he himself would be unable to find a path through the woods to safety; yet he knew that was exactly what he must attempt. Just at that point something his guardian had once said came to him: "When you doubt your senses, trust your beast." Yes, he had to trust the beast.

"Dear Forby," Bey whispered into the pony's twitching ear, the coarse hairs tickling his lips. "Carry me to safety."

The pony snorted and shook his mane as if he was saying "no way" to this obviously daft request, and for a moment Bey feared that the animal was going to refuse to move another step in any direction.

"Please!"

As if hearing his master's plea, the pony began to trot forward, following a path that only he could sense. Bey's own eyes were slowly adjusting to the dark and after a few minutes and he could already make out the blotchy, vague shapes of trees and bushes against the flat blackness. As they moved deeper into the forest, another fear began to grip at Bey's heart; not the fear of being hunted, but fear of the unknown. Stories told around many midsummer campfires floated unwanted into his head, tales of unquiet spirits, cursed wells that hid secret treasure; and vengeful man-beasts that were always on the search for human...!

*Stop that!* Bey told himself sternly. *Stop that you fool! Now is not the time to be frightened of childish tales of ghosts and goblins!*

But what about *sighs*?

Claw-like branches and sharp things caught at Bey's hair and clothes and all around him the forest was alive with the furtive sounds of night creatures, things that crawled through the undergrowth and called to each other with guttural barks or shrieks that made Bey's hair stand on end. Some of them made sounds so much like human screams that he was sure someone was being murdered close by. seemingly oblivious to the sounds Forby trotted on, his hooves finding a path that Bey couldn't even see; leading his master either to safety or towards danger, he knew not. Bey was glad that at least there were no wolves in the forest; Lord Kites'

grandfather had seen to that that.

After what seemed hours of plodding through the dark they stopped in a glade — Bey knew it was a glade for the night sky formed an irregular inky-blue patch over his head; a sky window. He scratched Forby behind the ears, telling him what a clever pony he was (if Forby agreed with such high praise he said nothing, being the humble creature he was) and then climbed down to wait. Wait for what? For Lord Corvaine to come and find him? For the enemy to hunt him down? For morning to arrive? He did not know.

Bey sat heavily at the foot of a tree and placed his back against the rough bark, holding Forby's reign loosely in one hand. All he could do now was wait and see what the night would bring.

"Everything will be alright now, Forby, you'll see," he said out loud, more for his own sake than for the pony's. "You won't go wandering off now, will you?"

The pony, a vague shape in the gloom, made no sound.

"No, I thought not."

Bey shifted his weight a little to the right as a knot of wood was sticking painfully into his spine. He thought of Pechra and Cisp, both safely tucked up in their warm beds, and envied them. He wondered if Pechra's unconscious father had been discovered yet and the alarm raised; or were all the guards still slumbering peacefully from the potion Lord Corvaine had put in their beer? And what of Lord Kites himself. Where was he right now? Was he out stretched out in his favourite chair, soundly snoring, or was he diligently searching for Bey, stalking through the castle, loudly calling his name while Maid Griffin hunted for him down in the storerooms? Bey had no way of knowing what was going on back at the castle and knew that it was useless for him to speculate about such distant matters — that was another life now — but he could not help himself. Something had to fill the emptiness.

The abrupt hoot of an owl made the boy start in alarm. Forby glanced his way, as if detecting his unease, and then went back to nibbling the grass. Relieved, Bey laughed at himself. Digging a clump of dried moss from beside him, he propped it against the tree and used it as a pillow.

"Lord Bey Gren-Liet, Asteel, how do you like the sound of that, eh?" He asked the pony, not expecting to get an answer and getting none. "It's got a certain ring to it, hasn't it? Lord Bey Gren-Liet, *Asteel*. I wonder if any squire in the history of the Asteel has been through as much as I have on his first day, eh?" If Forby had an

opinion on the matter he was keeping it to himself, clearly not wanting to upset his master. "No, I guess not. I bet they're all have a grand time in New Dolis, jousting, fighting duels, messing around and having grand feasts with not one single whiff of danger. Not one single jot of excitement. Well, I've got off to a real good start, haven't I, what with an assassin trying to kill me and everything? Emperor Mantorias must be really scared of what a great Asteel warrior I'll become, to..."

"Don't fool yourself, lad," said Lord Corvaine, stepping out from behind a tree as if he had been there all night. "They weren't trying to kill you because you'll become the greatest Asteel warrior in the world; they were trying to kill you because your death would have put a great strain between the houses of Corvaine, Kites and Gren-Liet. I'm sorry to say that your murder would have been purely a political one, and if there is anything a person should not die for in this world, I would say politics is it. I would rather die for a good tankard of ale than for politics."

Bey jumped to his feet, overjoyed to see that his new guardian was still in one piece.

"Master, you're safe!"

"Yes, for the moment at least."

"Please sit, master," Bey insisted. "Rest a while."

Lord Corvaine sat down against the tree with a deep sigh. The light from the moon made his face appear wan and ghostly.

"You look exhausted. Did that awful man escape?"

