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Notice on Potential Content

While I have never desired to make my books graphic, in an attempt to write a book that is realistic and authentic, I have naturally included several elements which might potentially turn some people off. I know what it's like to read a book that is darker than I had wished for, so I want to be perfectly open with you about anything that might be disturbing in this book (even though I doubt most readers will find it so). There are no spoilers in this section, so don't worry, but here is a list of things that might be potentially disturbing.

For language, there is one instance of the word 'blast' in chapter 7 and the same word used as an adjective in chapter 6.

For violence, this entire book takes place in the context of a siege. There is therefore much combat in this book. I do not believe in reveling in the details of gore, but I do believe it is necessary to include relevant descriptions of war scenes for realism and to in some degree simulate the emotion of the event. There will doubtless be some who would say that I have gone too far, but I do not believe that most even conservative readers will think so. For those who generally enjoy action novels and who are not turned off by historical accounts of combat, I do not foresee any issue with this book.

May your reading always be pleasurable!

—Daeus

Chapter 1

*It is possible to be secure in convictions, but never in body.
The world has forgotten this principle. It once knew it, but it has
abandoned the idea.
Where this blood-bought truth has been forgotten, it must be regained...*

Civil uncertainty and universal suspense gripped the nations. For two years, the stouthearted heroes of Lord Fairwin had been abroad, fighting under his leadership in the cause of the united sovereign states of the Brinean lands. It was a time of sacrifice—a time when half the men were abroad with their hearts at home and half the women at home with their hearts abroad. It was a time when men saw mighty things near at hand, but fear always lurked behind them like a shadow.

In the state of Rondinborough, the citizens hoped and feared like all the rest, but their lives were carefree by comparison. Carefree, that is, until the twelfth of March.

They lived like all others with a feeling of security—they fixed their eyes on the skies or the fertile ground, but rarely on the dark woods. They imagined walls around them where there were none—guards posted where no guards had stood for ages. There came a day though when they woke up to find that an intruder had entered their tent.

The men of Rondinborough placed their hope in two men. One they loved, the other less so. He whom they loved was Sir Aldren. Through countless lands, tales were told of his Titan's strength, command in battle, rashness of arms, and a will that was indomitable. None could equal him save Lord Fairwin himself. If Sir Aldren's name were only mentioned, a farmer's eyes would spark, the corners of his lips would curl, and he would be filled with a fresh vigor.

Yet for a time, the citizens of Rondinborough were somber, for a great illness had restrained Aldren and he was not able to join in the war. Their spirits soared however when he regained his feet. In only a few days he would be fully recovered.

That other whom they trusted in, the Earl of Galldenborough, evoked no cheer when mentioned. Few spoke ill of him—most said his name with reverence—but he had declined to join in the war with the other Brinean

lands in their alliance and was therefore a feeble hero in their eyes.

While others marched to war, he remained in his castle. Others died. He feasted. Many pronounced him an uncaring man, but in their imaginations, he was still their highest wall of protection. He was the hen whose wing surrounded them. He ruled a kingdom twice the size of Rondinborough, and though he had not joined in the war, none doubted that he would come to their aid if needed, for there were ancient ties between the families of the earl and the Fairwins.

And so with him they loved and him who ruled armies (if nothing else could be said of him) the inhabitants of Rondinborough rested without a care, save for those loved ones gone to war.

But the twelfth of March came. It was without warning, without precedent, and it crushed their securities.

In the morning, ere the sun had fully risen, a rider galloped in a blizzard of haste through the gates of Rondinburg, the one and only city of Rondinborough. Careworn lines etched his face and his horse reeled like a drunkard. *A little farther*, was his thought, and he urged his horse on.

He careened through the streets, blinking to keep awake. A tiny girl, a shriveled flower in her hand, walked out in front of him and he almost rammed her, but the child was pulled away just in time. Cries from the citizens bade him watch his course. He pursed his lips, but kept his gaze before him and gave not a sign of acknowledgment.

The Fairwin palace loomed out of the cityscape like a pearl on a necklace. He guided his horse to its marble steps.

Still alive. He had made it. He leaped from his horse and stumbled to catch his footing. Pain shot through his back and his numb legs threatened to give way for a moment. He chided them with guttural sounds and bounded up the steps two at a time. Casting a look behind him, he saw his horse collapse on its haunches and tremble.

"Ho! What haste?" called a voice from above.

Ignoring the voice for a moment, the rider bounded up the last few steps and halted breathless. Looking up, he saw a nobleman standing before him.

The man looked at him with his jaw set and his calm, steely eyes focused and waiting. He had a slightly pointed beard and a tunic of rich soft blue embroidered with gold. The messenger took his hand in both of his and shook it. "A message, sir! Urgent. For lady Fairwin. Can you— show me...?"

The nobleman clasped his hand firmly in return. A thin smile curled at the edges of his lips and he stood back. "My every thought is for Rondinborough, sir. Come. I will show you the way." He turned on his heel and the rider followed.

The rider was exhausted. Though one thought consumed him, the scenery captivated him. It stormed his mind and pushed the thought away for a short lapse of bliss.

The parts of the palace he passed through were formed of open porticos and verandas suitable to the moderate climate. They were glossed in sunshine and ornamented with broad lavish landscapes. There were sparkling fountains both inside and out, cascading water, and glimmering pools. Around the pools were fruit trees and others of rare beauty—trees with huge oblong leaves, cupped white flowers, pale blue flowers, silver bark, and countless other variations. His eyes sparkled in wide-eyed wonder, but he shivered though the air was not cold.

The gardens showed the native taste of beauty he had seen on his ride in, but nowhere so sublime. He wished they could be less sublime, less dear, less easy to cherish. He wished it with more passion than he had wished hardly anything in his life.

They entered enclosed hallways and the rider noticed that his heart rate had slowed. He took one moment to examine himself and, with a quick compression of his lips, dusted himself as best he could. He then looked around and the thought entered him, *Have I entered paradise? But no. Alas! It may not remain a paradise for long.*

They reached an archway with figures of women and children carved upon it so real they seemed as if they might walk or dance. Past the archway, the space expanded into a hall covered with tapestries and flooded with light from the high arching windows on either side. Two knights guarded its entrance. "But a brief moment," said the messenger's guide, taking a step back to stand next to him. The messenger nodded and his guide left him and entered the hall.

The rider began to look about him.

A guard coughed, displaying a casual smile. "A messenger, I presume?"

The rider started. "What?" He rubbed nervous fingers together. "Oh... yes. I come from the Thane of Dorth."

The guard cast his companion a look. "The Thane of Dorth? Our lady will be glad for any news from him." The rider blushed and stammered

something under his breath, but the guard did not notice. The guard pointed to a mural covering the wall beside them. "The roots of the tree grow deep."

The messenger studied the painting with fresh eyes, wondering what tree was meant. After a time, he concluded the guard used a metaphor to refer to the relations between Rondinborough and Dorth. The room depicted on the mural was the very one he waited to enter. Centered on the mural was a long table and a feast was spread upon it. The court of Rondinborough sat around it with the lord and lady at the head. The lord was standing with an outstretched arm to a man entering the hall. It was a nobleman with his train who received the welcome. The messenger knew him as Othniel the Younger, ancient founder of Dorth.

A voice awakened his senses. "You may enter, sir." It was the nobleman who had guided him. His lips were held firmly together in a grave expression, but his eyes followed the messenger with interest.

The messenger bowed and passed through the arch. He was led down a carpeted walkway, passing a score of guards, all in dazzling steel and colorful raiment. The two stopped some thirty feet from the extremity of the hall and the nobleman bowed low. Before them were two thrones. The left empty—a body without a spirit—but in the right sat a lady, her eyes soft and blue, full of merriment, but also wisdom. From her shoulders fell a long gown of shining colors fixed with embroidered patterns that had the vivacity of dance even though they were inanimate. Her expression was fair and calm. She remained still till the nobleman had risen, then stretched out her hand to him. "Welcome, Sestin. What do you wish?"

The man referred to motioned to the messenger. "Lady Fairwin," he said, speaking in a ringing tone, "a messenger has arrived. He claims his news is urgent."

The lady's face became clouded for the briefness of a second, then she smiled and stretched her hand toward the messenger. "I welcome you to the realm of Rondinborough. Who sends you, friend? Tell us your name."

The messenger felt a heavy burden of guilt at this moment and wished to cast himself at the lady's feet and tell her only of triumphs, some good message, a kind word. He bowed. "I am Galther, my lady. My lord who sends the message is the Thane of Dorth."

The lady's eyes danced in the sparkling light at which the messenger cringed. "Dorth?" she asked, then added, "you may deliver the letter now. I will read it."

The nobleman, Sestin, reached out his hand with a respectful nod and took the letter which Galther pulled from a satchel at his side. Sestin walked it forward to the lady, then stepped back, waiting with the riveting, unmoving attention of his eyes, but perfect silence.

"It has been too long since I have seen this seal," said Lady Fairwin, unfolding it.

Galther bit his lip.

She read it. At first she read it leisurely, then she drew the paper in closer to her and squinted at it. As she read, the color faded from her face like snow that melts under a warm noon sky. Sestin silently stroked his beard and with every moment his brows drew closer together—two antagonists doomed to meet.

The lady finished. She stared into empty space and laid the letter down. When it rested on the arm of her chair, the air seemed to grow heavy and Galther fumbled with his fingers, becoming suddenly interested in a guard's armor to his right.

"What news, my lady?" asked Sestin, his fingers involuntarily curling into fists.

"I...I will..." She stalled. "I will read it to you." For a moment, her eyes caught Galther's. He shut them as a tremor ran through his body, looked elsewhere, and muttered he didn't know what. Lady Fairwin raised the letter.

By the Thane of Dorth. To the most excellent Lady Fairwin in her husband's absence,

Greetings. I write to you with greatest haste, knowing what importance its quick delivery necessitates. I hope it has not arrived too late. For some months now, my lord, the Earl of Galldenbourough, has made secret preparations for war. It was two weeks from the day I write this that he first called for the mustering of troops. I thought at first that he intended to join in the general cause, so I sent him my required troops, intending to join him with more when I was able to come in person. Alas though! His intention is not to join in the alliance, but to invade Rondinborough. Even as you read this, he will be marching southward toward your state.

It was my strong desire to come to your aid with my remaining men, but if I had done so, I would have incited the wrath of my lord and left my own

people defenseless. I can only offer you my withdrawal from this war entirely and but one other gift.

The messenger I have sent you is a man skilled in all things mechanical and of arts of uncommon fires you may find useful in your struggle. He is one of my own household, but keep him for the time being.

I am confident you will know both the way and manner of action in this time of trouble. It has always been that the people of Rondonborough have only grown stronger with every trial they face, and I hope with a great hope that Rondonburg may withstand this storm. There may be many sorrows, but I trust and know that Right will not utterly perish from the earth.

With my undying friendship,

Edward, Thane of Dorth

Chapter 2

The earl's treachery was known in every corner of the realm before the sun could reach its apex. It set bells ringing, smithies clanging, and villagers flooding in from every corner of Rondinborough to the sanctuary of their only city, Rondinburg. The noise of their entrance was like the rumble of a thousand cattle.

In the armories, captains gathered men and boys, fitting them with arms and armor and organizing them into divisions. The captains met at the conclusion and there was an awkward pause. They looked at the scanty ranks of eager faces and said nothing.

Lady Fairwin led the preparations and in her occupation she let the evening meal slip by. As the sun set though, she collapsed in her throne to rest for a moment. Even here though, someone occasionally scurried about, distracting her. She called to a page running by and the lad leaped to attention. She raised a weary hand to him. "Go," she said, "call Sir Aldren and Sestin to me." The page scurried away, his feet pattering in quick rhythmic beats and his short, rusty-golden hair swaying in the breeze from his own trot.

With a sigh, Lady Fairwin collapsed back. She basked in the silence of the room. Two years Lord Fairwin had been gone. Two years she had ruled alone. She had learned much. She had not learned enough.

She started as her eyes rested on a slender chain of gold fastened round her wrist which was embedded with rubies. With a swift motion, she yanked it off, holding it before her with wide, startled eyes. What she held was a ceremonial gift from the earl. Slowly, she let it slip through her fingers till it fell to the floor. In the slightest whisper, she said, "There now, I claim nothing of yours."

Her thoughts naturally turned toward the earl and there she was troubled in more ways than one. She had visited him when they were both children. He had shown her his own personal garden, tucked away in a hidden nook of the castle grounds—a secret all his own. He had smiled. He was sincere. Now, he would attack her people.

