

## **Chronicles of Koeleth**

### **Chapter II**

#### **Bandits and Thieves**

“Well, old man, can you tell us more about that?” the bartender asked.

“What? Oh, you mean how Tom saved Cleo’s life? Well, sure, I most certainly can. I know the story well. Now, let me think. Alright, here it is:”

To hear it from Tom, you’d think it was no big deal, and, to hear it from Cleo, you’d think it was downright miraculous, but regardless of whom you heard it from, the fact of the matter is that Erwin and Cleo owed Tom their livelihood and possibly their lives. It happened roughly six months ago, when Tom found himself wandering into a little town on the edge of the rolling hill province of Ramsrest, and it is an adventure he will not soon forget.

Tom was headed home to Lilly Pond, a slightly larger village in the Sorowa’s Cradle marshlands, when he passed through the unassuming village of Pasture’s Edge. There was ample time left in the day, so he had planned on heading all the way to Cronehall, but an eerie silence hung over the town. The streets were empty, the shops closed and the mules and horses restless. Tom turned his attention to the one place that seemed to have life left in it: the Drunk Skunk. The local tavern looked rather run down, but that hardly mattered at the moment. He approached the bar, intent on going in and asking for information, but he stopped shortly before reaching the small porch. He caught sight of a troublesome scene through one of the windows. Creeping up to the window, he peered over the edge to see what was happening without being seen himself. What he saw confirmed his initial suspicions: a brown-haired, bald-faced young man dressed in black clothes was standing over a middle-aged man with an orange beard as thick as his large belly. A group of eleven similarly dressed men occupied the rest of the tavern, including two who were holding a young woman against her will.

Tom could not quite hear the whole conversation, but he did catch snippets of conversation about “how expensive being a bandit has become” and how “you don’t want us going out of business, do you?” This kind of behavior was absolutely abhorrent to Tom, and he would not stand for it. Picking up a rock from the ground, he threw it at the stables at the back of the inn. Striking the wooden wall, it made a powerful thud that distracted the attention of the bandits. Stealth and diversions were not Tom’s preferred form of combat, but when you are

outnumbered so significantly, you make do. The bandits quickly resumed their business, but Tom grabbed up another rock and lobbed it at the stable wall. Once again, it caught the attention of the bandits, but only briefly. A third rock stirred the bandits to action. Three of the bandits were sent out the back door of the building. A couple pebbles tossed at their heads served to pull their focus to the windowless side of the building. As they approached Tom's position, he deftly tripped up the first bandit with his halberd and knocked him unconscious. Alerted to the threat, one of the bandits ran back to warn the others, while the other attempted to fight Tom. Using the length of his halberd to his advantage, Tom easily defeated the knife-wielding thug. A well-placed wall of water, doing what it does so well, blocked the third man's path. Tom quickly rendered the man senseless and proceeded to the back door, avoiding the relatively well guarded front door. Somehow, the commotion managed to go by unnoticed. Tom took advantage of this apparent oversight and knocked on the back door.

"Is that you, Paul?" the thug guarding the door asked.

Tom grunted in response.

"Come on in."

Opening the door, the bandit was shocked to see that the man standing before him was not, in fact, Paul. A solid punch to the face knocked the grunt off his feet. A solid kick to the nether regions ensured he stayed down. Another bandit charged Tom, but Tom sidestepped just in time to watch the criminal stumble through the doorway, falling on his face. With four bandits incapacitated and one temporarily disoriented, seven bandits remained, including the young man from before, who seemed to be the leader. Two more bandits flanked Tom, one on each side, but an elbow to the face of the one on the right and a swift jab to the left with the halberd's shaft put an end to them. The reckless bandit from before had recovered, and he shoved his knife into Tom's back, only to discover that Tom was armored. Tom knocked the knife out of his would be killer's hand and delivered him the same treatment as his comrades. The bandit furthest from Tom pulled out a throwing knife and tossed with great skill at his head. It was only luck that saved Tom, as one of the flanking bandits, restored to his senses, pulled him to the ground. The knife stuck solidly into the wall. Tom kicked the man in the neck, removing him from the conflict. Three more bandits rushed Tom, hoping their numbers would help them, but Tom used his all too familiar magic to knock the men down, giving him time to get to his feet. Lifting up the nearest unconscious bandit to use as a human shield, he advanced across the

bar. The three downed bandits had recovered and hesitated to renew their assault. After a loud command from the leader, they attempted to surround Tom, but he bowled them over with the limp body of their companion. The knife thrower took advantage of his lowered defenses and lobbed another knife in his direction. Tom managed to dodge just in time, unintentionally landing on one of the still conscious bandits, relieving him of his wakefulness. The two other bandits fled. Now, the only remaining bandits were the leader and the knife thrower. The leader stepped forward and addressed Tom.

