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CHILDREN OF THE RAVEN

By

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“Who is the good-looking bird with blond hair?” Roark asked as he looked across the smoky common room. “It has been a while since I’ve seen one that nice in this place.”

“She’s a governess for two young children traveling to the capital,” his partner Brock answered. “Seems her liegeman took ill and had to be sent by coach back to Ramsford and a real doctor. The innkeeper set her up with Leach to guide her and the children the rest of the way. Seems the young ones are the children of some noble family. She paid gold for the coach to return her man to the doctor this afternoon. Here is Leach now, he will know more about it.”

The large black-haired man slipped into an empty seat beside Roark, in order to admire the statuesque blond woman speaking with the innkeeper on the other side of the large room. “So, Leach, what is the story about that fabulous looking blond over there?” Brock asked.

“Boys, we have fallen into it this time,” Leach began. “Her name is Miss Ellie Bloomsfell, and I am definitely in love... She has heard all about the stories of the highwaymen attacking travelers between here and the capital, but her guardian and protector very suddenly came down ill. And, that leaves her, and the young ones unprotected and traveling alone in this inhospitable country. So, she tells the innkeeper, Blythe, about her dilemma, and who should he choose to help her out in her time of need, but his reliable brother, me. I’m telling you fellows; our luck has changed.”

“How much gold do you reckon she his carrying, Leach?” Roark asked.

“From the size of the bag, I would guess about thirty pieces. But, just wait until you get a look at the horse she is riding and the ponies for the children. The mounts are worth at least ten gold marks, but the children are the real valuables here. They are the young son and daughter of a nobleman who is close to the king. We could ransom them for ten times all of that.”

“There she goes, back up the stairs,” Roark observed. “I sure would like to see what is under that dress.”

“She has arranged for her and the children to have their meal in their suite. The likes of us and the common room conversation is not suited for the sensitive ears of her kind. Here comes Blythe. Let’s see what he knows.”

The stout innkeeper sidled over to their table, wiping his hands on an ever-present small towel he carried over one shoulder. “Round up the rest of the lads,” Blythe said. “I need to see to her ladyship’s needs personally. We’ll meet here in two hours after the crowd has thinned out some.” With a nod, Blythe returned to the kitchens. Once there, he supervised several serving maids as they loaded two

large trays with a variety of foods. He had already seen that a table setting for three had been set up in the large suite of rooms, one floor up. Carrying a couple bottles of wine, the portly middle-aged man followed the maids up the stairs to the governess's suite.

After light knocks on the door, he waited patiently for the command to enter. He had already been dressed down once by the prim and proper lady for entering without being invited and had vowed to not endure that unpleasantness again. When he received the invitation, he opened the door and then held it for the serving women as they maneuvered their trays through the entrance. Both children sat reading and working in front of the antler covered fireplace in regular sized chairs, their feet reaching only halfway to the floor. Miss Bloomsfell stood with perfect posture in the middle of the room and supervised the setting of the table like a drill sergeant. She seemed to find fault with almost everything, starting with the cleanliness of the silverware. One of the maids was quickly dismissed to retrieve more from the kitchens. When she was satisfied with the settings, she inventoried Blythe's selection of wines which she found to be unacceptable. Another maid was dispatched to the cellars to retrieve a different selection for her perusal. One of these was judged acceptable, albeit just marginally. As Blythe and the maids were dismissed, he heard her admonish both quiet children, "Gillette, if you don't finish your pages there will be no dessert for you, young man. And, Darcy you still have three more of my sentences to copy before you can sit down to our meal."

Exactly one hour after their meal had been served, per his instructions, Blythe lightly knocked on the door again. When granted permission, he and the serving maids entered and removed all the trays and dishes. "Mr. Blythe," the governess began, "the children and I will have breakfast in the common room at first light. Please instruct Mr. Leach to join us at that time and see that our horses and ponies are saddled and ready to depart. We need to get an early start so that we may reach Plainsman Falls by tomorrow night to camp... The children are already asleep. That will be all, Mr. Blythe."

Blythe had known this young woman less than one day, but he had quickly learned that it was best to bow and scrape when required and to speak as little as possible. As he held the door for the maids, he smiled to himself as to the fate that awaited this lady. He bowed respectfully and asked, "Will there be anything else, Ma'am." A quick dismissive wave of her hand was all the response he received.

When the door was closed, the little girl emerged from the bedroom. Three and one-half feet tall, with mousy brown hair that hung to the middle of her back, she wore a gold medallion around her neck over tan blouse and matching breeks. "Be careful, Darcy," the tall governess said. The little girl smiled and touched the medallion with her right hand. Instantly she vanished and only the slight opening and closing of the door told of her passing out of the room.

Darcy easily made her way down the stairs. Already the common room had begun to clear out. Leach and six other men sat around a large table with fresh mugs of beer sitting in front of each of them. Blythe, wiping his hands, was just returning from the kitchens to join them. Darcy eased closer so that she could overhear their conversation.

"Her Ladyship is having breakfast here in the morning with the common folk. She wants to depart right after their morning meal. I'm to have Leach and all their horses and ponies ready. Take them at Plainsman Falls," Blythe said. "A day's ride from our little crossroads is almost in a different world. Mind that you wear your masks and cause no harm to the children. They are worth a fortune, and together with the others they will make us wealthy beyond our dreams. I don't care what you do to that uppity governess; just make sure she pays for the aggravation she has put me through, several times over." Everyone at the table smiled. "Take them early in the morning after they camp at the falls overnight. Roark, you are to bring the children to the ancient volcano. They can help keep our current guests' company while we all sit back and wait on word that the ransoms are on their way to us."