Footsteps echoed in the vaulted hall and Lady Fairwin looked up to see Sestin enter. Behind him came Sir Aldren with his squire, Destin. Sestin walked with slow strides, his head bowed and pondering, Sir Aldren with

his head high and grim and propping himself on Destin's shoulder. The squire pulled a chair for his master and the knight sank into it, then cast his eyes about the room with a loftiness far above his weakened state. They came to rest on the lady and he nodded with an air of respect.

Sestin remained standing. His eyes had a firm unmoving expression. "You called, my lady."

Lady Fairwin took a deep breath and began to organize her thoughts, found them too numerous, and forced herself to relax. "Friends," she began slowly, drawing herself more erect, "you know the threat that hangs over our city. It will descend on us tomorrow or the day after. I do not know of battles, but I know that we are unprepared. I ask your counsel. What opening is there in this that I do not see?"

She had hoped for a ready reply, but both counselors sank into silence. Sestin's face was an impenetrable wall of marble—a quiet expression, but deceptively quiet because of the conviction that lay behind it. As for Aldren, his lips twisted downward. Though there was nothing fierce in it, it was a displeasure one would have feared to see aroused in the setting of a battle. Sir Aldren bent his head lower with his chin rested in his hand like a philosopher studying the universe. "My lady..." He cleared his voice and it came out richer and with a deeper solemn authority. "Our forces are indeed weak—weak in numbers. The strength of our state has departed with my lord, and those who remain with us are few and ill-trained." He braced his hands on the chair and propped himself up, looking straight into her eyes. "On our own, even I must admit we would have a desperate struggle. But there is one source of aid open to us." A thin smile curled on his lips. "I have already taken the measure to send a messenger to our lord to call him back from the war. It will be five weeks' time before he can return, but if we can hold our walls for that length, then there is hope. The forces must know of this hope. They will fight the braver for it." The slight smile disappeared from his face and he grimaced and clenched his fist. "It is only by great determination that we will endure—so long." Sir Aldren slumped forward again and rested his chin in his hand, his eyes burning with a dangerous fire.

Lady Fairwin looked at Sestin. He nodded, though not looking at her, and began to rub his brow, which was deeply furrowed. At last, he raised his eyes and began to speak, now addressing Lady Fairwin, now the knight. "Surely, Aldren," he began, gazing intently at the knight as Aldren lifted his face to return the gaze, "your forethought will prove the greatest weapon

we have in this struggle, but—” He paused, looking up at the high windows of the room, his face filled with peace, but then a tremor and he squeezed his eyes shut for a few moments before he opened them again and spoke in quieter tones. “But come. Will we last the five weeks?” He stretched an upturned palm to lady Fairwin, one brow raised, his lips pursed. “The earl is not a fool. I have known him as well as both of you. You know he understands we will send for help.” Sestin turned back to Aldren. “Your plan rests, not on Lord Fairwin in fact, but on us. Can you think the earl is oblivious of our position? Do you think he is not prepared to take us before five weeks? You are a spontaneous man, Aldren, but the earl is a calculating man.”

Lady Fairwin bit her lower lip, and Sestin turned his eyes to the floor. After a moment, he raised them, but this time his eyes were searching and hesitant. With a brush of his hand, he wiped the perspiration from his brow. He and Aldren’s gazes were locked in a firm hold. “If the earl comes fully prepared, our only hope is to fight him with a weapon he cannot expect. We must avail ourselves of the secret resources of Rondinburg. We must fight with our minds more than our arms.” He paused a moment and stared at Sir Aldren. The knight eyed him intently and gave him a nod.

Sestin coughed and proceeded with greater boldness. “There are two options I see. You will remember Galther, the servant sent to us by the Thane of Dorth. The thane informed us that this man is a master in the arts of fire and invention. I have often seen these arts to surpass those of a warrior. He should be given our best engineers and a crew for his assistance.” Sestin took a deep breath. “And then there are the secret caverns of Rondinburg.”

A wave of disgust rolled over Sir Aldren’s face. He clenched the sides of his chair, broadening his already broad shoulders. He had the same look on his face as when someone challenged him to a fight—somber, not for himself, but for his opponent—totally confident.

Sestin approached him with slow cautious steps as if he were testing out the ground before him. His voice was almost a whisper. “They are a secret, of course, but that is their strength. The earl cannot suspect them. If once our walls are taken, we could flee to these low lands and defend ourselves for any length of time. The walls of the earth cannot be broken. They are the world’s greatest castle.” He ceased, began to spread his hands, but then stopped and folded them. He waited with a rigid, expectant expression.

Lady Fairwin now turned to the knight. "Aldren?"

He had been on the edge of his seat ever since Sestin had mentioned the caverns, often starting like he would rise. He stood at once. Any weakness he had had when entering the hall was completely gone from him. He stood tall, almost looming: a whole head above Sestin. His hand grasped the hilt of his sword. "My lady," he began, but he looked at Sestin, "what Sestin says has wisdom. We must indeed fight the earl with a weapon he could never guess. But"—he paused, casting a quick glance at Lady Fairwin before turning back to Sestin—"I for one, will not go into hiding." He took a step forward. "I will tell you what it does. It turns men into cowards and morphs their hope of victory into a hope for safety. When men seek only safety, I assure you, they lose both victory and safety. Holes are for rabbits that farm hands hunt. We must put our hope in courage, for it alone can make a hopeless cause succeed."

Sestin arched one eyebrow as if to say "*only?*" and he pursed his lips.

Aldren raised his voice, now addressing Lady Fairwin. "If we must fight the Earl of Galldenborough with a secret weapon, let it be a level of courage such as the world has never seen. All men know of our courage in battle, but no man has yet faced the courage of the men of Rondinborough in defense of their own hearths. Wait and see what new ferocity will be born in these times of trouble." His right hand clenched into a fist. "They will make even the Earl of Galldenborough quail."

Lady Fairwin bit her lip and toyed with the arm of her chair, stroking it gently with her finger. She would never fully understand Aldren, but he was the greatest warrior in Rondinorough. She stopped stroking the armrest and propped herself up in her throne. "Aldren..." she began, pausing for a moment, "I will not have my people destroyed."

He took a step back, looking for a moment weak again, but then he took a step forward, raising his hand. "Did I suggest it?" His face was slightly colored. "Tomorrow come the hosts of Galldenborough, and in a short season they will return to their land defeated. Wait and see! I have never yet lost a battle, and I shall not lose one now."

Chapter 3

Sir Aldren's squire, Destin, was returning from an errand for Lady Fairwin late that night in the palace. Scattered torchlight and the glimmering moon showed the way before him. He stole quietly along without fear, savoring the night air and pondering how the darkness softened the features of the architecture. He paused when he saw a faint light at the end of a corridor as of a candle moving back and forth. He squinted and tried to discern the distant figure.

"Sestin?"

There was a distant sound of papers shuffling, then the light stood still. "Destin? Up at this hour?"

"I work all I can."

"Yes. I understand." Sestin picked the papers up again and Destin approached. By the candle's light, he could see that Sestin's eyes were strained from weariness as he studied the papers, but his lips formed a determined line.

Destin came up beside him and gazed down at the papers, smiling at the density of the notes, figures, and quick sketches that consumed each entire page. For a few moments, Sestin paced, but when he noticed Destin watching, he stopped.

"Is it for the defense, Sestin?"

The strain in Sestin's eyes diminished and his lips curved in a bittersweet smile. "Yes, for the defense. Perhaps you are not the one to tell this, but I am trying to use order and reason to rescue us."

"You would be the man for that."

Sestin rested his eyes on the ceiling. Shadows darkened the lines in his brow and around his eyes. Sestin rested one hand in the other and snuffed. "That is just it. I seem to be the only one. Your master is leading the siege. A good man—capable, I know—but caught up with fiery ideals." Something akin to a growl rumbled in Sestin's throat. "He is compulsive, likely to let his passion rule over his reason. He may be the man to lead us in a fight, but he is not the man to lead us in wisdom. If I don't wish his follies to be our downfall, I and others must take up the lead in areas he won't consider." Sestin resumed looking over his papers. "I have already had talks with Galther. There are means of defense other than a mere mass of

courage." Sestin concluded with a frown and looked up at Destin. He changed to a smile. "But I detain you. I ask your pardon."

Destin nodded, biting his lip. "Aldren is no fool though. I think he can save us."

Sestin looked long into his eyes, then turned away. "Yes, he is not a fool. Pardon me. I did not mean that. But you've really only known him for a short time, Destin. Only a short time."

Sir Aldren joined the watch early the next morning. Others sauntered about, looking casually now and then into the distance, but he rested his hands on the parapet and peered out into the great expanse of slowly brightening grey. Every outward sign of his face and body was perfectly still, but on the inside, his blood coursed with the gallop of a war horse. This was the day he would finally meet the earl in battle. For once, they would not be allies, but foes. That was what the battle came down to. Two minds in bitter opposition. Two arms wielding a thousand swords. The blood in his veins quickened and then he was senseless of it. *And here he was.*

Shouts rang in Sir Aldren's ears. Trumpets screamed. He grimaced and ignored the tumult, peering deeper into the distance, trying to number the army that was emerging from behind the bend in the road. He waited, making vigorous strokes at his beard. The sun rose and they were all in plain sight. A thousand and ten thousand pikes caught the rising sun and flashed it with a haughty glare. A thousand and ten thousand shields interlocked in a mile-long stretch like a monster of the deep covered in scales.

Men swarmed past him armed with weapons and making their way to their positions. Sir Aldren ground his fist into the parapet. "So then," he whispered, "we meet today. Let it come." He stormed off, shouting commands to everyone he saw and completing his mental plans for the defense. He met Destin on his way and motioned him. "Destin, where have you been?"

The squire saluted, a slight smile appearing on his troubled face. "With Sestin, sir. We were organizing the boys to gather stones for missiles."

"Stay with me. Many things are coming to a head including your

training.”

They walked along the parapets together. Aldren set the men in order and gave them commands. “Remember the men of old,” he shouted. “Their valor is not yet gone from the earth. It lives in you. Defend what is yours. This land is ours and not another’s!”

Sir Aldren reached the section above the main gate when Destin caught his shoulder and pointed out into the plain. “Horsemen, sir.”

There was a deep scorn in Aldren’s voice. “Ah, indeed. They will embarrass themselves with a plea for surrender.”

Three score horsemen were coming toward them with a man bearing a golden shield at their head. On either side of him rode a horseman carrying a banner with the golden bear of Galldenborough.

Sir Aldren snorted. “A bear is too brave a symbol. Come, golden fox.”

The horsemen reined in and the man with the golden shield stripped off his helmet. His hair tumbled out—a deep grey and scattered black. His face, even from a distance, was both commanding and austere. “Sir Aldren,” he cried, “are you there?”

Sir Aldren looked about him with grim satisfaction at the hundreds of soldiers who waited for him in perfect silence. He leaned over the parapet. “I am here, oh traitor!” The men all around Aldren stirred.

There was a pause from the earl, then, in graver tones than before: “Sir Aldren, think well on what I have to say. How long can you hope to resist me? A week? Two weeks? Your glory will be ashes. Your sword will never rise again. It will be by your choice that your men will lie in their blood and your streets will be ruined. This will all be upon your head, I say. Surrender.”

Sir Aldren's face burned red. He hurled himself backward and wheeled around to face his men. “Men!” he roared. “What do you say?”

Loud cries of condemnation burst from every corner and Sir Aldren smiled the smile of those who have had their vengeance. He turned back to the earl. “Let that be your answer!”

The earl drew his sword, raising it above his head. “Your own mouths have sealed your fate!” He turned his mount and galloped away with his company.

Sir Aldren heard a heavy exhale from beside him and turned to Destin. “What? Have you given up so easily?”

Destin looked up, then shooed with his hand. “No, no. I only think of all that is at stake and how easily it may be lost.” After a pause, he added,

“But I do hope.”

A growl escaped Aldren and he laughed. “Hope? *Only* hope?” He half shoved Destin in his mild ire. “Would that you too cherished the wine of bad odds. I tell you, I have never felt so young.”

An hour later, Sir Aldren braced himself for the oncoming forces. The sea monster had arisen. It breathed no flames, but the defenders of Rondinburg were warm enough. Anticipation lit fires in each of them and the warmth radiated from their armor, creating a heat unbearable in the sun. Beads of sweat trickled down into Sir Aldren's eyes, blinding him as the besiegers brought up their ladders.