“Wow. Impressive. You’re a natural wrecking ball. May I ask the name of the man who felt the need to involve himself in something that doesn’t concern him.” The sleek man sneered.

“Thomas Riversedge, at your service.”

“At my service, eh? Well, then, do me the service of getting lost.”

“I’m afraid that is one thing I cannot do, Mister...”

“Julian Whitehorn. You may have heard of Julian the Greedy, of the Greedy Grove Bandits?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t, and with a cheesy name like that, it’s no wonder why. You’re second rate at best.”

“Harsh. Well, what’s your claim to fame, then?”

“Oh, nothing. Just a traveling mercenary, ridding the world of scum like you.”

“Oh, scum, am I? Well, that attitude just got you a death sentence. Billy, take him out. Then, we can clean out the old man, and have our way with his daughter.”

The knife thrower didn’t say a word, but he pulled out several throwing knives. Billy displayed his competence with them by unleashing a volley of knives at all of Tom’s weak points. Fortunately, Tom’s chest was armored and the thick cloth that wrapped his neck managed to deflect the knives. Only his head was unprotected, and he deftly used the wooden shaft of his halberd to block the knives. Before he could pull out more knives, Tom charged him, knocking him to the ground. A solid kick to the head knocked him senseless.

“Phew, good thing I took care of him. He seemed like he might be difficult if I let him keep going.”

“You’re good, I’ll give you that. Your biggest challenge is me, though.” Julian pulled out what appeared to be a segmented broadsword. Though it was rare, Tom knew what kind of weapon it was right away. It was a snake sword. When swung, it would separate into several

sharp segments of the blade, all attached by a cord running through the center. “This is my Envious Serpent, given to me by the lesser guardian Gred, servant to the guardian Desiren.” He lashed out with the weapon, and functioned exactly as it should. Tom parried it with his halberd, but the speed of the attack surprised him.

“So, you’re blessed, too?” Tom asked.

“Indeed. Who blessed you?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I carry the symbol of Sorowa, both the weapon and the element.”

“None of her servants, then?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Ah, well, no matter. Let’s decide this now.” Julian let out another swift attack, which Tom once again parried. “How’s the temperature over there?”

Tom noticed that he was feeling rather warm. “It’s refreshingly cool,” he responded.

“That’ll change soon enough.” A couple more blows rattled the room. The room began to grow humid and hot. “My sword ramps up the heat every time it strikes something. Soon, you’ll be boiling like a lobster!” A sadistic smile lit up his face.

A few more clashes had the room sweltering. Tom was sweating up a storm, but Julian seemed unfazed. He surmised that the magic must not affect the user. Nevertheless, the environment had changed, and Tom could use that. He erected another wall and steam began to roll through the room.

“Clever. I can’t see you. I can hear you, though.” Julian’s fist struck Tom’s chin.

“Damn, that hurt. You’re strong.” Tom disappeared back into the thick steam. He grabbed a dagger from the ground and ran over to the tied up girl and cut her loose. Handing her the knife, he told her to get her father and leave the building. In order to give her that opportunity, Tom attacked Julian in an extremely obvious manner, pulling his attention away from the tavern owner. In response to this attack, Julian wrapped his snake sword around the halberd’s shaft, attempting to pull it from Tom’s hands, but Tom held fast to his weapon. A fierce struggle ensued, both trying to wrest the other’s weapon from their hands. The stalemate would give the young woman plenty of time to escape with her father. Tom broke off the wrestling match and a fierce battle ensued. After several strikes and parries, Tom finally got in close enough to grab Julian’s right arm, effectively ending his onslaught. Tossing aside his halberd, he jabbed his fist into Julian’s face. The disoriented bandit leader dropped his strange

weapon. Before he could come to his senses, Tom grabbed up Julian's weapon and lifted the spell that was affecting the air. While a blessed weapon is most effective in the hands of the one it was designed for, anyone can use it. Grabbing Julian by the collar, he pushed him towards the door.

"Now, I'll give you two options: you can leave and never bother this town again, or I can end your criminal life right here. I'm not a big fan of criminals to begin with, but people like you, who threaten innocent men's lives and rape young women, deserve only the worst of punishments. So, I'm cutting you a break. I would take this opportunity at life, if I were you."

"Heh. Fine. I'll go. I'll never touch this town again," Julian laughed in response.

"Glad we understand each other."

As they reached the door, Julian pulled something out of his jacket pocket. He swiftly turned and jabbed a dagger into Tom's unguarded left shoulder. Tom winced and took several steps back.

"Ha! That'll teach you to tell me what to do! You have no idea what you've done! You thought you were saving this place, but now I'm going to come back with the full force of my gang and raze this town to the ground, starting with this tavern! I'm going to destroy the lives of every single soul in this town! The men will be our slaves and the women our playthings! And before I kill you, I want you to know it will be all your fault, Thomas Riversedge! Hahahahaha!"