"Yes, he escaped," said Lord Corvaine, shifting to make himself more comfortable; that tree knot really did dig in horribly. "He was skilled, but I gave him something to remember me by." The warrior dangled something disagreeably fleshy between his forefinger and thumb.

"What is it?" asked Bey, wrinkling his nose in disgust. He did not want to touch the loathsome object.

"Part of his ear," said Lord Corvaine and flicked the ragged pink lump into the foliage, where it was caught and consumed by a hungry fox. "And he was lucky that's all I took." He thumped the ground with a fist. "If only I got a look at his face!"

Bey knelt down beside the warrior. "Are you hurt, my lord?" he asked, unsure what he should do next.

Lord Corvaine shook his head and gave the boy a rueful smile. "Only my pride," he said. "I should have known that something was amiss sooner. I had only a hunch to act upon, and my hesitation nearly got us both killed." He looked directly at Bey, and the way the moonlight shimmered in his eyes made it seem so much worse. "Understand, Bey, this is how the enemy fights. Of course he has vast armies, and fleets of warships and machines of destruction that we can only guess at, but his most potent weapon is treachery; by driving a wedge of fear and doubt between his enemies and making them fight each other, rather than fight him. If you had been eaten by a beast on the Crooked Path, or slain by bandits, you would have died an honourable death and your family would have grieved for you and prayed for you, but they would have been content and not sought revenge. But for you to die in your guardian's house, before we had even begun our journey...!" Lord Corvaine shook his head. "Asperond has a lot to answer for."

"Was it this... Asperond who...?" began Bey.

"No," said the warrior quickly, keen to allay the boy's fears so soon on their travels. "Asperond dwells in the terrible city of our enemy, Thestol. He is the man Emperor Mantorias trusts more than any other to keep him safe from all the treason and treachery in his own court; and there is a lot of treachery in Thestol. Many wish to see the emperor dead and seize power for themselves, and many of them call themselves his most humble subjects."

"But who is Asperond?" asked Bey, who had only heard fanciful whispers and childish gossip of the infamous and much-feared man, but few solid facts

"Asperond is the Emperor's grand spymaster," Lord Corvaine explained, his brown darkening. "He is a plotter without equal, a player of deadly games. I detect Asperond's hand behind tonight's attack — the only thing that is unusual about it is that it failed. He rarely makes mistakes, or if he does make a mistake it only appears that way, which is exactly what he wants the enemy to think. The assassin will have a lot to answer for."

"Will this assassin follow us?" asked Bey fearfully. "Will he try again?" He did not want his new guardian to know that he was all shaky inside, like a plate of tripe left on a rocking chair.

The warrior shrugged. "He has been discovered... and more than that he was wounded! I think he will go to earth for a time; lick his wounds. Yes, he will try again, but not for some time yet. Be assured, Bey, you are safe for the moment, but be vigilant, always. Grow eyes in the back of your head."

These words did not comfort Bey in the slightest, yet he swallowed down the lump that had formed in his throat, nodding his head in a sharp manner that he hoped conveyed an inner-strength that he did not actually feel.

"Are you scared, Bey Gren-Liet?" asked Lord Corvaine.

"No sir," replied Bey, throwing back his shoulders.

The warrior said nothing, but his eyes – dark in the night — were hard and penetrating, as if they could see straight into Bey's heart and see the fear that he hid there, curled up like a feral animal.

"Come," he said, standing; "we must be off I want to arrive at Hoffa's Green by midday, at the very latest."

Lord Corvaine made a thin whistling sound between his teeth – anyone listening would have sworn it was the wind – and a moment later Polonus, his great grey mare, shouldered her way through the dark and oily foliage, leading a reluctant looking Forby behind her, who had begun to wander away as they talked. The warrior met her gladly, whispering soothing words into her ear as he stroked her silvery mane, and then leapt upon her back.

Bey climbed clumsily onto Forby, who snuffed irritably.

"I believe the path is this way," said Lord Corvaine, giving the reign a light flick of the wrist to the right.

Bey followed on Forby as Polonus made her way to the road by whatever magical horse-sense that she possessed. He was bursting with a thousand questions and, much against his better judgement, allowed some of them to bubble forth.

"Why did you drug the guards?" he asked. "Was it really necessary?"

Lord Corvaine was quite for a moment, as if gauging how much he could safely tell the boy. "From experience," he said. "I have learned that the assassins of the north use chaos and disorder to their advantage. The last time it happened..." He shook his head. "Let's just say that many people died. Too many. I would not have that on my conscious again, if I could help it. When you are older you will understand."

This rather cryptic answer irritated Bey, but he had another, more important, question that required urgent clarification. "Why does this Asperond you speak of want to create a rift between the families of the Asteel?"

"That is no question for the middle of the night, and especially not for folks riding through a dark forest such as this — even brave folks like us. I will tell you everything that you need to know in good time; until then be quiet for I have much

to ponder."

And so Bey reluctantly fell silent and he used the time to do some thinking of his own. He quietly came to the conclusion that being an Asteel squire might not be as much fun as he had hoped. He had often imagined himself slaying dragons and giants and saving damsels from evil knights in mortal combat, but actually getting hurt... or even worse, *killed*... why, that had never been a part of it.

## **Thank You.**

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