"What if the nobles won't pay the ransom for the children?" one of the older men asked.

“When we start sending them little fingers and toes, they will see the light pretty quick. I’m thinking they are worth at least fifty, maybe even a hundred gold marks each. When you have all had your fun with the governess, cut her throat and throw her in a ravine somewhere. About a week from now, we are all going to be very rich men,” Blythe finished with a big toothy grin on his fat face.

Darcy didn’t release her invisibility until she was safely inside the room with her governess. “At the falls, the morning after we arrive,” she said, “and just as you thought, they have the Princess but don’t know who she is yet.” Miss Bloomsfell did not respond, instead she just nodded her head as she sat in deep thought by the fire.

Just as Blythe was placing a large platter of eggs, bacon, and toast on an oval table, the governess, accompanied by both children, came down the stairs. He had to admit that at least she was punctual. She ordered both children to seats by the fireplace and quickly prepared a small plate for each of them. She also saw they each received a cup of hot tea. Only then did she take a seat at the oval table and help herself. Just as she sat down, the front door of the inn opened, and Leach entered. As he approached the table, Miss Bloomsfell stood. “Good morning, Mr. Leach, I hope you are ready for a fine day’s traveling.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said bowing slightly. For the first time, he noticed that she was wearing tight riding pants with a white blouse and a light brown jacket. She also had her long blond hair pulled into a long-pleated tail. “Do I need to bring a pack animal, Miss Bloomsfell?”

“No, that will not be necessary, Mr. Leach. The children and I are traveling light, and we have everything we need stored in our saddle panniers. Mr. Blythe has been kind enough to pack our traveling rations and bedding for us.”

“Well, then all we need to do is get a hearty breakfast and we can get on the road.”

“The children and I will not hold you up, Mr. Leach. We are all accomplished riders. It is an integral part of their upbringing.”

As Leach shoveled eggs and bacon into his mouth, he glanced over to the children sitting before the large fireplace. Because of the hoods they wore, he could not see their faces directly, but the little boy seemed to be in deep concentration about something.

Gillette looked up at the ceiling. “Barvella, we are leaving the inn within the hour. We will make camp at the Plainsman Falls just as we planned. You and Vallyden make sure there are no surprises waiting on us.”

Vallyden is already there. He wanted to make sure no one else was using the campsite. I will shadow the others as they follow after you. We will all meet again tonight.

When everyone had finished breakfast, Miss Bloomsfell paid Mr. Blythe for their stay and gave him an extra gold mark with instructions to split it equally between the maids, the stable hands and himself. He was stunned by the extra gold and followed them out into the stable yard where their horses and ponies were saddled and waiting on them. He thanked Miss Bloomsfell repeatedly and missed how thoroughly both children went over their mounts. Each readjusted the cinches on their saddles and checked and rechecked the storage panniers they carried on each side and in a roll behind the saddle.

Leach could tell instantly that Miss Bloomsfell’s fine rear end was accustomed to sitting on a horse. Her magnificent dappled gray mare was outfitted with an expensive saddle with all the trimmings. She went over every inch, checking all her equipment. She ignored the stable boy who stood smiling expectantly by the mounting block and vaulted into the saddle with an ease and grace that only came from years of practice. The children already sat stoically on their ponies with their hoods pulled over their heads to ward off the morning’s chill.

Leach nodded to his brother Blythe, mounted his black horse, and proceeded to lead his party out onto the road to the capital. The morning was crisp and cool, and the horses and ponies were frisky. Several times he glanced back at the children, but they were having no problems at all keeping up. They stopped briefly at midday to rest the animals and have one of the many sandwiches the kitchen had packed for their journey. The children were so well disciplined that they kept to themselves and left him alone to look at Miss Bloomsfell. Her sharp blue eyes and intense stare made making eye contact extremely difficult, but Leach found that he could not help but look at her and her tight-fitting riding pants at each and every opportunity.

They journeyed easily though the countryside following the well traveled road as it wended its way through the expansive forest of this region. An hour before sundown, they reached the cascade where they stopped for the evening. Leach looked in admiration as the children cared for their mounts and then began setting up the campsite for the night. The little boy gathered firewood while the little girl filled a kettle from a gurgling stream nearby for tea. “Miss Bloomsfell, how old did you say these children were? They cannot be more than five or six, yet they have manners, better than any I have ever seen before. Someone has truly done a wonderful job with them.”

“Why thank you, Mr. Leach, but I have to admit that I had nothing to do with their upbringing and training. You see, they are not children and I am not their governess.” Leach looked confused even as Darcy removed her hood and short cloak. “In reality, Mr. Leach, I am not here to protect them; rather they are here to protect me... Let me explain it this way. I am a lieutenant in the King’s Legion and the finest blade in Fennar, and I don’t think I am a match for either one of them. Gillette is the greatest archer on Rythmar, and I have never seen Darcy’s equal with a throwing knife. But we have some questions we want to ask you. I’ll let Darcy begin.”

With her hood removed and her features outlined by the setting sun, the large man could see that the small figure standing before him was no girl, regardless of her stature. “Mr. Leach, my name is Darcy Sage Farrow, and I am a Thane. The handsome fellow just returning to camp now with a shovel is my husband, Gillette. He has been out digging your grave. Whether or not you fill it will depend on you and if you tell the truth.” Leach pulled the long belt knife at his left side. “I have to tell you, Mr. Leach that is not the kind of cooperation I was expecting from you... Perhaps you should meet one of our other traveling companions.”

Leach let out a gasp as a huge gray wolf walked into the camp and stood by Darcy’s side. “That is the largest wolf I have ever seen,” Leach managed to stammer out.

