

Chronicles of Koeleth

Chapter I

Guardians

“Hello, old man. Got another story for us?” the young barkeep asked jovially. “Why don’t you tell us a story from the old days?”

The old man sighed, reflecting on the many tales he knew. After searching deep in the recesses of his long memory, he latched on to an adventure a good friend of his once had.

“Alright, alright. Just as impatient as your grandmother, I see. Well, here’s one from a long time ago, about a young man, about your age if I recall correctly, and how he met an unlikely comrade.” The old man took a deep breath and began his story:

Long before the days of humanity, when strange beasts still tread upon the earth and fell monstrosities ruled the ocean, a being of limitless power reigned over the entire world. An ancient god of fathomless wisdom and might, it carved the land to fulfill its desires. The deity, whose name Time itself has forgotten, drove all of creation, from the miracles that ferry in life to the tragedies that ferry in death. By its hand, and its hand alone, the mightiest behemoths fell before the meekest of rodents. This force changed lush forests to vapid wastelands, and lifeless tundras into fertile plains. For countless ages this god marched through the world, shaping it as its mind saw fit. In solitude and isolation, it formed the world. This would not last forever, though. There came a time when the deity began to feel its loneliness. It was unique in all of existence; there were no other beings like it. It desired a companion with whom it could communicate and sympathize. To this end, it began the process of creating a new being, one who could think and feel and reason.

The creature it made was strange and unfit for the wild world it was born into. The creature was frail and weak, not able to withstand the hardships of nature. Its flesh was thin and easily torn, soft and feeble, unlike the beasts of the land, whose hides were tough like leather. Standing erect, the creature was ill prepared for running or swimming. Climbing was a difficulty, and flight an impossibility. It could not hold its breath for more than a few minutes, nor could it breathe through gills, like the beasts of the sea. It had neither scales nor spines, neither claws nor fangs by which it could defend itself. The creature was physically inferior to any other in all of creation.

The creature was not without its strengths, however. Of all creation, only this creature was granted the gift of speech, so that the creature could communicate with its creator and its fellow creatures. The deity also gifted the creature with a mind, so that it could observe and reason. By this gift, it could adapt to and control the world around it in a way that no other creature could. The final gift of the creator was the gift of the soul. The soul would be the force that drove the creature to explore the world, to learn about its creator, and to express itself through its voice and mind. The deity saw this creature, and it called the creature “human,” and humanity multiplied and filled the earth.

As time went on, humans grew so enamored with the created world that they grew distant from the creator. The deity once more felt the pain of isolation and solitude. The deity did not create another mortal creature, however; instead, it spawned from its own being a myriad of lesser beings who it called “guardians.” Each guardian took on an aspect of its progenitor, and they spread across the world. The guardians developed unique personalities and appearances, mirroring humanity in many regards. For many centuries they lived in peace and community with each other, with humans, and with their parent, sharing the blessings of the deity with humanity. Humanity became afflicted with strife and tragedy, however, and the guardians focused their attention on aiding man. The deity, whose own creation had strayed so far from it, left its broken creation to its own devices and allowed the guardians to attend to the situation as they saw fit. The humans warred with one another over wealth and resources. They carved the land into separate territories, forming armies with which they could defend themselves. The guardians saw all this and began to similarly choose factions, allying themselves with the humans whose ideals fit their own. As the guardians lent increasing quantities of power to the humans, the humans began to revere them even more highly than they once had revered the god. In exchange for their aid, the guardians were worshipped and temples were built to honor them.

The guardians became so powerful through this worship that it became desirable to choose for themselves human champions to spread their influence in the world. They called these champions “paragons,” and the paragons served as guides and protectors of humanity. In the earliest days of history, the paragons held positions of political strength and power. The hero

kings of the early nations were amongst these select warriors, and they birthed thousands of legends through their deeds. The hero kings allied themselves with one another to increase their might, and the alliances they formed grew into prosperous nations. In those days, there were countless more nations, but as time marched on, three nations showed themselves to be greater than all the rest. Even to this day, those three nations stand. They are the United Tribes of the Nagyb Desert, the Ariluo Empire, and the Kingdom of Koeleth. These three nations stand above all others in wealth and power.