They were screaming and beating their swords, those warriors of the golden fox. The clatter rung in Aldren's ears like a million drums in a fiendish heathen rite. He growled and leaned into his stance, wrapping his fingers tighter about the stout pole in his hands, forked at the end to catch the ladders. A ladder crashed against the wall before him and a doomed soul raised his head into sight. He had no helmet and blinked childishly before a wicked smile came over his face and he lifted his right leg for the final step.

Throwing his whole weight and the fury of his yell into it, Sir Aldren shoved his pole into the top rung of the ladder. Four others grabbed hold of the pole and helped him shove it with their combined might. The ladder began to budge, tilting back. The soldier on top's eyes grew wide. He trembled. He swung his sword chaotically, striking nothing. He swayed, then crouched forward to maintain his balance. The ladder reached the tipping point and hung for a moment. He reached out hopelessly into the air, then fell. The screams of the falling rose above the din of battle and they hit the ground.

Sir Aldren gave his pole to another and left to check the rest of the defenses. He ran into men hurling huge stones on the enemy and archers firing in rapid succession. Always, the men were hurling down the ladders and they seemed to grow in energy as Sir Aldren approached them.

After leaving a thin cluster of soldiers who had just repulsed a determined attack, Aldren ran into a man who had gone mad. The man was a butcher with a family and armed only with a giant cleaver. What armor he had was battered and bloodied and he waved his cleaver with

fanaticism as he screamed defiance at everything. Aldren walked up, knocked him to the ground, and held him down with a knee.

In a dizzying string of lurches, the madman wormed from under him and leaped to his feet, waving the cleaver. "Argh! But out of my way, rogue!" the butcher seethed, spitting. He charged Aldren, red streaks in his eyes. Aldren promptly disarmed him and sent a blow to the man's temple that left him unconscious and sprawled on the ground.

It was with a wry, bitter, smile, but a smile nonetheless, that Aldren walked away. He was seeing the new form of ferocity he had prophesied. It was coming true. It was a strange type of madness though. Few in Rondiburg were soldiers by profession. They were a quiet people and even their city bore the irrepressible signs of the pastoral life. But now they were roused to a peak, and only he could attain a further raving madness.

Aldren also noticed a rising desperation. The enemy was starting to gain a foothold despite the defenders' best attempts. In more and more places, they were mounting the walls and fighting with their feet firmly planted on the stone before the sheer fury of the defenders drove them back. Aldren noted with a grimace that it was numbers. Numbers alone were carrying the day.

Sir Aldren pursed his lips and peered over the parapet. And where was the earl in all of this? He had not seen him since the morning. Was he in the rear? Was he hiding in safety? An arrow smacked into Sir Aldren's shield. He half-consciously pulled it out, tore it in two, and cast it down to the foes below. A roar was building up in his throat, and when it choked him, he could no longer keep it back. "Show yourself, coward!" There was no reply. He told himself he had expected as much. He paused for a moment, finding that he was craving a fight like a starving man, then charged off to the nearest fray. Some of the enemy had mounted there. It would be a diversion. The real battle was waiting somewhere in the back of the enemy lines, far away where he was helpless to reach it.

Galther's strained nerves rebelled at the continued work, but as he forced himself to new limits, he at last gave a smile of satisfaction. All night he had labored to create a substitute for the ingredient he lacked. Now he believed he was ready. First, he examined the jars until he was satisfied, then he poured in the gelatinous liquid.

"Done, sir?" asked one of his assistants, rubbing his eyes.

Galther yawned, though he tried to stifle it. "Yes...just..." The jar was full and he capped it off with a deep sigh. He turned to all his assistants lined against the opposite wall. "I think it's ready. Let's take it outside and see.

They nodded quietly, also too dreary to talk much. He led them out into the sunlight. "There now," he said, handing the jar to one of his younger assistants, "cast it over there by the water where it won't do any damage."

The bleary-eyed boy took it, stumbled forward, swung his arms, tripped, and released the jar in the wrong direction. It flew and hit the shop, bursting into an instant inferno.

Everyone was awake.

"You! Water on the fire. The mixture! To the shop! Everyone to the shop!"

The assistants rushed into the shop like scared rabbits. They emerged like lumbering tortoises carrying huge barrels of the flaming substance and a good hundred jars. Galther's concoction was safe, but their negligence of the fire had let a neighboring building catch and there was a steady wind beginning to blow. Galther stood frozen for a second, then threw his hands into the air and ran down the nearest street yelling, "Fire! Fire! Come and help!"

At one o'clock, the battle still raged. Sir Aldren saw the fire in the city and a sudden weight pushed down on his shoulders. He almost feared for a moment, but then he decided that he had no one to spare and that the best he could do was to ignore it. His thoughts were of a true tactician, but his almost-fear frightened him more than the danger itself. *Can it be*, he asked, *that I too am a coward?* The thought terrified him and he fought with thrice his former madness, by himself nearly turning the battle, but it was not enough.

Someone tugged on his arm and he whirled around, bringing his sword before him. It was the defense instinct nailed into him from hundreds of combats. Only a page stood before him who stared at him with wide, frightened eyes. "It's Galther, sir. He's got some jars that burn. A hundred, he says."

Aldren swung his sword in a high arc over his head. "Is that what's setting the city aflame? Bring them immediately."

The page scampered off with astounding liquidity.

Sir Aldren returned to the battle. His senses took in the scene automatically. Scarcely had the battle subsided since it first began. The enemy had suffered heavy casualties, but as he scanned their ranks, they seemed no thinner than in the early morning. Here and there though before him, a corpse lay of a man he knew, and there, off in the distance, one he had seen at times. There was not a soul in Rondinburg who would not have a friend to mourn that night and every sword was precious.

Yet he felt a drunkenness of hope and he shouted triumph with every blow he struck. He could sense a weakening in the enemy's movements. It was evident in the way they bore themselves, in the arrows that whizzed by him less often, in the triumphant shouts of his own men. He gave himself over to the madness, letting hot blood dull his haggard senses. He cleft one man's skull, shouting something about the earl—he couldn't tell what—then a steadying hand was laid on his shoulder. He turned about and saw Galther and his assistants with a hundred of the jars.

"I have put hell into a bottle," said Galther. "You had best reserve the medicine for others."

Aldren sheathed his sword then grabbed Galther by both shoulders, shaking him. "The hour has come, Galther! Give me one of those jars. The hour has come! It's here."

Galther wrested himself from Sir Aldren's grasp and, scrunching his brows at Aldren, gave him a jar. Aldren took it and, without a word, whirled round and pitched it into an enemy soldier. It shattered in a ball of flame that spewed outward followed by an unearthly scream. Galther turned quickly and hid his face. The man who was aflame tumbled back and fell from his ladder and instantly it seemed as if the whole force of Galldenborough groaned as one beast.

Sir Aldren took another jar. "Spread these throughout. We'll roast them from every foot of the walls."

It was a miracle drug Galther had brewed, but one that Aldren knew might not work more than once. That was all that was needed though. This was the reckless folly of the earl's first moves, throwing in all his might at once to try to obtain a quick victory. Sir Aldren ground his teeth. And if only he could teach the earl his folly in person.

The earl's forces were mostly veterans. They lived with death, flirted

pain, were accustomed to scale the highest walls while boiling water or scorching sand was dumped on them. They knew how to endure these burning pains, but the fire jars were different. When they shattered, a ball of flame birthed that could stick to their very armor and cling like a leech. It was worse than death by a sword and worse than hot oil.

It was an unknown.

Bodies of men fell from the ladders consumed in fire like lava spewing from a burning mountain. Men coated in fire ran screaming through the ranks, spreading the fire on all they touched like an infectious disease. The disease infected their brains. Terror swept through their ranks like a leaf carried on the fast-blowing wind and they left their ladders, dropped their bows, and set speed to their feet.

Sir Aldren felt adrenaline consume him and his limbs became fresh as if they were well-rested. The stones beneath him blurred as he ran to the gate. "A sortie! A sortie! Gather round me!" There was a wild whoop from the nearby soldiers as they rushed down with him to the foot of the gate. At his order, the gate was thrown open and they charged out in formation.

There was chaos among the enemy, each trying to flee and some not knowing why. The men of Rondinburg plowed through them, cutting them down right and left. The chaos increased, but the men of Rondinburg kept their lines. The open field was turning into a butcher's shop when an array of golden banners flashed above the mob, bearing down with an aura of doom on the battlefield.

"So now is it?" Aldren seethed, and he hacked his way toward the horsemen. "Now, when we come from behind our walls—now you appear? Now, when you are surrounded with horsemen, and we on foot? Welcome!"

The horsemen were trying to force their way through the foot soldiers. They would break through in a minute. Sir Aldren tightened his grip around his sword and the world seemed to blur as he focused his eyes on a single horseman.

"Sir Aldren! Sir Aldren!" It was Destin at his side.

Half slipping from his trance, Aldren cast him a sideward glance.

"Sir Aldren, we must go. It will do no good to get eaten up here on the plain."

Sir Aldren spat at his feet and swung his sword overhead. "Quiet, boy. This is my hour. The hour has come."

"Sir..."

Sir Aldren blinked twice and the tip of his sword dropped to the ground. There was something so pleading in the voice that Aldren started. His visage cleared and he trembled and his legs became weak. "I—I..." He choked on the words, then mingled passions flooded him and he roared at the top of his lungs, "Back! Fall back! To the gate, men! To the gate!"

The horsemen had just broken through and were ready to charge when the gate closed behind the defenders. It reverberated with a long mournful wail as if it were the earl groaning that he had been too late.

A few noticed at that moment that Sir Aldren had a pale, haggard look, but they forgot it in the spirit of the moment or thought that they must have been deceived, for nothing, they concluded with confidence, could trouble Sir Aldren.

The battle came to a close for the day and the men of Rondinburg retired from their walls, only a few remaining as guards. Sir Aldren made a quick inspection of the fire and found that Galther's shop and a dozen homes had burned down, but nothing more. He lingered however, staring at the ashes, and though it was warm, he shivered. He gazed for a long time into the destruction of the fire and then left abruptly. He gave no other order than that there should never be fires again. While he had been there though, some commented among themselves that he had seemed almost hypnotized by the ashes as if they bore some hidden meaning to him.

As the soldiers marched home through the city, they were greeted with cheers of praise and jubilation. Then a strange thing was noticed—it was noticed that there were some missing, some who would never return home.

Chapter 4

Destin had risen the next morning to bleak skies. The air was filled with a dull, slithering breeze that was too cold for the season.

He was on the walls at the moment and made an effort to turn his eyes away from the new weapon out in the distance. Men muttered at what they saw, and he preferred not to think about it. His eyes rested on the dark skies. A miserable drizzle fell from the clouds that was bad for morale, but worse, the air was charged with an electricity as if the clouds might suddenly erupt. A smile slipped across his face. At least Galther couldn't set fire to the city again.

Destin turned back and saw Sir Aldren staring over the parapet, his eyes fixed and dreary, his stance completely unmoving, and his breath quiet. Two watchmen whispered in hushed tones beside him, glancing furtively every now and then across the plain and then quickly looking back. Destin knew he must face it now. All things in life were to be faced with squared shoulders and eyes gazing straight ahead. He looked across the plain.

There was the siege tower. The earl had begun building it during the night. It would not be done for a time, but when it was, there could be no greater danger. When finished, it could be rolled up against their very walls. Hundreds of men would hide together under the protection of its many stories, ready to flood a section of the walls in an instant. Sir Aldren had taught him a maxim of war which was very fitting, that a concentrated force was always stronger than a large force spread apart. It was a brilliant siege engine, whoever had invented it. At the top was a drawbridge which the besiegers would lower across the walls, allowing them to run into the city.

There were other engines too. Scattered here and there like rabbits in a prairie, catapults were under construction. It reminded Destin, strange as it was, of the wolves that sometimes visited Rondinborough in the winter. It irked him, but some devilish voice in the back of his mind kept making him feel like there were fangs at his neck.

An arrow shattered against the wall near Destin and he jumped. Another whistled by and he ducked. He turned around. Others had taken cover, but one young man still stood. He rocked on his feet and a feathery

object protruded from his chest. Destin's mind blurred. ...*How odd.* He didn't think chests normally... Destin felt a quivering sensation and knew instinctively what had happened without yet knowing rationally. He blinked several times. Strong arms carried the lad away and Destin's mind became clear.

"Destin. Destin."