“His name is Vallyden and he is a Dire-Wolf from the country of Abyssalia on the southern continent. He is my friend and my Ward. We have fought many battles together and when the King of Fennar asked us to help put these highwaymen and outlaws that plague his country out of business, we just could not say no... So, Mr. Leach, how many of your men are camped just over the last hill we passed this afternoon? And by the way, if you don’t put that knife away, Vallyden is going to rip your throat out.”

“I don’t know anything about a bunch of men camped over the hill,” Leach said but did return his knife to its scabbard.

“How much money did you think you could get by ransoming a noble’s children?”

Leach started to answer, but nothing came out.

“What did you plan to do with Miss Ellie here while you held Gillette and me for ransom?”

“We uh... well we were going to ...” Leach stopped stammering as Vallyden began a low growl.

“I have one last question, Mr. Leach. How many innocent people have you killed, raped, or brutalized on this stretch of empty road, and are you the leader or is it really your brother the innkeeper?”

Leach never said another word. He pulled his belt knife again and took a step towards Darcy. As his foot hit the ground, a Thane throwing knife was sticking in his throat, and a short Thane arrow was protruding from his left eye. Vallyden was all over the large man, but he was dead as he hit the ground.

Vallyden looked up as another lighter gray Dire-Wolf the size of a large pony entered the camp. Gillette quickly put his arms around Barvella’s impressive neck. “Six men in the camp,” Gillette said looking up from stroking the huge wolf. “It appears they are sticking to the plan.”

“Why don’t we take them tonight?” Darcy asked.

“We need some information from them,” the lieutenant began. Someone is alerting Blythe and the others when travelers are heading their way. We need to know who it is to put them out of business for good... I’m afraid it is someone in my command... Only the army check points would be privileged to that much accurate information.”

“What about the Princess?” Gillette asked.

“You and Darcy are going to be taken captive with her... It is too risky to storm the old volcano without someone on the inside. That is for you two. The one named Roark is the key. There will be a procedure or password for whoever is watching over the Princess, and he will know what it is.”

“They will be rotating someone on watch all night long. I know who Roark is without making any mistakes,” Darcy said. “I’ll use the medallion and watch over their camp until it is his turn on guard. I’ll ask Vallyden to alert you when it is time.” With only a smile, Darcy vaulted onto the broad back of her Dire-Wolf and they disappeared into the verge and the darkness.

“Darcy told me that once both of you had one of those medallions,” the lieutenant said.

“That’s right,” Gillette replied. “After the last Great War, I decided to give my medallion to a very good friend named Igen, who lives on the southern continent and on a unique escarpment called the Pelian. Anyway, Darcy and I only need one to pass on to our first child. The southern continent has been ravaged by several huge wars in the past few years, and I thought it would help him rebuild his homeland.”

“That was very gracious of you, Gillette. Are you and Darcy planning to have children anytime soon?”

“I don’t know,” he said his face turning a little red. “We’ve been working pretty hard on it since we returned to the northern continent, and she is no longer taking blue root like she was; but, so far no success.”

“The medallion she carries is one of the seven made from the sword of Vanatee, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Ellie, it is. It was given to one of her ancestors at the end of the First Great War, over ten thousand years ago. It has been in her family ever since.”

“Was your medallion passed down from your family as well?”

“No, I was given mine by a dying officer from Arnor. Before he died, he charged me with the responsibility of taking the medallion to his father, King Feldar. That started an adventure that took Darcy and me to all three continents on Rythmar and lasted eight years.”

“You are the most famous Thanes that ever lived,” the beautiful lieutenant said. “Everyone knows your story, even way up here in remote Fennar. You are two of the finest warriors on all Rythmar. Your exploits are the materials for legends. Five hundred years from now, Bards will still sing about your adventures.”

“Right now, I would be happier if Darcy and I could return to being just normal people again. But, several years ago we met King Cephan, and when he asked us for our help, we could hardly refuse.”

Gillette was sound asleep when Vallyden licked him on the face to wake him up. He quickly roused the blond lieutenant. “It is a few hours before daylight and Roark just took the last shift. We have time for a cup of tea before we storm their camp.” Gillette added more wood to the fire and placed the tea kettle over the flames.

“How should we handle this?” Lieutenant Bloomsfell asked as she accepted a cup of tea from the young Thane. “Unless I miss my guess, Darcy and Vallyden will have Roark trussed up like a turkey ready for the oven by the time we get there. Should any of the others be spared?”

Miss Bloomsfell thought for a few seconds before replying. “No, these people are rapist, murderers, and kidnapers. They deserve no quarter. Roark is the only one who has any information for us that we can use. We kill them all.”

The moon was in the first quarter and provided adequate lighting for them, but they still followed the Dire-Wolves who unerringly lead them to Darcy’s side. Just as Gillette had predicted, Roark lay on his stomach with a gag in his mouth and his arms and legs trussed up behind him. He started to squirm and fight his bindings but stopped as Barvella growled menacingly by his ear.

“Ellie, let Darcy and I handle this,” Gillette said.

The pretty blond officer did not hesitate, even for an instant. “No, these vagabonds have been murdering and abusing my people. I’ll do my part.”

“Alright, the wolves will stand on either side to take care of any surprises,” Darcy said as she pulled her back sword.

As it turned out, the wolves were not needed and as the sun was just beginning to peek over the large hill to the east, they all were having a second cup of tea while the Dire-Wolves supervised Roark as he dug a large communal grave.

“This would be much easier if those two wolves would stop staring at me. Their amber eyes just look right through a man.”