The Kingdom of Koeleth is governed by guardians who empathize with the plight of humanity. The vast pantheon is felt in the daily lives of the people. When we weep, and when we rejoice; when we hope, and when we despair; when we love, and when we hate; whenever we allow our hearts to run free, the guardians of our great nation are there watching over us.

“Or at least that’s how the legend goes,” the black bearded young man pondered aloud to the audience of children at his feet. “I think.”

“That was kind of boring, mister!” one boy shouted.

“Yeah! I want a funny story!” another proclaimed.

“Yeah!” The orphaned army erupted into a raucous clamor.

“Hey, hey! Give me a break. I don’t know that many stories!” the man protested. “Tell you what, next time I’ll bring some better stories with me.”

“You don’t have to leave already, do you, mister?” a little girl asked.

“I’m sorry, but I do,” he kindly responded. “I have other places I need to be. I have important things I need to do.”

“Please don’t go!” one child asked.

“Yeah, stay here!” his juvenile audience begged.

“Now, now, children. He can’t be expected to stay here all the time.” A young woman came to the man’s aid. “Mister Tom is a busy man.”

A unanimous cry of disappointment rose from the children.

“Mister Tom,” a little blonde girl with a teddy bear mumbled. “Will you come back?”

“What?” Thomas said, as he wrapped her in a bear hug. “Of course, I will, Anna. Don’t you worry. I’ll be back.”

“Now, say goodbye to Mister Tom, everyone,” the young woman told the children.

A noisy farewell followed, and then the orphans ran off to play. The two adults exited the building and stood outside for a few silent moments.

“You know, the orphans really do love you.” The young woman finally broke the silence. “It would make them so happy if you stuck around. And they aren’t the only ones.”

“I know, Angela,” the man named Tom replied. “But I really do have other places I need to be. You know that.”

“Why, though?” Angela pleaded. “Why can’t you stay here with me? We could get married, settle down and have a family. You wouldn’t have to go on these dangerous missions anymore! I wouldn’t have to worry about you!”

“I’m sorry, Angela, but I can’t just leave my work unfinished. Just a couple more jobs. If you wait for me to finish these jobs, I’ll put away my weapon for good. I’ll come back here, and we can live our own happily-ever-after life. Just let me finish these few jobs!”

“No! It’s never going to be enough! As soon you finish these jobs, you’ll find another job that will require your attention, and I’ll be left waiting again!” Angela’s voice rose, a mixture of anger and sadness. “What then?!”

“I promise these will be my last jobs! Just wait for me! That’s all I am asking for!” Tom desperately searched for the words needed to quell Angela’s fears, but none came.

“I can’t do that, Tom! I have to know now! Which is it? Me or your job?” Angela’s eyes were locked on Tom’s, desperate and hopeful all at once.

Tom considered the situation that was before him. On the one hand, the woman who stood before him loved him, and he felt much the same way towards her. It would be easy to just leave the rest of the world behind, duties be damned, and live here with her. On the other hand, he was a mercenary, whose duty it was to go where he was told to go and do what he was told to do. He was not a headhunter or an assassin like many mercenaries. No, his own morals impeded that. Instead, he was primarily an armed escort. Nevertheless, the handful of jobs he did have were of a certain degree of importance. Two of his current missions involved delivering important items to certain nobles who did not trust normal couriers to safely do it. He also had a mission which was of utmost importance to his guardian, Sorowa.

“I’m sorry.” The words struck Angela with the force of a war hammer, crushing the hope in her eyes. Even Tom seemed shocked at his own words. “Angela, I love you, and I wish you

would wait for me, but I won't force you. However, these jobs that I currently have are too important to just be tossed away. If that means we can't be together any longer, so be it."

"Well," Angela shakily said, mustering up what little strength she had. "If that is the case, Mr. Thomas Riversedge, then I must bid you a fond farewell." Her voice trembled with agony. "I hope that your life brings you nothing but good things. However, I cannot be a part of it, if I am less important than your stupid work."

"Angela, I--" Tom began, but was quickly cut off.

"Please, Mr. Riversedge, do be on your way."