Destin swallowed and took a deep breath, then looked around and saw Sir Aldren. His face was perfectly composed like an eagle flying confidently over the mountains.

"A challenge for you."

Destin wrestled himself up into a more stable sitting position. He sighed, then smiled with a faint twinkle in his eyes. "I would do anything for you, sir, but I am not up for assassinating the earl."

Aldren's face clouded, grew a shade paler, and his lips moved without speech. He recovered, but his voice dropped to almost a whisper. "Easier than that."

Destin waited.

"Why does the earl send out his archers if he isn't making any assault?"

"...Can't say."

Sir Aldren slanted his brows and pursed his lips. He raised a finger and then rasped his naked sword across the stone floor as if he were grinding away imaginary forces. His face was turbulent and reckless as if he would stand up and dare himself to the shots of the archers. Destin almost thought he might. "The answer," he said, "should be clear. It has *everything* to do with the few of our men who will die and nothing to do with those of his who will be shot down. Undoubtedly, more of them will fall, being more exposed. That's nothing to him. The earl's enemy is time, and it is time alone he cares about, not men." Sir Aldren looked up at Destin and scrutinized him. There was a pause. "You are silent." It was an unstated question.

Destin motioned with his hand to encompass all the men on the walls. "It's these I'm thinking of."

Aldren grunted, knowing. "That is the way of things. Victory never comes without sacrificing something precious for something even greater."

Destin said the words without thinking. "And what is the greater thing?"

Sir Aldren started and put his hand to his sword, then slowly released

it. He walked away. "That..." he said in a hushed tone, "I am still deciding."

Destin looked after him startled, then scratched his nose.

Destin was passing through the infirmary at the end of the week. It had been converted from one of the long porticos of the Fairwin palace. Soft light colors spilled in from every direction and the breeze flowed freely over the beds of the infirm. They were brought inside at night but carried out in the morning.

Many sighs came from the wounded, but no groans. Volunteers from all over the city floated about them and nursed their wounds with ointments. The thudding of Destin's boots had a distinct calmness in this place that always seemed heavy to him when he was on the walls. It was, he thought, a novelty that the dying should be so at peace and the living so restless. He carelessly changed the direction of his thoughts and began to think of Sir Aldren. *What was that thing that required so precious a sacrifice?* He knew now. It was these. The wounded. It was a metaphor of sorts. There was glory in sacrifice and happiness in health, but the greatest joys were to the wounded who became whole.

But to be whole, one must survive, and as much as Destin wished to deny it, survival was a dubious thing.

He saw Lady Fairwin and stopped beside her. She was bending over a wounded man, cleaning a gory wound that stretched down his neck. The curious thought crossed Destin's mind whether the healers did more for the cause of Rondinburg or him. He bent lower and examined the cleansing with a scholar's interest.

Lady Fairwin's critical eye was upon him. "You are not on the walls."

He turned slowly on his heel and had the look of a young boy caught in the middle of some trick. "...The walls...they are not my first love."

Lady Fairwin shook her head. "Neither is mine tending the dying."

He wet his lips. "I see." He wished to ask her why she resisted—what she looked for in all her sacrifice, but then he realized it himself. The people of Rondinborough were her people in more ways than one. They were her people in law and custom, but also in heart. To surrender would be to change the essence of Rondinborough itself.

Lady Fairwin turned back to her work and Destin gathered himself

together and marched out the door with a rigid martial step. Once in the streets though, his mind began to wander and he slowed down. The streets were unusually bare and quiet. The only sound was a ringing from a smithy down the street. It sang its metallic climaxes over and over with depressing monotony. *It is, thought Destin, like entering a new world. Outside the realm of the dying, all is bleak and somber because we have lost our vision.*

Near the walls, he ran into a boy hauling baskets of stone for the defenders to throw at the enemy. By way of greeting, he said, "You look weary, lad."

"Aye," was the dull reply.

"Have hope," Destin chided.

"Aye," replied the lad, more dully than before.

Destin got away from the boy as soon as he could at the top of the steps and rushed over to Sir Aldren. The knight was pointing out into the plain. "There, lad, they are coming."

Destin stopped. Aldren was right. The completed siege tower loomed threateningly in the distance. No invention of man ever looked so much like a mountain on wheels, ready to crush anything that came in its way like a piece of matchwood. Thick hides covered its sides, soaked in water to prevent fire. There were hundreds of men inside, all ready to burst out in an instant.

Right now, hundreds of beasts and men were hauling ropes, trying to drag it toward the walls. It budged and began to move on huge wheels of wood.

Destin's chest tightened and he pulled out his sword, tightening his fingers around the leather until it eased the thrill. Sir Aldren was yelling commands to the soldiers to get into formation. They were armed with spears. Somebody gave him one and he took it, sheathing his sword. Mindlessly, he took his place in formation with the others, sticking his spear out with the rest.

Groans came from the surging tower, louder than any human shriek. It stopped, looming before them quiet and awful. Destin held his breath. He looked around and saw that Aldren had organized them into three rows of jutting spears, a porcupine-like impenetrable fence with their shields interlocked.

Destin could see a few of the others' faces. They were grim, their shoulders sagging a little—perhaps from responsibility—but with those

same shoulders tensed and bulging through their mail. A strong brotherhood was animating them in the face of death and a raging desperation.

The boarding ramp began to lower, squealing like a dying pig. Destin caught his breath. He could feel a tremor in his chest and his legs tensed. It was like facing the dark entrance of a cave, waiting for a bear to come out. Indeed, the golden bear was fluttering in the breeze.

There was something he wanted now—wanted desperately. It was three very simple things: a garden of his own, loyal friends who would stick by him forever, and no more wars.

The bridge hit the wall with a crash like thunder and a hundred fiendish screams tingled the already tense air. Destin stumbled as the first invader hit his spear. He regained himself, but the next wave was already there. It was like trying to gain your footing in breakers that hit you faster than you can catch your breath. It was like trying to fight a sandstorm.

Chapter 5

Wave hit, then wave. Destin's spear shook as he caught man after man on the point of his spear. He began to tremble from excitement. An invader broke through the line of spears and hacked down the man in front of him. Destin shifted his spear and struck the man with the shaft.

This whole wave seemed to do better than the others, breaking through the line of the defenders' spears. For a moment, it was man to man and then Rondinburg disentangled, letting their enemies' corpses drop to the ground. There was a short breath of air—only a second to regroup—then the next wave hit them. And the next. And the next.

The sheer weight of the attack forced Destin to give way inch by inch, though he never rested, never lowered his guard. Only Aldren kept his ground as he roared incoherent yells, motioning to his men to press forward. They tried. They failed. Slowly but surely, they were being driven to the brink of their own walls and to the great precipice beyond.

Destin licked his lips and tasted blood. He could hear the enemies' wild yells ringing with triumph. He felt a warmth in his leg where he didn't remember being wounded. The loss of blood was making him faint. A man ran straight into his spear at full force and he stumbled backward. Some hand grasped him by the shoulder and hauled him out of the fray.

Destin reeled. He regained his balance and flipped open his visor. There was Galther. The inventor leaned in toward him and shouted, "Jars of fire." He pointed to a pile.

Destin spun back around looking for Sir Aldren. His master was deep in the fray, more advanced than anyone else. He could not be called. Already, the formation had broken and the men of Rondinborough struggled hand to hand with the men of Galldenborough. Aldren was screaming something, trying to regain order.

Destin turned back to Galther and pointed to the boarding bridge. "Break their toy?"

Galther grinned and handed Destin a jar. They pitched them into the enemy, trying to hit the bridge. Shouts of anger erupted from the besiegers as one jar burst on a shield. Here was inspiration though. They used their shields to catch the fire and threw it overboard, saving the bridge.

Galther pursed his lips and held back right as he was about to pitch

another one. "No use." But it was some use. The distraction had given Sir Aldren time to regroup his men.

Galther scanned the scene and his eyes sparked when they rested on the siege tower. "Aha! Not many left, Destin. Help me haul them to the side here."

Destin caught up three jars and skirted around the fray to where he had a perfect flanking position. "Into their ranks?"

Galther licked his smiling lips. "No." He pitched a jar right at the side of the siege tower. Instantly, the hides burst into flame, even though they were soaked. A sword stabbed through from within the tower and whipped around the flaming piece, cutting it out. "Take another one you yawning hole! Are you hungry?" Galther's second jar flew through the hole and into the heart of the tower.

Destin heard his name shouted from somewhere in the fray and turned around. Blood soaked and panting, Sir Aldren ran up beside him. "Destin! Reinforcements!"

Destin looked around him. The fight was raging on every part of the wall and he doubted whether there was anyone to spare.

Sir Aldren flung out his hand. "Go!"

Destin took one last look at Galther, threw his own jar, then dashed off.

Sir Aldren returned to the fight. With all the chaos and mayhem, it was impossible to tell the winning side. He knew Galldenborough had endless reinforcements, and he might have none at all, but that only made him all the more ravenous for the fray.

The reek of battle swelled his spirits—the sweat, the blood—it all combined to make him fill his lungs with a purely exultant roar. He bit his sword into an enemy's chest, pulled it out, and struck another man's skull. He stopped. There was another morbid fragrance burning his nostrils, one he had not noticed before. He rumbled a growl and fought his way to the center of the fray, bringing some little order to his men which was just enough to keep the enemy from breaking through and flooding every part of the walls and into the city.

The morbid fragrance was distinct now. It was the incense of smoke and flame. A glorious revelry filled Sir Aldren's heart as he saw light wisps

of it float out from the tower. Terror spread through the enemy and Sir Aldren's heart filled with laughter. Had he not said he would never lose a battle?

The incendiary passion, revelry, and fury in Sir Aldren was catching spark in his own men's hearts. Just then, Destin arrived with twenty precious reinforcements. Sir Aldren pressed forward. "Onward! Onward! Into the heart of the tower!"

The enemy was using their shields now more than their swords. They stumbled backward, tripping over each other. Sir Aldren took every foot of ground they gave and slew those who could not retreat faster. He pressed them into the confines of their own tower until they vanished into the level below. He followed them into their hole, his men behind him. He pressed them further and they could not escape fast enough. On the next level, the fire burned.

Sir Aldren paused before a room filled with smoke and flame. Below, the wood floors crashed with the stampede of a human waterfall gushing out the entrance of the tower, but here, all was still and there was nothing but smoke and flames and an eerie emptiness that sent a chill down his spine.

He breathed in deep draughts of smoke and coughed. He was strangely frozen, his eyes transfixed on the flames.

"Sir Aldren!" Destin called.

Why did he always see prophecies in the coals? It was an irking question. Never words, but vague dark senses of foreboding. The flames always seemed like hands reaching out to grab him. This time, they almost reached him, almost drew him into whatever fate was lying there in those coals, so bright and gloomy.

A human arm grabbed him and yanked him back. "Sir Aldren!"

The spell broke. Sir Aldren ground his teeth, slamming his sword into the side of the tower. "Back! Back, men! Back to the walls!"

The heat nearly roasted them in their armor, but they got out and coughed the smoke from their lungs.

Sir Aldren turned around. Fire was leaping from the sides of the tower like a chimney that was consuming itself. He gave a wry smile, then turned pale. Again, the prophecies whispered to him. He had to tear himself away. He panted, slamming his fist against his knee and grinding his teeth. Every eye was on him. He sighed and raised his head. "...The battle is... not yet over. There are forces still to be reckoned with."

The fighting was furious even where the defenders faced no siege tower. There had been a fusillade of arrows and the invaders came on ladders. Sir Aldren's victory was just in time to save them or the battle might have been lost. Now though, they defied the besiegers and cast them off their walls.

The besiegers began to waver. Sir Aldren moved among his troops. "Only a little longer! Hold out!"

The flames of the siege tower leaped into the heavens high enough so all could see. It was like a second sun blazing in the sky.

As if the flames were a signal, trumpets blazed from every stretch of the enemy's line. As they retreated, Sir Aldren pointed over the plain to a horseman far away. "Do you see that?" His men gathered round him. "It is the earl. He is hopeless and cannot bring about a victory." Sir Aldren clanged his sword against his shield as a sort of salute. His eyes became hazy and he looked out into the distance for a long time before he finished. "Well...so it shall remain."

Night was falling and Sestin hurried to get back to the palace. It was best to get his notes to Lady Fairwin as soon as possible before she retired to sleep and he had to wait till the morning. He took a shortcut down a long alley that was ancient and ill kept—far unlike the rest for Rondinburg. The houses blocked the low moon. It was a solitary place.