“You don’t want to be on the bad side of a Dire-Wolf, Mr. Roark,” Darcy said. “They kill slowly and mercilessly. I’ve seen them drag a helpless victim around by his intestines for hours. It’s a big game to them.” Darcy nodded to the young Fennarian lieutenant that the time was about right to begin the questioning.

“Mr. Roark, I am going to ask you some very direct questions,” the lieutenant began. “I expect some direct answers. If you cooperate, I will see what I can do for you when you come before a magistrate. If not, there are always the Dire-Wolves.” Roark did not respond but nodded to her and indicated his willingness to help. “Where do you keep the victims, you kidnap and hold for ransom?”

“At the old volcano on the other side of the South Thorn,” he replied, keeping one eye on the wolves.

“How many guards are there at the volcano?”

“I don’t know, Ma’am. I never see anyone. I chain the captives to the bell, ring it three times, and leave. That is the end of my involvement until Blythe gives us another mission.”

“Who informs Blythe about travelers leaving the capital?” Darcy asked.

“He gets a bird, Ma’am; from someone he calls the ‘Raven.’ He has never met the man before.”

“How about travelers journeying to the capital?” Gillette asked.

“They usually stop at the crossroads. If they spend the night at the inn, the innkeeper sizes them up. Otherwise, they usually purchase supplies from the outpost or have repairs made at the stable. They alert Blythe and he gives them the once over.”

“So, Blythe runs this operation?” the lieutenant asked.

“No, the man called the ‘Raven’ runs everything. Blythe just gets his cut when the ransom is paid in the capital.”

“How are those who have been kidnapped returned to their homes?” Darcy asked.

“They are blindfolded and left on the road to the crossroads and the inn. They have never seen their captors faces so they cannot describe them.”

While the Dire-Wolves watched Roark, Darcy and Gillette joined the lieutenant for another cup of tea to discuss their options. “You have to admit, it is a pretty clean operation,” Darcy said.

“They have one network snatching people; another holding them captive, and a third providing the intelligence for the operation. None of the groups knows the others, and their captives are always kept blindfolded or his men wear masks, so they don’t know who their captors are before being released,” Gillette said. “No wonder it has been so difficult to shut them down... They only kidnap the children of wealthy nobles or merchants and kill anyone who sees their faces or gets in their way.”

“What do you think we should do?” Ellie asked, looking from one Thane to the other.

“That is pretty simple,” Gillette said. “Roark must deliver Darcy and me as kidnapped children to the old volcano... It is after we do that where my plan gets a little fuzzy.”

“Gilly is right,” Darcy said. “We cannot free the princess without getting on the inside. We can shackle ourselves and conceal a key in our boots, maybe even a throwing knife or two.”

“I don’t like it,” the lieutenant replied. “It places you in danger, and neither the wolves nor I can get to you to help.”

“We knew what we were signing on for when we accepted this assignment from King Cephlan. His daughter is ten years old and probably scared to death right now. The sooner we get there, the quicker we can help set her free.”

“What have you learned from the other kidnapped victims that have been returned to their families?” Gillette asked.

“Not very much,” the lieutenant replied. “They were all so traumatized, I’m not sure we can place much faith in what they have said... Mostly something about monsters and an old crone, but their human captors wore masks while around them. All of them were specific about that. The rest is just a jumbled-up mess. Remember, these are just young children and very impressionable.”

It was late in the afternoon when Roark lead them through the narrow pass that approached the old volcano. The rolling hills adjoining the inactive fissure had begun to regenerate new growth since the last eruption. All the forest that had once been here had been burned away. Even the charred remains of the once mighty forest were almost completely filled in by a dense covering of thick brush and new saplings. Gillette and Darcy followed Lieutenant Bloomsfell and Roark, with the Dire-Wolves running at their side. The narrow path they were following ended in an open area fifty yards in diameter where nothing grew. In the middle of the open area was an ancient bell. On the far side of the bell was the black opening to a cavern or tunnel.

“We need to stop here,” Roark said. “If you will shackle the children, I will take them to the bell and give the signal. After that, I leave the area as quickly as possible.”

Gillette dismounted and began making a bundle, using a short piece of leather that contained his bow, quiver, throwing knives, and back sword. Darcy quickly did likewise. They concealed these bundles just off the roadbed after making sure the Dire-Wolves noticed their placement. Lastly, they took the shackles provided by Roark and fastened one end around their right wrists. They opened the

opposite shackle, but left it hanging loose. Darcy placed the small key inside her left boot. “We decided to leave our weapons here, just in case we are searched,” Darcy said.

“The wolves will stay here in case we need them,” Gillette said as he stroked his sleek pony.

“We can contact them for a league empathically in case something goes wrong or we need help.”

“After Roark secures you to the bell and gives the signal, he and I will make camp out of line of sight from any traffic in the last opening we passed a half mile back.” Darcy nodded to the lieutenant and both she and Gillette followed Roark forward into the opening.

The huge bell was much taller than either of the Thanes. Around the base of the huge iron and brass bell, a slack chain had been molded with both ends secured against the heavy base of the structure. Gillette placed the open loop of his shackle under the chain and then snapped the clasp around his left wrist. He watched as Darcy performed the same feat and nodded to him when the shackle closed. The slack in the chain and their handcuffs gave them some slight freedom of movement and both of them pulled the hoods on their parkas over their heads. Gillette nodded to Roark and the tall man rang the huge bell three times. Without hesitating a second longer than necessary, Roark grabbed the reins to their ponies and mounted his large horse. With just a nod of his head, he turned and departed the circular opening.

After examining as much of the huge bell as she could see, Darcy asked, “Do you think we will have to wait very long?” The thought was no more than out of her mouth, when they could hear the rattling of chains and the sounds of creaking wood coming from the entrance to the open cavern. The shadows created by the mountain made seeing inside the opening impossible, but there was no question of where the sounds were coming from.