"Alright." The word fell from Tom's mouth quietly, like a single drop of water into a calm lake. He offered up a weak smile and responded. "Ms. Angela Sunfire, I wish you only the best. May your life bring you all the happiness and joy that I could not. Farewell." Thomas grabbed his weapon, the halberd called "Hardened Tear," which was leaning against the building, and began to walk away. Before he got too far, he heard Angela call to him one last time.

"Oh, and one last thing, Tom. Please, don't forget your promise to the children. You told them you would visit again. Don't forget."

Upon hearing this, Tom let out a genuine laugh.

"That I can do, ma'am! That I can do!"

Thomas and Angela shared one last laugh before Tom finally left. Angela watched as the strange man walked away. He looked no less raggedy than he did when he first came into town as a stranger two months ago, with his old cloak and rundown clothing, and, yet, to Angela, it was like watching the greatest thing to ever happen to her disappear. A single tear rolled down her cheek. She could only let that one go. She had other things to attend to at the moment. She turned back to orphanage and rejoined the children.

The smile on Thomas' face did a poor job of hiding the anguished sorrow in his heart. His decision was not an easy one to make, but if he went back on it now, he would never respect himself. His work required his attention, and that was no lie. The best thing to do now was to grin and bear it. He had another, unofficial mission to attend to at this exact moment. Tom jogged off towards the eastern gate of Stonewall.

"Hey, sir," Tom addressed the guard at the gate. "Do you happen to know if another man came by this way a while ago?"

“You mean that other mercenary? The greasy haired one?” the guard asked quizzically.

“The one wearing all the black and carrying two spears?” Tom answered back.

“That fellow, eh? Yes, I do recall him coming by this way. You’re a friend, then?”

“You could say that. Anyways, where did he go?”

“I believe he continued eastward. He was carrying little more than his weapons. A bit odd, if you ask me. Normally, solo travelers are better prepared than that. Like yourself, actually. You seem very well prepared, though your attire could use a bit of a refresher.” The guard was not wrong. Thomas’ worn out old cloak and ragged trousers were a sight to behold. If one looked close enough, one could see the faint glimmer of rusty steel through the holes in his tattered shirt, the only indicator that he had any armor at all. “I’m sure you’re not here for idle chatter, though. Your friend should be a mile or so down the road by now, given his lackadaisical pace.”

“Ah, thank you, sir.”

“Not a problem.”

After exchanging parting salutations with the guard, Thomas charged off in the direction of his fellow hireling. Just as the guard had predicted, about a mile and a half down the road, Thomas spotted a slick-haired, dark-clad man dozing underneath a tree. Two spears leaning against the trunk of the tree confirmed his identity.

“Aaron! Aaron!” Tom shouted.

The commotion caused by the hired guardsman stirred the thief from his slumber. Without opening his eyes, he responded.

“Thomas Riversedge,” the blackguard responded flatly.

“Hey, Aaron, where you headed next?”

“Somewhere,” Aaron Deepscar exhaled nonchalantly, his gaunt figure slowly stirring from its rest.

“Well, if you’re not busy, how about we travel together for a while?”

“I see. So since we made such an excellent team for one job, you think we should just always work together?”

“Well, if you want to put it that way . . . yes! What do you say?”

“I say that I don’t need help and that you seem quite cozy staying where you are now.” Now standing, the difference in height between the 6’2” rogue and the 5’9” halberdier was apparent.

“What are you implying?” Tom cautiously retorted.

“The way I see it is this: you had a beautiful young woman pining after your heart, and her feelings were obviously reciprocated, so you should have settled down here. I’d say you’ve got it made. Especially given the way you talked before. Not that I care.” True to his statement, his words fell out like rocks from the side of a cliff, cold and passionless.

“Heh,” Tom sighed after a brief moment of silence. “Well, unfortunately, that is no longer a viable option.”

“So, she dumped you, then,” Aaron said more than asked.

“Long story short, yes. She wanted me to stay with her and live the life you have just described. I must admit, it was tempting, but I have my duties. I do regret not staying, but I can’t go back now.”

“No, you can’t,” Aaron emotionlessly stated. “Unless you intend to go back and apologize.”

“No, I made a decision and I have to live with it.”

“Oh, Disciplina’s little paragon, now, are you? Following all the rules?” Aaron jeered jokingly.

“That’s ridiculous. I don’t have the kind of dedication and self-control for that. No, of all the guardians, my goddess is still Sorowa, the Lady of Infinite Tears.”