Another figure loomed down from the other end of the alley and Sestin came to a sudden stop, clutching his reports against his side. "...Sir Aldren, is that you?"

The form came nearer and halted. "...Aye." The form was tensely still.

"Ah..." Sestin lowered his head and made a move to get past him, but Aldren shot out his hand.

"Stay." Aldren's voice was hushed but shaky. "Why the hurry?"

Sestin backed one step, wetting his lips. "My survey. I have just finished."

The knight's breath came in quick uneasy pants. "How are we for food?"

"Oh...we could hold out indefinitely."

"Water?"

"Same." Sestin calculated the size of the gap between Aldren and the

wall.

“Arrows?”

“Running low—More are being made.”

Sir Aldren paused a moment before he asked, “...Men?”

The blood rushed to Sestin’s face and he glared up. “*You know well* how low we run!”

“Aye,” said Sir Aldren, his voice dropping and taking on a tone of desperation. “Think you it is too little? I have said I will not lose this battle. There is too much at stake. The earl...” Aldren rose, looming like a bear in the darkness. He gasped quick and frightful, then pushed Sestin aside and fled down the dark alley and further into the black shadows.

Sestin gaped and furrowed his brows. He stood thinking for a moment, then shook his head. He went his own way.

Chapter 6

There was an argument taking place on the steps of the Fairwin palace as Destin and Sir Aldren passed by on the seventeenth day of the siege. Captains were gathered together and their faces were lit with animation, hands flying about like flies buzzing over meat. Lady Fairwin stood above them with her arms outstretched, a silent monument for them to cool their tempers. She caught Sir Aldren's eye and beckoned him with a quick wave. He bowed his head and came forward, harsh heavy steps announcing his way before him.

The captains hushed when Sir Aldren entered among them. Lady Fairwin stretched out her hand toward him, taking a slow breath and directing the others' attention to him with her eyes. "Sir Aldren," she began, taking care to say her words with smooth calmness and deliberation, "these captains are saying that the walls cannot withstand the catapults much longer. They say they will be useless by the end of the week."

The captains eyed Sir Aldren, though neither they nor he looked the other in the eye.

Aldren frowned, then smirked, suddenly clenched his teeth, folded his arms, and glared at them.

"You alone could find some way to stop this," said Lady Fairwin. She wet her lips then asked with her voice a slight pitch higher, "Is there any course to save ourselves?"

He looked straight into Lady Fairwin's eyes for a few seconds with his face expressionless, then, with a short grimace, he whispered in a tone so low it could barely be heard. "I have said it. These walls will not fall." Before any could stay him, he turned and walked away.

Destin wavered, looking at Lady Fairwin. She returned the gaze, took a quick glance at Sir Aldren, then glanced at the ground. Destin copied her by gazing at the ground himself, then wavered, took a hesitant step, and followed after his master. As he hurried to catch up, he pondered the exchange. The walls were indeed crumbling, but what might Sir Aldren do? What might his prowess accomplish? That was the real question. It was as Sir Aldren himself had said. Mathematics showed they were fighting a losing battle. That left their only chance in employing something that the

earl could not have calculated in all his schemes. Sir Aldren was as wild as the east wind. He could not be calculated by anybody.

Sir Aldren walked with brisk paces and Destin had to hurry to keep up with him. They wandered down a senseless jumble of side streets until they stumbled upon the walls of the city. Sir Aldren halted there and Destin halted too. Aldren slowly stooped and took a knee among the deepest of the shadows, resting his head in his hand. His brows charged against each other like two jousting knights and created deep furrows.

Destin waited, twiddling his thumbs and staring at the few trees nearby. After a minute, Aldren started with a short breathy exclamation. "Oh, Destin, you here?" He got up, looked at the ground, and shook his head. "Go where you like. I'll be alone for a while." He walked off thirty yards and sat down again under the shadows there.

Destin looked after him for a while, then turned around and left for the Fairwin gardens. He reached them and was glad to find himself alone. Since his earliest memories when he had played in their grasses, they had been his haunts. He would study flowers, herbs, and trees, but often the visiting populace disturbed his silence. At such times, he knew the perfect places of retreat and by some instinct he wandered in the direction of one of these. He breakfasted from the fruit trees as he walked, losing himself in meditation.

Sestin had told him something strange yesterday that his philosopher's mind wrestled with. He had said that every man acts in battle as his heart has been from ages long and wearied. And what did that mean? That the earl had never been loyal to them? That his soldiers had never known chivalry? That left few good men on earth. Destin held a half eaten plumb at arms' length and studied it. He dropped it.

He remembered Sestin saying something else too. He had said that some men you could never know until their darkest battles when their true selves came to the forefront. This posed an even deeper question. Would he, Destin, remain who he seemed to be when the hot coals burned beneath his feet? He frowned intently at the nearest tree and watched a lumbering beetle skedaddle across a branch.

His thoughts cleared when he came at last to his retreat. It was a whimsical arbor of willows shading the pure water of a glistening pool whose banks were clothed with a ground cover of soft burgundy. He lay down among the ground cover and felt its velvety leaves brush against his head like a pillow. He began simply listening to the quiet sounds of the

gardens.

There were many soft noises—so varied and charming. There were the miniscule insects, the rippling water, the subtle breeze, and...something else.

He frowned. What was it? Concentration would disturb the gentle peace he was in, but he turned to concentration anyway. That noise, the strange one, had been so much a part of the quiet symphony that he had not noticed it at first, but now it buzzed in his ears like a nagging fly. It was grating though—a sort of irregular scratching. He chewed a piece of grass in his mouth and wondered aloud, "...Groundhogs?"

Something flipped inside his stomach like a little animal and he caught his breath. "But it couldn't.... Of course, surely.... Now I.... *Tunnelers.*" The last idea stuck in his mind and he staggered to his feet. He waited only a moment to assure himself. They would break through any minute. Destin looked around, hoping for a crowd to be in there. A noisy one. A mob. An army. He wouldn't mind interruption in the garden at this moment as long as there were soldiers, but they would only come if he fetched them.

He ran yelling, realized no one could hear him, then put down his head and ran faster. One thought possessed him. Sir Aldren. He must find Sir Aldren. He ran down a series of streets and slammed into a wall and reeled. "What in...!"

"Need help, Destin?" asked Galther.

The world spun and Destin blinked to catch up with it. He had rammed into Galther's new shop. He blinked the stars away and lurched through the doorway. "Galther, do.... Got a sword?"

The inventor narrowed his eyes. "Do you have eyes?"

Destin threw up his arms. "There's tunnelers by the wall!"

Before Destin could even think of giving a ranted explanation, Galther dropped the papers in his hand. Two whistles and the adjoining door banged open and assistants swarmed in. "All you, swords? How about armor? Never mind. Come! Come!"

They stampeded and Destin had to step aside to let them through.

Galther yanked him by the shoulder. "Where to?"

"Right-right..." He froze for a moment, blinked, then wheeled round and sprinted off.

The gardens that had seemed so extensive before flew by him in a flash. "Over here," he shouted.

Galther came in behind him and knelt on the ground. He listened for

a moment then gave a puff through his clenched teeth. "Aye, that's them all right." The quiet peaceful inventor had transformed into a livid general. He leaped to his feet and shot his gaze all over like a combatant following every move of his opponents, then snapped his fingers to call them all together. "Shovels. Any nearby?" No time was given for a response. "You," he ordered, pointing to an assistant. "Get Sir Aldren or any troops you can find." He remembered now. "I said a shovel. Does anyone know where a shovel is?"

Destin blinked, hesitating for a short moment. "Well...there might be some in that shed."

"Yes. Immediately." Galther darted off in the direction of the shed and Destin followed.

"What would..." but Galther was already in the shed.

He came out, bearing five shovels. "Take one." He handed one to Destin and ran back to the group. Destin scratched his head and followed.

Galther was giving instructions.

"Would make a nice club," said one man sarcastically.

A more gentle-minded fellow said, "Just listen to Galther."

Galther showed full intention of being listened to. "All with shovels, follow me. The rest, stay here. Guard the hole. Be quiet. *Don't* let them through."

Galther turned and lead the way to a nearby pond. Those with shovels looked at Destin. He coughed. "Galther's...waiting."

They all four went over to Galther who was throwing his whole being into shoveling the pond's bank. "Sluggards. No sitting...dig...with..." he gesticulated with his shovel, then plunged it in by way of example. Destin shrugged, uttered a hearty guttural cry, and plunged in his own shovel. The whole group was animated.

Water soon began to flow from a small trench they made. "Faster!" Galther barked. They worked faster. Sweat gathered in tiny rivulets.

One of the soldiers standing guard over the tunneling came over to Galther. "Sir," he said, pulling Galther lightly by the arm, and speaking in a low, even rumble, "the enemy will break through any minute. Can't you come keep guard? We are already too few."

Galther wheeled around for a quick moment and shoed the man away. "Hold them as long as you can. Can't you see where the water's going?"

The soldier looked, and the water from the pond was flowing to a

depression directly over the tunnel. A flash of realization lit his face. "Ah...!"

The water was flowing steadily now. It was even wearing away its banks. Galther eyed it for a moment, then threw himself back into the work.

A minute later, a shout came from the spot of the tunneling. Destin turned around to see warriors pouring out of the tunnel and the guards cutting them down as best they could. The invaders were drenched, but sounds from the tunnel told that it was not yet submerged.

Galther gave a wild cry and Destin turned back. The inventor had his shovel in the mud and a huge stone bulged right before it. "Help pry it out!" he said. "It will burst the whole thing."

Destin and the others shot their shovels into the mud. The rock was larger than a breastplate and rooted in the mud like a willow. Perspiration pooled on Destin's brow and slipped down his eyes, blinding him and stinging. *Just push harder* he told himself. Wild cries and screams sounded in the background.

Galther gave a raspy yell, carrying it on, making it louder and louder. The stone began to budge. There was a monstrous slurping, then the stone bolted from its nest like a chased creature. Water gushed through the breach, ripping the soil before it and leaping like a boulder straight into the tunnel of the besiegers.

There were screams, splashes, and desperate howls from the depths of the tunnel, mixing oddly with the sharp clangs of battle. Galther turned suddenly back into the quiet inventor and his sheepish, abashed face spoke of an apology for his dynamic action.

Destin felt his heart race like it did when he looked down from a height. There was a gurgling sound, and then, in a moment so startlingly still he would never forget it, the cries from the tunnel ceased. The whole scene was horridly silent. Even the invaders who had made it inside the city were motionless. Then, from behind him, Destin heard a well-known voice shouting, "Go! Take them out! Help your comrades! Spare none!" It was Sir Aldren.

Men of Rondinborough poured into the fray, far outnumbering the foe. Destin turned and saw Aldren beside him, looking at Galther. "What is this?"

"Well, sir..."—Galther fidgeted with his shirt—"you might say it was sort of a war of shovels. They tried to dig our grave and we dug theirs."

Sir Aldren looked around him, his eyes taking in everything. After a long moment, he said, "I see." He paused again, then finished, "Galther, you have beat them well. The earl..." His face became ashen.

Destin followed his gaze and saw a soldier of Galldenborough running pell-mell from his pursuers. The man held a torch in his hand that burned with a dark amber glow.

Every muscle in Aldren's body tensed. "The blasted rogue! Why does he carry it! Can I never escape the flames?"

Galther stared at Aldren.

"I—I..." Aldren put his hand over his face and turned away.

Chapter 7

It was the twenty-fifth day of the siege and the proud walls of Rondinburg were crumbling.

It happened again, now beginning to concern Destin, that Sir Aldren sent him away in order to spend time alone. The time had come though for Destin to return. He entered a long quiet street with no turns for a hundred yards. His head was bowed, but he eventually raised it then started and blushed. "Just my luck! Too awkward to turn back now." Perfectly in the center of where he was and the next turn stood a young man and woman with arms about each other. Their eyes were glistening yet hollow, blissful yet sad. They had been turned toward each other, but now turned toward him. *Now then, he thought, the thing to do is to become very interested in these shop signs. But wait! I shall do better. I shall enter a shop and spend some time there, then when I come out I'm sure they will have left.*

He turned in at a barber's shop, but when he entered, he found it deserted. Everything was set in order. As Destin walked up to the counter, he rubbed his hand across it and pulled up a layer of dust. Destin frowned, then went to the back of the shop where he found a door exiting into the parallel street. He let out a light chuckle as he walked through and closed the door behind him, then sighed and slumped his shoulders. *But it's not really funny, is it? Poor fellow if he doesn't survive.*

There was a connection here between the one man and men in general that made perfect sense to him, even if others might not have recognized the connection. He returned to his previous thoughts of the walls and man's involvement in them. The walls were giants of architecture. The greatest engineers of the ancients had built them. It had taken years. And now, here were men of his own time. They used simple machines, yet the giants of stone were crumbling beneath them in a few days what had taken so long to build. Men built, they burned. Men raised, they ravaged. Men were curious things. What would they do next?