“Apparently not,” Gillette said as both he and Darcy turned to face the black opening in the side of the mountain. The flickering of a light inside the cave told them someone or something was coming

towards them. They both stood in anticipation and were shocked when an old woman wearing a hood and walking with the aid of a cane, along with two Ruks, emerged from the black opening.

Darcy and Gillette had seen and fought with Ruks many times in the last two wars with the Priory of Karshee, but only once had they discovered them this far north before. “How did they get here?” Darcy whispered. Gillette did not respond, but instead shook his head that he did not have any idea.

“Two more little birds for my care and keeping,” the old crone said as she approached them. Her weathered features and stringy blond hair told of someone who had lived a difficult life most of her years. She said something in the guttural tongue of the Ruks and quickly the two Thaners were released from their shackles, but a large Ruk hand stayed on each of their small shoulders. “If you behave, you will not be handcuffed. If you misbehave, you will be punished severely. Does each of you understand?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Darcy replied.

Gillette quickly followed suit, “Yes, Ma’am.”

“My new birds even have good manners... Well, you will be a welcomed addition to our cage, and you can teach the others something about minding their elders... Go with these two back into the cave. There is no escape from here, so bide you time wisely and wait until your ransom is paid.” With a sharp guttural command, the Ruk beside Gillette pushed him slightly to get moving. Darcy quickly stepped up beside him, the two five-foot-tall creatures following along behind them.

The first twenty yards inside the cavern were dark, but as their eyes adjusted to the darkness, Gillette could see smokeless torches lined the wall to his left beginning about forty yards into the cave. They followed the well-worn pathway, staying to the left next to the stone wall. After a hundred yards, the right side of their pathway opened up into a lake, but, the liquid filling at the opening looked more like quicksand. Occasionally noxious gases bubbled to the top and had the distinct aroma of rotten eggs.

After another fifty yards, they encountered a thirty-foot wooden bridge that had been erected to replace a long section of the stone pathway that had crumbled into the bubbling lake. The wood on the bridge looked old and weathered. When they reached the other side, Gillette saw the large winch and chain system that raised and lowered the bridge. The two chains ran through a pair of large davits placed into the thirty-foot ceiling of the cavern and then back to the opposite end of the wooden structure.

A hundred yards from the end of the overpass, the cavern opened into the bowl of the ancient volcano. Two more Ruk guards stood outside the opening. Several more Ruks were watching half a dozen children who sat on a house sized pile of rocks in the very center of the crater. Glancing quickly around, Gillette could see where steam vented from several fissures around the basin and where at least one small pond was formed by the condensing water. In the middle of the small pool was a little island that remained dry as the cooling water ran off on the far side.

At their arrival, the Ruks watching the children began herding them towards an opening on the left where an open chain and metal gate had been swung to one side. Without incident, the children all entered the opening; Gillette and Darcy were shoved in behind them as the bar filled gate was closed and locked.

Their cell was about thirty yards deep and half that wide. As his eyes began to become accustomed to the darkness, Gillette could see that two wall sconces with smokeless torches provided some ambient lighting. Arranged around their cell were cots for over a dozen prisoners. Gillette ignored the stares from the children and walked to the back of the cell before returning to the iron gate, checking how it was pinned and locked. When he turned around, he found that Darcy had removed the hood from her head, revealing her features. Gillette followed her example and looked around the stone room. There were four girls and two boys all ranging from six to twelve years in age. A tall brown-haired girl immediately stepped forward and looked at them closely.

“You’re not children,” the pretty young girl of about ten said.

“Princess Leanne?” Darcy asked.

The young girl placed her finger against her lips but nodded her head in acknowledgement.

“Everyone here knows,” she said. “But we have kept it from our captors... Who are you two?”

“I am Darcy, and this is my husband Gillette Farrow. We are Thanes and as you can tell, we are not from around here.”

“How many humans are there among the guards?” Gillette asked.

“Only the old crone,” Leanne answered. “The rest are those monsters, with their long arms and pointy teeth.”

“They are called Ruks,” Gillette answered.

“They are not to be trifled with,” Leanne said. “They obey every command from the crone without question. I’ve seen them break the arms of two prisoners since I’ve been here, but the others have seen worse.”

“We are getting out of here tomorrow morning,” Darcy said. “What time do they let you out of this cell?”

“A half hour after first light,” Leanne answered. “We have breakfast and then can walk around the opening of the crater for a few hours. Mostly we all sit on that pile of rocks and try to keep each other’s spirits up, but the bell tunnel is always guarded by two of the monsters.”

“What you call monsters, are Ruks,” Darcy began again. “Just to be clear, they are a creation of the dark lord of the southern continent and were thought to be all but extinct after two devastating wars. Eight years ago, Gillette and our traveling companions had an encounter with some here in Fennar. I expect if we could communicate with them, we would discover this dozen or so that keep you captive

here, date back to that time. We will probably never discover how they came to be in the employ of these murders and kidnappers.”

Just as Leanne had said, their cell was unlocked a half hour after first light and the prisoners were given the freedom of the old crater. Breakfast consisted of a pot of hot porridge. As Gillette filled his bowl and joined Darcy and the others sitting on the rock pile, a large black bird lit in the middle of the compound with a message tied to its leg. When the old crone approached it, the bird cackled and flew up to sit on her outstretched forearm.

“That isn’t good news,” Darcy said. “Let’s be ready for anything,” she whispered to Gillette.

“The wolves are ready,” Gillette answered, “just waiting for our signal.”