Suddenly, a sharp pain in his gut interrupted his maniacal laughter. Looking down, he observed that his own sword was sheathed in his stomach, blood adorning the blade. Tom was standing over the now crouching figure, a mixture of disdain and regret in his eyes.

"I gave you fair warning. I gave you a chance, Julian Whitehorn. I didn't want to kill you, but you had to go and pull that stupid stunt. That's my strong arm, too."

Julian's only response was to let out a groan. His final breath spoke of rage and humiliation at his loss, but more than that it spoke of the fear of his impending death. His lifeless form collapsed onto the ground.

"What a shame," Tom heard a voice behind him. The middle-aged man and his daughter had returned to the tavern. "Julian was always a troublemaker, but we never thought he'd go this far. Six years ago, when he left town, no one knew what happened to him. Then he came back with a rovin' group of miscreants and ne'er-do-wells."

"That truly is a shame."

“It served him right, though, and he won’t be missed. So, don’t look so glum, Mista-?”

“Riversedge. Thomas Riversedge. Even if he did deserve it, it’s no man’s right to mete out his own justice.”

“That may be, but there are few guards out this way, and they appreciate any help they can get. Besides, as Ah said, no one will miss this one. Now, considerin’ ya have just saved mine and my daughta’s lives, we owe ya somethin’. What can Ah do for ya?”

“Oh, you don’t have to do anything for me. I am just happy to be of service,” Tom responded gleefully.

“Nonsense! There must be somethin’ we can do. Ya’re a mercenary, right? I should pay ya.”

“Honestly, I just happened to come by. I helped out of my own free will. You didn’t sign any contract saying you had to pay me. Please, it’s no big deal.”

“Surely, there must be somethin’, though!”

“Um, well, I guess it’s a bit late in the day to be traveling. I hate to impose, but could you give me a room for the night? I’ll pay if you need me to.”

“Oh, Ah don’t think that’ll be an issue. And you needn’t pay us. We owe you this one.”

“Thanks! I do feel a little bad about damaging your bar even more than it already had been, though. Please, allow me to help you clean up this place.”

“Ah, that would be much appreciated.”

Tom was about to start cleaning when he heard a soft voice from over his shoulder.

“Um, Mister Riversedge,” the young woman from before squeaked, her blushing face staring at the floor. “Thank ya so much!” With that, she flung her arms around Tom’s neck, wrapping him in a suffocating hug.

“Can’t...breath...!” Tom gasped for air.

“Cleo!” Erwin shouted. “Cleo! Give the man some air!”

“Ah’m...Ah’m sorry,” Cleo said, releasing her death grip. If her face was red before, it was an unhealthy shade of crimson now.”

“Haha! That’s quite alright, Miss...?”

“Cleopatra Horsekeep,” she whimpered, still blushing.

“That’s right! Ah haven’t introduced myself neither!” the man said. “Ah am Erwin Horsekeep, and ya already seem to be acquainted with my daughta Cleo. She can be a bit dramatic.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet the both of you,” Tom politely responded. “Cleopatra, huh? That’s an interesting name. From a Nagyb language. Ygimi, I think. Beautiful name, but not one I would expect in the heart of Koeleth.”

“Yeah, it was her mother’s idea. She loved the name. We decided that if we evah had a daughta, we’d name her that. And then we had our adorable Cleo!”

“Daddy! Stop!” Cleo cried. “Please, just call me Cleo.”

“Well, Cleo,” Tom began. “I’m glad I was able to help you out. Please, no more headlocks, though.”

“Yessir, Tom!” Cleo shouted.

“Oh, it’s ok to talk to a stranger as if you know them, huh?” he said jokingly.

“Well, sorry! Mr. Riversedge, then!” the girl said with a huff.

“I like you. You’re funny.”

She blushed again.

“Oh, Erwin, there is one more thing I would ask of you.”

“Anythin’ you want,” the old barkeep said.

“I would like to keep Julian’s sword, if that’s alright by you.”

“Take it! He’s caused enough trouble, and that blade is only a reminder of that! Stupid kid, he could have done somethin’ with himself.”

“Thanks.”

After safely securing the snake sword in his pack, Thomas went to work on restoring the bar to working order and helping Cleo and Erwin recollect themselves. He took up Erwin’s generous offer and stayed. He left early the next morning, and Erwin and Cleo saw him off. Over the next several months, he found himself travelling through Pasture’s Edge quite a bit, and he developed a strong bond with the Horsekeep family. Inevitably, Cleo confessed her affections to Tom, only to be rejected, on the grounds that he saw her more as a little sister than as a potential girlfriend. This did not deter her, and she always made sure to express interest whenever he was in town.