Here now were the steps leading up to the ramparts. Destin mounted them. He needed to taste the breeze up there. Needed it badly. He needed to get to Sir Aldren. On top of the walls, Destin looked around for his master. He didn't see him. For a good stretch of the wall, he jogged along, greeting the lookouts until he came to a breach. A catapult had torn a hole

there about twenty feet down. It was a serious threat to their defenses, but it was not the worst of the breaches. By far, that was in the front of the city near the main gate.

Destin's eyes softened and he let out a sad melodious "hmm..." as he looked down into the breach. Sir Aldren stood there with his helmet off and the stiff breeze lashing his hair.

There was a sense in his demeanor that Destin knew well—the quietness of being alone, especially with a breeze. It was rapturous. But Aldren wasn't calm. There was a slight scowl on his face—softened, but still there. His eyes were fixed with a sense of eternity on the small dots of their invaders swarming in the distance, constantly scuttling in preparation for some new attack. His eyes carried a strange resemblance to those of the lovers Destin had seen: glistening yet hollow, blissful yet sad, and—there was something more. Passion, fire, despair.

Destin stole with soft steps up to his side. Sir Aldren gave the slightest cough showing that he noticed him but said nothing. The two remained standing there for several minutes just looking out into the distance. As time wore on though, Sir Aldren's face became more tortured. Destin's presence had changed him. If bad odds were his wine, he had become drunk and his tongue unfurled. "...It is a cruel destiny I have inherited."

Destin let the breeze lash him for a minute. "Cruel?" He chewed on the insides of his cheeks, then asked, "Is all suffering cruel?"

Sir Aldren gave a hoarse, uneasy breath. "You know little of me."

"Do I?" Destin looked at him and thought about it. "...You are our most famous hero along with Lord Fairwin..." He focused on Sir Aldren's face which spoke more of the battles he had fought than all the tales Destin had ever heard. "You fought in many battles.... It was in the previous war between us of the Brinean lands and the empire of Argaloth..."

Aldren nodded. Destin thought that might be all.

It was not. After two minutes, Aldren added, "...My history with the earl."

"The earl?"

Sir Aldren winced and his eyes narrowed on the outstretched plain. "...Yes." He paused. "In the first battle of that war...the battle of Layrdith river...he and I were knighted together."

Destin was silent.

Sir Aldren breathed deeply and the tilt of his brows became even sharper. "We were friends then." Sir Aldren pursed his lips and his eyes

gleamed a dark coal-like hue. "He was both fierce and noble at that time—not so renowned as I, but a great warrior. We were alike then. We both fought bravest in desperate odds." Aldren's face softened almost to a subdued and weary aspect, but the glint in his eyes became wild. "But as the war stretched on, he began to change." He swallowed. "At our knighting, he was not yet an earl, but then his father died and he inherited the rule. From then on, he grew more and more reserved and careful and was often late to battle. I and others suffered alone." There was a soft rubbing sound. It was Sir Aldren fingering his sword. "His forces grew in number and his power expanded, but his behavior died. All that remained was courtesy. Any man may show that if it benefits him." Aldren cleared his throat. "Now..."

More wind and silence. Destin's mind ran in circles, trying to follow the million different threads the new information poured into his mind, but the wind seemed to hold him back like chains keeping him still. A numbness settled over his thoughts. "I see.... It all makes sense now."

Sir Aldren clenched his fist and his voice rose. It seemed like the hot coals within him were being fanned by the wind, for the first time sending out sparks. "I should have seen it earlier. He was deceitful. It was I who was ever the bravest in battle, but his cunning will bring him victory. I see that now. If I were to stand this plain and challenge him, I would conquer, but he surrounds me and hems me in. As long as I stay behind these walls I am his prisoner. I have been loyal, and he crafty. I could try to fight through his forces and get to him, but even I am not such a fool." Aldren ground one fist into the other and clenched his teeth. "My name. My honor." His voice dropped very low and he paused with a curious expression on his face. "It is all a dream, is it not?"

Destin said nothing.

Aldren closed his eyes and breathed in the wild wind. The draughts cooled him down to a stillness that made Destin bite his lower lip. When Aldren opened his eyes again, they were hollow. He hesitated. "... Destin..."

Destin looked him in the eye.

"Destin, what do you think of me?"

Destin scrunched his brows. "Why..."—his lips twisted in confusion—"I think you are the bravest man I know."

Aldren reached out his hands and slowly grabbed him by the collar, earnest but not threatening. The coals were gone from his eyes and they

looked more like gems that were shattered and broken. "No, not that, but am I...am I—"

A voice and pounding footsteps interrupted. "Sir Aldren!"

A man coated in mail and a grey tunic bounded up the stairs and headed straight for Sir Aldren. "Sir Aldren,"—he paused, panting—"the earl is gathering his forces at the breach at the front. They're congregating from everywhere."

Sir Aldren wheeled around and glared at the soldier. "Enough of him! I wish he had the courage to show himself. Blast the earl."

"Yes, sir," the soldier stammered, "but—"

Sir Aldren grimaced, took on a haggard look, and turned away. "I'll be there immediately."

The soldier saluted and disappeared.

Destin felt a stirring within him to say something, but Sir Aldren was already far ahead of him, headed for the front of the city. There was a battle waiting for them. There would be no time for talking.

Sir Aldren arrived at the front of the city. His forces were gathered and he wove his way among them, surveying the situation. "Sir Aldren!" one of the captains called. He ignored him. There was a soldier before him who was kicking and fighting while two others restrained him. The man's face was flooded with tears.

Sir Aldren folded his arms, waiting for what reason he could not have said.

The man in hysterics caught his eyes. "S-s-s-sir..."—he fell on his knees and grasped Aldren's ankles, weeping—"...they will not let me fight...Th—"

"He's half dead already, can't you see?" shouted one of the others. "He's been sick all week. He'll die just lifting a sword."

"S-s-s-sir...let me, *please*. We can't hold them even here and they're— everywhere."

Sir Aldren fixed his eyes on nothing until the nothing became a blur. He rubbed his fingers together. He mumbled senseless words, then, "...The earl will...only attack here."

The two soldiers and the hysteric stared at him.

"...Pride..." Sir Aldren kept staring at nothing, then slowly, he turned

his head and stepped away. "Why not let him after all? What does it matter?"

Sir Aldren moved again among his troops. He counted them. He counted few. They were stretched thin like wineskins ready to burst. All who were able bore the sword. Even beardless youths and the aged mounted the battlements. He did not encourage them as was his wont.

Amid the clanking armor, sounds of weeping floated around like butterflies. Wives, children, feeble fathers, near kin—all had gathered at this point simply to be near their loved ones. They could not stay any longer though. He had to send them away. He approached them silently and raised his sword. They understood. They wavered like fluttering hearts. They turned. They left. The open space was utterly desolate save for one chipped broken stone. Sir Aldren looked at it for a moment and then sheathed his sword.

He returned to the defenses. The breach in the wall came down to within ten feet of the ground. Debris from the crumbled wall formed rough ramps which ascended nearly half way up on both sides.

On the breach, Galther had constructed a nine-foot wall spanning from one end to the other. It was solid enough. That was all. The original wall was twenty feet thick and it was centered right in the middle.

Sir Aldren gave commands. He said no words, but looked into men's eyes and they took a sharp inhale and did whatever he had commanded.

The defenses were now in basic order. Riveting peals echoed across the plain before Rondinburg. Sir Aldren turned and saw the hosts of Galldenborough advancing. Their mass filled the plain like a great lake which flowed, not with water, but with steel.

He closed his eyes. He clenched his fists into balls. A monster inside him was breaking free of its chains—it was breaking through the mountains of stone that weighed down on his spirit. His heart pounded and his head lightened. It was coming.

A thousand voices filled the air from both sides.

It was coming and he could not stop it. At first he seethed. Then it consumed him. He could not hold it back. It broke free. His roar rose above every noise and struck fear into the hearts of his friends. The foe too was bitten with alarm and every heart who heard him trembled.

Sir Aldren was among that number.

Chapter 8

"Father, don't go so close."

The earl slid off his horse and lifted the young boy who rode behind him into his arms. He gazed at the boy with his light green eyes, then licked his lips and asked in a nonchalant tone, "What do you fear?"

The boy lifted the dusty brown hair out of his eyes and scowled. "They can shoot you this close."

"Aye," said an aged knight beside them, his tones gruff and muffled behind the thick barrier of his mustache, "the lad is right, my lord."

The earl lifted his son out at arm's length and gave a gay laugh. "What will I care if I die? I will have conquered Rondinborough and my son will be the greatest man on earth. He will be wiser and richer than I and will live a happy life ruling many people."

The son blushed and kicked himself out of the earl's arms, then scampered over to the gruff knight who seemed sympathetic to his side of the case.

The earl unslung the bow from his shoulder and notched an arrow to it, whistling in undertones. He paused, looking up at his son as if remembering him. "Have you ever seen such a fine bow?" he asked. "Used by the archer Nymberwolf." He looked back at his bow. "I am still a great archer. I will take one shot at Sir Aldren from this distance and then they will offer no resistance. Rondinburg will be yours."

The boy buried his face in the horse flesh beside him. The father smiled.

"I would be wary, my lord," rumbled the aged knight.

"One shot, Annak. I can see him above the others."

The knight leaned over so far that the earl could feel the warmth of his breath against his ear. "Then they can see you."

The earl strung his arrow. He laughed, light and long. "I do not care. I will have conquered. My son will rule."

"My lord—"

The earl launched his arrow.

"Did it—"

The earl grimaced and drew another arrow. "Missed."

Something whizzed by and there was a morbid thunk. The earl heard

the scream and froze. He knew that scream. Had heard it a million times in battle. He snapped his bow in two and he could hardly breathe from the constriction of his chest.

“Father! Father!”

He made himself turn around. The boy was kneeling on the ground, tears flowing in floods down his cheeks and pooling on his chest where the blood poured ten times as thick from his heart.

The boy reached out one hand to him and sunk lower to the ground.

The earl kneeled at his side and embraced him in his arms. The ages of the mountains passed and when the earl raised his head he met Annak’s hollow eyes.

“I...I’m—”

“Annak,” the earl whispered, and his face was like a moonlit glen with one monument of a contorted beast marking the resting place of some murdered prince, “Destroy them now. Double the attack.”

The invaders screamed victory. Barbaric determination was in their eyes. They were coming.

Sir Aldren stormed along the battlement, the monster in him raging. “Hold back! Pour into them when they are right upon you. No mercy! No mercy!”

The first wave of invaders lashed up over the rubble heap like tentacles of a giant squid, lifting themselves over the breach in the weight of their armor. They lingered an instant. A hundred missiles riddled their bodies and they fell dead. Not a breath’s pause and their comrades trampled them and rushed to mount the bulwarks.

Sir Aldren took a huge stone and threw it at a giant of a man. More arrows flew. The bodies of the dead formed a ramp the besiegers could climb to the top.

And so, this is the moment, thought Aldren. All that he had worked for turned to this. The earl secure, himself in death’s claws, this wall of Galther’s a mere sapling before the axe.

Aldren took on an almost death-like calm. Here the enemy came. They mounted like horses. Their ranks were thick. They would wash over him and suck him out into the ocean. There the waves would wash over him. It would be quiet and still. How peaceful. How abominable! He spit

between his teeth. Sweet vengeance, he would wreak death on all who came. The enemy was ten feet away. Now five. A tiger's leap and snarl and he hurled himself upon the oncoming ranks.

He severed a neck as he hit the ground, then cut off an arm. "Come forward! Come fight! Cowards, won't you dare!" For a moment, he alone held the advancing lines in check. "Cowards!" He pierced another man in the shoulder between the joints of his armor. A moment. Such triumph and then the enemy swelled again and pressed onward, surrounding him and coming right up to Galther's wall.

He laughed. "At last you come." His sword flashed here and there, sucking blood. The circle around him widened until he had a clear path to Galther's wall. "You will burn, all of you!" He took a leap and grabbed its height with his hands and hauled himself over. A spear glanced off his back and struck a defender in the throat.