The pair didn’t have to wait long before one of the Ruks approached them, a cudgel already in his hand. With its free hand, the ugly creature pointed to each of them and motioned for the Thanes to follow him. Rising to her feet, Darcy looked Leanne in the eye and said, “When the fighting begins, get all of the children back onto that small island made by the condensing water. It is only ankle deep, but you will be safe there from the Ruks.” The pretty young girl acknowledged with a slight nod of her head.

The lone Ruk lead them to one of the numerous caves that opened onto the basin of the old crater. It stopped at the opening and motioned for them to go inside. The Thanes looked at each other, but did not see options, so they walked past the Ruk guard and into the large alcove. They quickly discovered this was the living quarters for the crone, complete with a bed, dresser, and a desk. Comfortably seated behind the desk was the old woman herself. With the hood pulled back, her head was almost bald. With a loving finger, she stroked the breast of the large black bird roosting on the right side of her desk. In her right hand, she held a piece of parchment closer to the oil lamp.

“Remove your hoods,” the old crone said in a most commanding voice. “I have a note here that says you are imposters and not children at all.” As Gillette swept his hood back, he noticed that another of the Ruks had joined their guide. The two of them barred any escape from the alcove.

As Darcy removed her hood, she placed both hands on her hips and locked the old woman in her raptor like gaze. “We are Thanes,” Darcy said, anticipating the crone’s first question. “And, we are here to free the children, and kill you and your company of Ruks.”

“Are you now?” the crone almost laughed. “Not that it matters, but where are Thanes from and are you full grown?” the old woman asked.

“We are from the small country of Baldor,” Darcy replied. “It is located about a hundred leagues south of here... My husband Gillette and I are twenty-five years old, and yes, we are full grown. Now, we have answered your questions, would you do the same for us?” The old woman responded with a conciliatory nod of her head. “How did you come to be in the company of these Ruks?”

“So, you know what they are. The children prefer to call them monsters... Fair enough, you answered my questions; I’ll tell you my brief story. I came to this continent almost seven years ago in the company of these creatures. I was a sergeant in the army of Karshee. My command was all but wiped out during the war, but me and a dozen of the Ruks you have met, took sanctuary in these deserted mountains. Along the way we met a remarkable person, who instead of destroying us, took us into his employ.”

“The Raven,” Gillette said, speaking up for the first time.

Once again, the old crone nodded her head. “A most profitable employment, I might add. We live here in relative safety. Every now and then we have to cut off a finger or ear, but the Ruks enjoy that part anyway... We’ve never had to kill anyone, until now... The note I just received says that I am to kill both of you immediately.”

Darcy leaped for the oil lamp the crone used for light in her quarters and grabbed it by the metal carrying lever. Swinging the glass lantern over her head, she swung it down with all her might directly at the old woman. The former sergeant dodged to the left and the lantern smashed against the stone wall in a ball of flames. She and Gillette turned and faced the two Ruk guards behind them. With her left hand, she removed the medallion from her tunic and placed her right hand on Gillette's shoulder. In an instant, they both vanished. A look of disbelief flooded the eyes and faces of the two creatures. As if awaking from a dream, one of them ran to help the old woman, who had leaped to the other side of the room. Almost as an afterthought, the other one smashed his cudgel into the place the Thanos had been standing, but nothing was there.

Once outside the alcove and on the floor of the crater, Gillette allowed himself to become visible for just an instant. By waving his hands in the air, he drew the attention of Leanne and the children still seated on the rock formation in the middle of the crater. She quickly understood what he wanted and began shepherding the children towards the safety of the condensation pool. Darcy quickly touched his shoulder again and the pair was once again invisible. Behind them the crone was screaming orders in the guttural Ruk tongue. They tiptoed quietly between the two Ruk sentries guarding the entrance to the bell cavern and once again entered the only escape route from the old volcano.

After pausing to allow their eyes to adjust to the darkness, they ran another hundred yards, where they came to the bridge and its' raising and lowering mechanism. The raised wooden bridge sat at about a forty-five-degree angle, its far end almost touching the stalactite ceiling of the cavern. Glancing around the left side of the bridge, Darcy could see both Barvella and Vallyden waiting patiently on the other side of the expanse. "I hope the two of us are strong enough to operate the lowering gears," Darcy said.

“I just hope we can get it down, before those two Ruks are on top of us,” Gillette replied. “Are you ready?”

Darcy nodded her head and followed Gillette’s lead as he showed her where to place her hands on the spokes of the four-foot wheel that powered the winch system. Gillette pushed upward slightly to take the tension from the chain and flipped the latching lever with his other hand. Slowly and steadily he and Darcy began to turn the wheel and lower the bridge. The double chain passing through the davits in the ceiling made a terrible racket in the confined space of the cave. Darcy kept looking to her right to see if the activity and noise had set off any alarms back in the crater. Not surprisingly, the outline of a Ruk appeared limned by the light from the large opening.

“We’ve got company,” Darcy whispered as she put almost all her strength into operating the wheel.

“Lean against me and concentrate on making us invisible, but keep helping me with the wheel,” Gillette said, the strain evident in his voice. “If the guard does not see us, it will at least confuse him for a bit.”

Darcy glanced to her right and could see both Ruk guards jogging towards them. Looking to the left she could see the end of the bridge was about ten feet off the ground and still descending. “It is going to be close,” she said between clinched teeth.

“Keep turning the wheel, but keep your concentration up,” Gillette whispered back. “Barvella, I need one of you before the bridge is fully lowered.”

I’m coming.

With that the huge gray wolf backed up ten paces and watched as her larger and darker gray partner positioned himself. With three quick strides, she landed on Vallyden’s broad back and sprang

upward pushing hard with her powerful hind legs. She easily made the lip of the lowering bridge, now eight feet above the path.

Get down.

With his left-hand Gillette flipped the restraining latch to stop the wheel from turning. With his right hand, he pulled Darcy down to the ground beside him as the huge wolf sprang over them. Her impact with the first Ruk knocked the creature from the path and into the boiling liquid of the lake. Before its partner could react, she had him by the throat. With a violent shake of her head, both Gillette and Darcy could hear the creature's neck break.

"Thank you, Barvella," Gillette said. "Darcy, let's get the bridge completely down." Both resumed turning the large wheel and very quickly the old wooden structure came to rest on the far side of the expanse. The first to cross was Vallyden carrying both bundles the Thanos had prepared. With practiced precision, Gillette quickly armed himself with his weapons and then he grabbed Barvella about the neck and shoulders to thank her for saving them. In wolf fashion, he received a lick on the cheek in response.

"Are you ready?" Gillette asked turning to Darcy who was just stringing her longbow after hugging Vallyden for a long few moments in thanks.

"Yes," she replied, "there should be ten of them and the crone left, let's go and finish this."

When Gillette emerged from the tunnel, he discovered the crone had organized her remaining Ruks into a defensive formation and had them moving towards the children. One had been too late in joining the group, and Barvella was standing over his broken and dead body viciously showing her impressive teeth at the others. Vallyden slowly stalked to the left side of the hastily arranged square. The crone screamed orders in the Ruk tongue, but her intentions were obvious; she intended on getting to the captives. "Get to the children," Gillette yelled. "The wolves and I will slow them up."

Darcy nodded to him, touched her medallion with her left hand, and felt the warm glow that always accompanied her becoming invisible. She sprinted with all the might her short legs would allow, and thanks to the wolves, was able to outdistance the crone and her squad of Ruks to the small island harboring the children. When she suddenly reappeared, Leanne and the others jumped with a loud explanation. "Where did you come from?" the slender girl asked, her eyes the size of saucers.

"I'll explain it to you in a bit, right now I need to protect you from the crone. The Ruks won't cross this water, but she will." Darcy smoothly returned her sword to its back scabbard, and then drew and knocked an arrow from her quiver. In front of her the Ruk party eased towards them, always weary of the Dire-Wolves. Darcy wondered why Gillette had not shot, but suddenly understood his plan. With the help of Barvella and Vallyden, he wanted to get the crone and her nine Ruks in a crossfire between them.

The crone recognized her mistake, but it was too late. Gillette drew and shot twice in almost as many heartbeats. Two of the Ruks fell dead, each with an arrow piercing an eye. Darcy put her first arrow into the base of a Ruks neck. It collapsed in a heap causing two of its partners to trip. The wolves were just a blur as they charged in to attack those lying prone on the crater floor. Another Ruk raised a tulwar to strike Vallyden; but, two arrows hit him in the head at almost the same instant.

The crone, now carrying a tulwar from one of her dead Ruks, looked at Darcy and let out a scream. Darcy tossed her longbow aside and pulled her backsword in one smooth stoke. She met the old woman on the crone's side of the condensing water. The crone made the classic mistake all humans do when engaging someone three and one-half feet tall. They are terminally overconfident. Darcy parried her first strike to the side and viciously wounded her across the back of her right leg as she passed. With anger etched across her face, the old woman put all the strength into her second riposte, but once again the lightning fast Thane was not there when the strike arrived. With almost contemptible ease, Darcy

plunged her sword into the old woman's heart. She ripped it away as the old crone fell to the crater's floor. She made eye contact with Gillette, but it was quickly apparent the remaining Ruks had been dispatched.

Darcy motioned for the children that it was safe to leave their tiny island in the middle of the condensation pool, while Gillette supervised the stacking of the dead out into the floor of the crater. The wolves excelled at this exercise and simply saw this as another game to play. "Those are the largest wolves I have ever seen," Leanne said as she took turns petting first one and then the other.

"They are native to the southern continent in a country called Abyssalia," Gillette said. "With every one of the Ruks accounted for, I am going to have them deposit the dead in the bubbling lake inside the bell tunnel... If you or the other children have any belongings here, get them. We will be moving in less than an hour."

Leanne smiled at her rescuer and replied, "Yes, Sir, but I have questions. Why did you make us get on that small island where the water runs away from the crater and how can Darcy make herself invisible?"

"Your monsters, Ruks we call them, are afraid of water. They won't even put their big toe in it. We knew you would be safe there. Darcy carries a gold medallion that gives her the ability to become invisible. She will show it to you when we have the time."

With the wolves helping, the two Thanos and their Wards safely escorted the six children across the stone and bridge causeway in the tunnel and out to the old bell. Gillette asked both young boys to help him and they delighted in ringing the old bell a half-dozen times. In less than ten minutes, Lieutenant Ellie Bloomsfell rode up to them leading Roark's tall horse and their two ponies by the reins.

"What happened to Roark?" Darcy asked as the tall stately lieutenant dismounted and greeted each of the children.

“I felt sorry for him and removed his shackles. He tried to escape this morning and I killed him. We will pass his grave on the way back to the crossroads. Where did you get the bird?”

“He arrived this morning with a message for the crone. I picked him up in her quarters. I’m going to return him to his home.”

“Let’s put the largest two children on Roark’s horse and the others on the ponies. Darcy and I will ride the Dire-Wolves,” Gillette said. Everyone agreed except the boys who both wanted to ride on the wolves. Darcy diffused this disagreement by promising all of them a wolf ride when they reached the safety of the inn. They passed Roark’s grave in the first opening they encountered on the journey back to the crossroads. When the group arrived at the junction, and the black bird recognized his home, he left Darcy’s arm and flew to his coop behind the stable. Two hours after leaving the old volcano, they were walking into the almost vacant common room of the large inn.