Aldren leaped from the platform down onto the breach and rushed over to a vat lying there. "Galther, the oil!"

The inventor poked his head from behind the vat and gave a quick nod. He grabbed a pump shaft and began to heave. Aldren grabbed the hose running from the vat and brought it up on the wall. They would burn indeed, every one of them.

The oil blasted from the hose and besiegers reeled. It hit them in the faces and soaked their armor. They cursed. They spat.

Then they laughed. They saw that they had been frightened by oil. They advanced again with eager bounds. Many slipped on the oil. Many stayed footed. Many threw their spears and a precious dozen of the defenders died.

Sir Aldren raged. "Bring me the torch!"

Galther ran forward with a torch and looked at him wide-eyed.

Sweet incense of the dying. Sacrifices of war. Let them burn. Aldren glared at them with a sardonic frown. He threw the torch.

A thousand fiery tongues sang at once in a rising crescendo. Screams and the sizzle of flesh combined into a fiendish mass—a rite of horror. The incense rose, nauseating the defenders. Only Aldren stood as he drank in the repugnance with his eyes closed. He was still for a while with a quiet modest smile. The hosts of Galldenborough stood at a distance, mesmerized, watching their comrades burn.

Something lurched inside of Aldren. He had forgotten something in this moment of triumph that his mind searched frantically to remember. It

bordered on panic, but was overwhelmed by the all-consuming smell of burning flesh. He breathed deeply of it and grew dull. But what was that poison inside him? Some evil. Something about fire that he always feared, something that would consume him. How foolish. The fire already consumed him. It raged in him. Was he not fulfilled? A vague foreboding. Something about Destin. About Lady Fairwin. He could not remember. Smoke. Reeking smoke and death. Death.

When the flames cleared, there was silence. Neither defender nor besieger moved. They were solemnly still.

Some trumpet sounded that seemed far away and the besiegers rustled. They gathered themselves together and captains yelled at them. They were coming on again.

“Oil!” Aldren shouted.

Galther began to pump. Oil blasted and hidden flames leaped to life.

This tiny hell. This pathetic pain. Aldren sucked in the air sharply between his teeth. He would give them more. Why would they not come? Why did they turn back? Were they all cowards? Would they all flee like the earl?

A vague foreboding. That fear...be gone! No more to do with you. What was there to fear? Ah, but he did fear. Enough! His sword and another sword. Battles were between two men. The earl? Where was the earl? He would find him. Yes, he would find him.

There was a lull in the battle. The earl had changed his plans.

Destin took a long drink, then laid down the water skin. There was new life now. New hope. For some reason he hoped. He did not know why. He looked around him with an infant’s curiosity and watched the defenders bandage their wounds. Everything was coming anew like spring foliage. Water, bandages—

A tremendous crash shocked his ears and rock flew everywhere. Destin barely heard Aldren’s “off the wall!” before he blinked and saw that a boulder had smashed away a part of Galther’s fortification. He scrambled to his feet. *Well*, he thought, *that renders it indefensible*. Someone pushed him and he stumbled forward to take cover behind the main walls. He heard a whistling sound and another stone flew overhead. Another stone came, then another. Destin watched their makeshift wall crumble into

oblivion. It felt like somebody had dangled a heavy stone inside his chest, then dropped it. He mumbled he didn't even know what and began to saunter around with no aim whatsoever, looking around with a child's innocence and a bankrupt man's blank stare.

The catapult stopped. There was a long pause and then Sir Aldren called them back to the breach. The command was given in a monotone without any sense of a soul behind it. Aldren paced and made occasional flourishes with his sword. Men shied away from him, but it seemed to Destin that they would still shy away from him if his sword were sheathed. The weight dropped by that imaginary hand sunk deeper in his chest. There was a vague sense of foreboding. He pushed it aside. Spring. Hadn't he been thinking about spring? Grass and flowers and—

He lost his train of thought. The silence around him was almost embarrassing. He looked around him. There were maybe eighty men left. They seemed to be as confused as he was—all but Sir Aldren who paced in his own world with his sword flourishing. They all waited for the attack. None came.

Destin was lost in his thoughts again. He had been thinking of spring. Grass and flowers and—

He snorted, realizing he could never get past that part. Something had caught his eye. A cloud on the horizon. Not a normal cloud—a cloud of dust. It was out in the distance, rising from behind a gently sloping hill hiding the road leading to Rondinburg. He closed his eyes and shook his head, then opened them and squinted to make sure he had seen right. Someone leaned forward beside him. "Do you—?" Yes, the others had seen it as well.

Someone whispered Lord Fairwin. Could it be? But, yes, who else could it be?

"Lord Fairwin! Lord Fairwin!" The cry spread like the breeze.

The man by Destin's side hooted and tackled him in a boyish frenzy. Destin gagged, irrepressible laughter forming in his throat as he tried to shove the fellow off. The man tackled him again and they rolled together back and forth over the stone. Men were cheering.

Sir Aldren had finally snapped out of his madness. "Impossible," he muttered, sheathing his sword and scowling at the others. "Sestin, your spy glass."

Sestin proffered the tool and Sir Aldren took it. He bounded up the nearest steps to the walls and set the glass piece to his eye. The cloud had

journeyed closer now. Little specks of men were just appearing in the distance.

Destin pushed his attacker off with a shrill laugh and ran away with the man chasing him. There was a loud crash of a sudden and Destin looked up to see Sir Aldren slamming his fist into the parapet. It rung like a war drum. "Hopeful fools!" he shouted. "That is no Lord Fairwin. It's the earl's men! His reinforcements!"

Something gave way in Destin's legs and he collapsed. A company of horsemen from the earl's army rode to meet the coming troops, settling any doubt on the matter.

Sir Aldren came flying down the steps and leaped into the city, pacing like a madman. He had thrown off his helmet and his visage was fully exposed. Destin's heart raced and he froze on the spot. He felt a hand on his shoulder and Sestin's voice saying, "I have—never seen Sir..."

Galther leaped down from the breach and stood a ways from Sir Aldren.

"Come," said Sestin, in tones barely audible, "let us do the same."

They leaped down and waited. Sir Aldren passed by them three times without any sign of recognition. The fire in his face had subsided, but it seemed somehow stronger, like a flame that would consume the world, only buried deep in unsearchable caverns. The caverns were filled with the bones of those who had died there. There was a rumbling beneath the caverns, the earth itself frothing with lava.

Destin felt that he might lose his balance. He leaned on Sestin.

"It must be you," Sestin was whispering. "You must talk to him."

Destin's stomach rumbled with nausea. He buried his fingers into Sestin's shoulder and heaved himself slowly upright, daring to gaze into Sir Aldren's eyes. The knight came to a stop. He looked back at Destin. There was no recognition.

"S-s-sir—"

"Fire, lad." Aldren's face grew deathly pale. "Never ending fire and coals."

"S-s-sir—"

Aldren shook his head. "Nothing, lad. Nothing can be done. Rondinburg is finished."

Something akin to passion welled up inside Destin and he found the courage to say one word. He was surprised how clear it was. "Lady..."

Aldren convulsed and clenched his fist. His face turned a shade paler.

"I will destroy the earl, do you hear me? I will destroy the earl!" He turned away and sprinted.

"Wait!" Destin called. He took a step and stopped, reaching out an arm. "Sir Aldren, wait! Where are you going? ...*Sir Aldren!*"

He was gone.

Chapter 9

A lonely lad stood by the small west gate of Rondinburg, surrounded by dust where frequent footfall had worn away the sod or travelers had tracked dirt onto the pavement.

He watched and waited. He was not above the age of twelve, but he held a short spear in his hand and there was an oversized metal cap on his head. His nose had not yet lost the delicateness of its childish form, but his eyes had that narrowed expression which is decidedly mature. There were lines furrowed around them from his habit of squinting at things far away in the city. He shifted around aimlessly now, focusing on the Fairwin palace. He did not focus on his song (for he sang). It was an ode of ancient memory, sung by the patriotic hearts of Rondinborough. He sang it carelessly, but with a good voice.

*My home, the land of Rondinborough
Where barley grows within the furrow
None dare raid and steal the harvest
The land where freedom grows the largest*

*Those who dwell in distant places
Light shines brightly in their faces
When home's hearth at last they rest by
Swear 'tis there they'll breathe their last sigh*

*Rondinburg, the fairest city
All who dwell there pledge their loyalty
And they wake each morning to the hope
That...*

His voice trailed, suddenly taken with what he saw. There was a faint cloud of dust a little ways off. He only noticed it from his infinite familiarity with the view developed from long days of standing there.

There were horse's feet now, sharp clomps spread out, coming at a slow pace. The lad bit the inside of his cheek and his eyebrows came together.

The figure appeared down the road, a knight on his horse. No helmet. He was wounded but held himself in his saddle. The boy recognized Sir

Aldren and swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth. The knight's head was sunken on his chest. The boy could not see Aldren's face, but the sudden tenseness in his muscles told him it was better so.

"H-halt."

The horse instantly stopped. Sir Aldren was immovable.

The lad eyed him up and down and squirmed. "The city has not fallen, has it?"

"...No."

"Then—"

Sir Aldren's voice was a tremor, like the ground before an avalanche. "Let me pass."

The lad shifted his feet. "Sir?"

"Let me pass."

"Where are you going?"

"Rondinburg is done for."

The lad took a step back. "But Sir Ald—"

The knight shot up in his stirrups. His fiery eyes thundered at the lad. "I will defeat the earl! Do you hear me? Fire. Blood. Vengeance. And above all, vengeance!"

The lad sunk to the ground beneath that gaze and the spear fell from his hand.

Sir Aldren trembled and urged his horse up to the gate. He took out a set of keys and seethed for breath.

The boy goped in the dust, scrambling up against the wall. Anything but this. Anything but Sir Aldren. His blood chilled. Aldren was looking at him again.

It was not the same look as before. Aldren's head was sunken again. The gaze was hazy, haggard, and haunted. "I do what...I must. Tell Destin goodbye...if he's alive."

Aldren opened the gate. He raised his head, though it seemed with an effort. He drew his sword, and it looked heavy in his hand. Aldren rode out and closed the gate.

It was a moment before the boy could move again. He cut off a whimper and staggered to his feet. His footing wasn't stable. He leaned on the wall for balance, then stepped forward. He peered out through the gate.

A stretch of soldiers was forming to block Aldren's way. There were a few of the earl's men still there as a precaution in case anyone attempted a

breakthrough. That was exactly what Sir Aldren was doing and they were utterly useless. Aldren's sword flew like lightning. He broke through. He was free.

A lump formed in the lad's throat as he locked the gate with the keys Aldren had left. *And so it is all over. Sir Aldren has gone.*

He turned sharply around at an echoing peal from the Fairwin Palace. It was a trumpet sound as shrill as the screeching wind. It was a signal call. It called him and he would surely come. All of Rondinburg was being called.

Destin braced himself for the impact. Swarms of men smashed into the thread-thin line of Rondinburg. He heard the cries of Sestin, barely audible in the storm-like roar of battle. "Fall back! Fall back!" The inner lunatic in him chuckled at the thought of disobeying—an impossibility. The men of Galldenborough ran them over like a stampede of cattle trampling the tall grass. Men around him fell or were carried along by the flood, screams the backdrop of all noise. Destin leaped into the city. Ravenous wolves pursued him. If they didn't snarl, he imagined it. He broke into a dead run.

Shrill trumpet blasts guided him to the palace. Someone appeared to be gathering all the civilians there for a last stand. It would be a short stand at least. Better than a lot of deaths he could think of. Like starving, and drowning, and—

A spear whizzed by his head and he ducked and put all his energy into the last stretch. There was one more street and then—

The palace appeared before him and he bounded up the steps. The clattering armor of his pursuers was close. He fled down a series of porticos and just caught fading images of the last fugitives fleeing into the palace. He wheeled around at the door and faced his pursuers, sucking in a breath. They stopped ten paces away, some fifteen of them. Hundreds more were streaming down the street and there were thousands out there somewhere. *Bees*, thought Destin. *Just like bees, and all of them full of stingers.*

He brought his sword up in front of him and snorted. Fourteen of the fifteen snickered uneasily and one giant of a brute stepped forward from among them. His shoulders were massive and he held a great two-handed sword more than six feet in length. The brute spit, chewed his deformed

lip, then charged.

Destin took one step back, gritting his teeth as he parried the blow aside. His arms felt like they would shatter, but he swung round for a counter attack. "There's one for Lord Fairwin!"