Seated next to the fire in the company of his escort of six men at arms was King Cephlan of Fennar. The short balding man scooped up Leanne as she flew into his outstretched arms. The Princess quickly composed herself and introduced each of the children to her father, the King. Cephlan waved Blythe over with one hand. “Your Majesty,” Blythe said, wiping his hands on the towel he carried over one shoulder.

“Food and drink for the children and their gallant rescuers, innkeeper,” the King said with a big smile. Motioning the Thanes and the lieutenant over with one hand the King said, “How can I thank each of you for saving my daughter, the future queen of our nation?”

When no one answered him, Cephlan continued. “Lieutenant, you are now a Captain. Gillette and Darcy, I cannot promote you, but I can see that you return to Baldor with a large pouch of gold each and the eternal thanks from our nation. The three of you have single handedly put this nest of vipers out of business.”

“Not quite, Your Majesty,” Darcy said. “The innkeeper, Blythe is an integral part of this operation and those managing the stables and outpost are complicit, but to a lesser degree.” There was a brief scuffle as two of the men at arms grabbed the fat innkeeper.

“We still have not discovered the mastermind behind this plan,” Ellie said. “We learned from Roark that it is a man called ‘The Raven’ in the capital. But neither he nor Blythe knew the identity of this man.” A brief but intense period of questioning verified exactly what the lieutenant said was true. Blythe identified those in the stable and outpost who helped his cause but swore he had never met the ringleader called ‘The Raven.’

The kitchen staff served a large feast, and everyone felt much refreshed with a good meal under their belts. “So, we have wiped out the nest of vipers, but have not killed their leader,” Cephlan said sadly. “We still don’t know who this ‘Raven’ is, and he is the lynchpin for this whole operation.” No one took notice as the Dire-Wolves pushed the big door to the common room open and walked up beside the oval table they all shared by the fire.

“I know who the ‘Raven’ is,” Darcy said so quietly that it almost startled those seated at the table.

You could have heard a pin drop in the large common room and the only sound was the crackling of the fire coming from the hearth. With one hand, she removed her medallion from over her head and handed it to the Princess. “Leanne, after you have examined my medallion, please pass it to Ellie.” The future queen examined both sides of the pendant for a few long minutes and then handed it to blond officer. As the medallion touched her open hand, she screamed and dropped the pendant to the wooden table.”

“The Raven is Lieutenant Bloomsfell,” the young Thane said calmly, sitting on the pillows provided for both her and Gillette.

“Darcy, how can you possibly think it is me?” the Lieutenant all but yelled at her, still shaking her hand where it had been burned. “I have been right beside both you and Gillette during this whole operation. Under the Kings orders, I even planned most of it.”

“Gillette, when we apprehended Roark and planned to disguise ourselves as children, she told us to be careful because she couldn’t get to us to help... How could she possibly know that, unless she had been to the tunnel and the crater before?”

“Secondly, she told us she felt sorry for Roark and removed his shackles; but later he tried to escape, and she killed him. King Cephan, if you will dispatch several riders to the old volcano, you will find a grave a half mile before you reach the bell. In that grave will be a dead man, with his hands shackled together.” Darcy glanced at the lieutenant, but the expression on her face never changed.

“Roark must have put the clues together enough that he guessed or figured out who Ellie really was, and she killed him for it, probably when he took her to get the bird, she needed to send a message to the crone. One of the properties of the medallion I carry is that it cannot be handled by an evil person. That is why Leanne could hold it and Ellie cannot. And, lastly I have these.” Darcy pulled two pieces of parchment from the pocket of her tunic.

“While masquerading as a young child, Ellie gave me writing lessons each evening for the benefit of the maids and innkeeper. This is the practice sheet she did for me in her very elegant hand. This other document arrived by bird this morning in the crater. It is an order from the ‘Raven’ to the old crone alerting her that we were not children and for us to be killed immediately. If you will look closely, Your Majesty, you will see that the handwritings are identical.”

The King examined both documents for long minutes and then turned to the lieutenant. “Ellie, is this true?”

The lieutenant glanced from Darcy and back to Gillette, before turning to address the King.

“Yes,” she said and started to rise to her feet, but her arms were pinned by the Dire-Wolves on each side of her. “I am your niece, Cephlan. If Leanne happened to die in a failed kidnapping attempt and you had no more children, one day I would be Queen of Fennar. You could not possibly expect me to live comfortably on the salary you pay your junior officers, so I came up with this plan to make my living conditions better. When Leanne just fell out of the sky into my web, I suddenly had the big prize within my grasp.”

“Place the lieutenant in chains,” the King said with a sad look etched across his face.

As two men at arms secured Lieutenant Bloomsfell, Darcy stepped up on the table and removed the officer’s sword from its scabbard and retrieved her medallion. “You know I could have taken you?” the lieutenant said with spite and hate dripping from every word.

“You forget that I have seen you practice in the early mornings we’ve been together,” Darcy said. “Go to the gallows with your mind at ease, Miss Ellie... You’re not even close... Come on, Gillette, we promised the children a wolf ride.”

Once they accompanied the Dire-Wolves outside of the inn, Gillette charged over and scooped her up in his arms. “So, you have been practicing early when I am still asleep, have you?”

“You are usually snoring, like a pig I might add. And yes, I am sick most mornings and practicing takes my mind away from my stomach.”

“You have morning sickness that means you’re ...”

“That means we are going to have someone to leave this medallion to, so it is time for you to take me home, Gillette Farrow.”