The brute caught his sword then started to lunge, but stopped, staggered, and fell to the ground. Destin's dagger protruded from his chest.

"And that was for Sir—"

Destin staggered and brought his sword in front of him as the fourteen let out a wild yell and rushed him. He cut off the hand of the foremost, then stumbled back to the doorway where only three could attack him at once. All thoughts jumbled in his mind. It was chaos. Time lost its clarity. Sweat rolled down his back and his vision both blurred and focused. Only Aldren's training brought him through.

There was something going on. A strange shouting. A movement in the enemy. Men before Destin were cut down and Galther and Sestin sprang through.

Sestin let out a wild yell as he cleft through a knight's shoulder. "Three are better than one, lad!" He sent another knight reeling with a kick.

Destin pushed back a smile as he parried a blade and bit his lip. "Where are the others?"

Sestin froze for a moment, almost paying for it with his life. He parried the sword just in time. "God be merciful."

The portico was full now. Steel flashed blinding lights in Destin's eyes. Three swords came at him at once. He didn't even know what he did, but he didn't die. Someone yelled. Destin risked a glance to his right and saw Galther beaten to a knee. He gulped. No way to help him. An axe descended on Galther and Destin looked away. He only heard the crack of the severed skull and the last gasp that sent a tremor through his chest. It was filled with something unspeakable. Both vile and glorious. The world flashed and Destin fought on completely by instinct.

Sestin's voice boomed through the shining haze. "Destin! Inside. *Protect lady Fairwin! I'll hold these dogs myself.*"

Destin parried four blades in a second. "No! I won't leave you." The next instant, Destin felt a boot slam into his stomach that sent him flying down against the floor. Passion filled his veins. He sprang to his feet.

"Your duty!" Sestin thundered.

Destin took a step forward and growled. "You're mad!"

Sestin stood alone holding back all those men. "Smart boy."

Destin wavered. He sucked in a quick breath, turned around, and didn't look back. He raced down the halls, sword still in his hand. All was still. *Where were the people? Where was Lady Fairwin?* His chest was starting to tighten. He ran faster, everywhere looking for a sign of life and finding none.

Reaching the throne room, he nearly fell from relief. All alone, but well, Lady Fairwin stood in the center of the hall. She looked taller than he remembered, more regal, more broken. One hand held a signal trumpet and the other held open a trap door. Destin had spent half his life in the palace, but had never known of such a door.

The hall felt more desolate than a graveyard, but he could hear voices fainter than whispers coming from somewhere far away. He paused before the trap door and looked at Lady Fairwin.

"Enter," she said simply.

He paused, staring into her face, then half bowing to her, he descended the steps into the darkness. The soft tread of her feet came behind him and the trap door closed. He heard a hundred boots clatter distantly overhead. That meant only one thing. The enemy was in the palace.

Chapter 10

Visions of flame and blood passed away. Screams of the dying softened into long mournful wails. Evening rays faded into the bleak shadowy ceiling of the caverns of Rondinburg. Destin groaned, rising from his stone bed. Above him, icicles of stone hung in ancient solemnity like teeth in a yawning mouth that would never close.

It was cold down here. Destin rubbed his eyes and yawned. "How long have I slept?" he whispered.

The caverns mocked him with the eerie grumble, "*How long have I slept? How long have I slept?*"

"Not enough. Why have you woken?"

Destin started. "Who are you?"

"An old man," came the desolate voice. "And weary."

Destin's eyes had adjusted to the dark now. The only light came from a few candles that gasped in the dampness. He could see now that there were vague forms lying all over the room. The old man muttered gibberish and sank down on the stone beside him. Destin squeezed his eyes and took in a slow breath. He would have to go find Lady Fairwin. A mist entered his mind and his eyes began to close. He sank back against the wall. It was so incredibly quiet, like being dead before one's time.

A muffled wail made him start back up that sounded like some haunted spirit heard through wet cloth. Destin panted. *Yes, time to find Lady Fairwin.*

A heavy feeling settled in his chest as he stumbled through the maze of bodies, not even clearly living but for their muttered wails. Walking was difficult. Pain riddled through his skull as he bumped his head into something. He grimaced. They needed more light.

He walked into the next room which was slightly brighter. There was more rustling too, but it reminded him more of bats than humans. No doubt there were bats down here.

He spotted Lady Fairwin at last. She was near a candle, standing. He slowly smiled. She stood in the light while others huddled in the shadows. A ray of hope suddenly found its way into his heart. She was silent though, even when she saw him, and that sent a tendril of fear in to compete. The battle had made him weak and he walked with heavy steps.

He stopped by Lady Fairwin. A few nondescript figures huddled in waiting while she dished something from a barrel into their cupped hands.

Destin coughed and his voice came out groggy. "How long since we came down?"

Lady Fairwin shrugged. "A day maybe. You can't tell without the sun."

Oh, yes, the sun. He had forgotten about that. There was a distant crash and he recoiled. "What was that!?"

A few figures stared at him in horror. He realized of a sudden just how loud he had been. He realized a moment later just how quiet it was. He took a look at the barrel before Lady Fairwin. It was unmilled grain. The thought gave him a dark amusement and he didn't know why.

"They've been doing it for hours," Lady Fairwin whispered. Her voice was soft and sounded like it should have been sweet, but the darkness wouldn't let it.

"Doing what?"

"Wrecking the palace." There was a long pause. "Trying to find us."

The tendrils of fear wormed in him like a living organism. He shifted his feet. "How are we for water?"

"Plenty."

"Food?"

Lady Fairwin sighed, "Our supply can't last four days."

"After that?"

Instantly, Destin regretted having asked it. He knew better.

Lady Fairwin looked at him with one brow tilted and bit her lower lip. "Then we will have nothing to eat."

Some said it was six days since they had entered the caverns, some said it was seven. Most said nothing. They were all hungry.

Destin paced alone in a secluded chamber of the caverns. It was safe here. No little ones looked up at him with those blank, watery eyes that made a lump rise in his throat. His own shadow was his only companion and he felt a kinsmanship to it. He stopped as another candle cast a shadow beside his. He didn't turn around. "Lady Fairwin?"

She breathed, but did not respond. Destin chanced a look and saw her leaning limply against the wall. "Is there anything—"

She nodded, then paused for a moment. "Have you heard the noises?"

Destin looked her over, then nodded. He could hear them now. They were faint roars—a muffled clatter and din that was far far away.

"What does it sound like?" Lady Fairwin asked.

He tried to concentrate. The foggy realizations he had sensed since the noises began came together into a clear form. "It sounds like a battle. Why,"—he took a step forward—"a battle means—"

He stopped, seeing Lady Fairwin's face. Puzzled lines came over his own face, then a vague understanding.

Lady Fairwin sighed. "Destin, be truthful with me. What are his chances of victory?"

There was a long pause. "He" meant Lord Fairwin and Lord Fairwin's army was small compared to the earl's. The earl had lost many men in the siege, but Lord Fairwin had been fighting for two years. The numbers came out clearly in his head, but he hesitated before saying, "Perhaps...one in fifteen with heavy losses. No—I would say one in eight. It is Lord Fairwin."

Lady Fairwin nodded again with her eyes averted, detached from the room's entrance, and walked away. Destin heard her slow walk pattering out in the distance. He looked around him. The room was suddenly darker than he had remembered it. His shadow looked treacherous. He harrumphed, but still left the room. He would see faces again, even if they broke his heart.

He scampered back into the main room and came to an abrupt stop when he entered. Half-whispered conversations floated around in eerie undertones that made the room feel more than ever like the underworld land of Hades. Destin tiptoed until he was in the center of the room. He forgot now what he had come for. He was overcome by a wave of helplessness as Lord Fairwin battled above. He sank to the floor and grew still. The moans, the whispers, and the faraway din of battle mixed together into a dull heartless chant which was somehow lulling. He nodded. There were whispers, whimpers, the sound of dripping, and a distant roar. Destin fell into a fitful sleep.

Destin. That was the one thought in Sir Aldren's mind. He was on the highest hill in Rondinborough, and from that height he could see all that transpired on the plain below. He saw the battle and a taste of nausea formed in his mouth. He swallowed and turned his mount so he wouldn't

see the city.

He closed his eyes for a moment and saw coals. He flashed them open, shaking his head. It would have been better to die. Better than this sudden change of fortune where he could no longer slay the earl. Neither could he fight for the Fairwins, lest he earn a traitor's death. Perhaps he would be hunted.

Destin. The word repeated itself in his mind. A sudden idea fixed itself before him. He rode up to a tree and hesitated. What were the chances that Destin was alive? None. What were the chances that some enemy would see this mark and track him down? It was very possible.

I would do anything for you, sir. Destin had said that, but was it in jest or earnest? He didn't know. Destin's name entered his mind again. That settled it. Perhaps he would be hunted down, but he would do it anyway. He pulled out his dagger and marked in the tree. *I, Aldren, go this way.* He marked an arrow.

He sheathed his dagger and looked out before him. Far away, at the very end of what his eye could see, was a barren wasteland. His face became like iron. That was where he was headed.

Destin felt a soft hand on his shoulder. He woke and saw Lady Fairwin standing over him. He rose. The whispers continued and the dripping, but something was missing. Lady Fairwin whispered in his ear, "The battle is silent."

Yes, that was it.

Destin kicked a stone and looked at the floor. "It will likely begin tomorrow."

Lady Fairwin's stumbling breath caught his attention. He looked into her lowered eyes and waited.

"Could the battle be...over?"

Destin's heart sank. Yes, it could. It could very easily. "...My lady—"

He stopped. Her eyes rose to meet his. "Destin." She said it with that same simplicity she had told him to enter the caverns. "I want to see above."

He started from the wall. "But you can't!"

The whispers stopped. A few hollow faces turned to look at him. Destin looked at them, then back at Lady Fairwin. Her eyes had not

relented. He exhaled. "Then I had better come with you."

A faint smile formed on Lady Fairwin's lips. She looked again at the ground, then abruptly spun on her heel and walked away. Destin sprang from the wall and followed after her.

The people parted before them. They seemed to understand instinctively that Lady Fairwin had some purpose and resolution and that she would see to carrying it through.

Destin followed her into the room where the staircase was. No one ever entered that room. Perhaps it was because the staircase connected it to a world of memories still too fresh. "Are you ready?" she asked.

Destin nodded, but when they were at the top and she opened the trap door, his heart raced.

The hall was empty. Desolate was a better word. Walls were broken down, rugs were scattered about and torn, furniture was smashed. It seemed that they were standing among ancient ruins and that this was an abandoned landmark left after a great disaster centuries prior that no living creature had since dared to enter. Except, there were living creatures, and very near.

Destin scrambled for a hiding place as soon as he heard the voices coming. He just barely made it behind an upturned couch before the voices entered the hall. He held his breath and then looked around for Lady Fairwin. He didn't see her. Worse, he heard her, and she was running in the wrong direction. A thousand horrid scenes filled his mind and he leaped up from his hiding spot and ran after her.

Yes, Lady Fairwin was running, he might say charging, and toward her charged a blood-stained warrior. Destin froze as they met. All his senses seemed to turn off and he was only awakened by the voice of another knight. "My lord, don't—" but then the other knight stopped himself and reeled.

Destin let out a wild yelp and rushed on the other knight, yanking off his helmet. "Edward—why, the thane of Dorth!"

The thane cried out and shoved Destin off. "Help me, Lord Fairwin!"

But Lord Fairwin was too busy to heed him. The thane rose shakily to his feet. "Why, I-I—"

"Edward, how?"

"Why, I-I..." He grabbed Destin by the shoulders, staring at him, his own face a battle of incredulity and hope. "Are you—how can you—" He shook Destin. "How many left?"

"Few. But, Edward—"

The thane rattled him like a musical instrument. "Call it an alliance, lad! Call it many friends helping Rondiborough fight a treacherous earl. Call it the end of the whole war and our last battle fought. Call it victory!" A choke between a laugh and a cry. "Call it—" He stopped as Lady Fairwin came toward him.

He took her hand in his and pressed it tightly, but seemed forever in speaking. The words came out at last with a tremble. "You have—suffered much."

There were tears in Lady Fairwin's eyes. She could not respond at first. She pressed his hand in turn. Then she said what was the only thing that could be said—what were the thane's own words to her before the battle. "I trust and know that Right will not utterly perish from the earth."

THE END

Howdy. Did you enjoy reading this book? If so, I'd appreciate your help spreading the word about it.

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