“And you are certainly doing a fine job. You break every girl’s heart, don’t you? I thought you were supposed to be the sad one, though.” Aaron pushed just a bit too far.

“Hey!” Thomas snapped. “Angela chose to leave me just as much as I chose to leave. It’s not all my fault! And it’s not my fault that Jennifer didn’t tell me anything!”

“No, but she wasn’t exactly discreet,” Aaron interjected.

“And Cleo is like a little sister to me! That just seems . . . wrong,” Tom continued, ignoring his irksome companion. “And that kitten doesn’t count! But it was an adorable kitten . . .”

“I didn’t say anything about the kitten,” Aaron said.

“But you thought it!” Tom was not wrong. “Now, what about my proposal?”

“After all that, you still want to travel with me? And after you just broke up with your girlfriend. I don’t know, Tommy, I’m not sure if I’m ready. Don’t you think we’re rushing this relationship?”

“Ha. Ha. Humorous, indeed. My poor word choice aside, why not team up?”

“My next mission is a headhunting mission. I know how much you love those.”

“If that filthy business is what’s on your plate, I may pass on this idea. I thought you were just a thief, though.”

“I’m kidding. You have the most entertaining reactions. Yeah, I guess, we can team up for now. At least, I’ll be a little less bored. Where are you headed next?”

“I can tell this journey is going to be so much fun,” Tom rolled his eyes. “My next destination is Rams Crown, the Capital of Ramsrest Province. Lord Ramsrest has a package for him from the Nagyb Desert, and he does not want attention drawn to it.”

“So, he gives it to a mercenary?” Aaron rightly questioned.

“A mercenary he can trust. I came recommended by a certain Lady Heronslake, of Great Heron Lake.”

“Oh, yeah? How’d you get such a good reference?” Aaron asked, as disinterested in the conversation as ever.

“Well, it’s a funny story, actually. I was hired to guard her on her way to the capital of Despar’s Respite. Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t alone. I was with three others.” Tom was recalling the story fondly.

“Who else was there?”

“Celeste Firemouth, Yuuta Seeker, and Michael Stubbornfoot. Celeste Firemouth you should know from her notorious anger. Seeker and Stubbornfoot are C-rank fighters for the Valiant Blades guild.”

“The Valiant Blades, huh? They’re that famous warrior guild that serves the guardian Valro, right?”

“That’s them.”

“Why did Lady Heronslake hire escorts? Shouldn’t she have had her own personal guard?”

“I guess she wanted to have that extra protection. Not to mention that the road between Great Heron City and Despar’s Throne is fraught with danger. None of her guard had any blessed weapons, and bandits practically sprout up like weeds in the Blacknight Forest.”

“True. I guess a little magical assistance can’t hurt. What brought her to Despar’s Respite?”

“Political issues. I didn’t ask. Lord Alexander of Despar’s Respite did mention something about trade, but that’s all. For the follower of Apathos, you sure seem to care a lot.”

“Not at all.”

“At any rate, I don’t know why she didn’t hire all Valiants, but it’s a good thing she didn’t, because a courier caught up to us early in the journey. He said he came from Vincent Anderson, the guild-master of the Valiant Blades, and the paragon of Valro. Seeker and Stubbornfoot left with the courier after returning their payment to the Lady.”

“That must have been during the guild war between the Inquisitors and the Valiants. An attack on Valro’s Hall is the only thing that could pull those warriors from their job,” Aaron remarked.

“Celeste and I being the only two escorts left, we had our work cut out for us when we reached Blacknight. The caravan was attacked several times, but we came out mostly unscathed. One poor fellow, however, didn’t make it. A young man, Alfred Olson, no older than you or I, triggered an arrow trap. Poor guy was shot full of poisoned bolts, but I managed to erect a wall of water with my Hardened Tear to protect the rest of us. The bandits attacked, thinking we were weakened, but Celeste tore through their ranks using her Animose Tongue, giving us time to escape.”

“Wait, Animose Tongue? Is that a blessed weapon, too? What kind of weapon would have that name?”

“Animose Tongue is a double-edged axe, blessed by Angern with the fire strike spell. It’s an offensive ability, meant to deal damage, unlike my water wall skill, which is obviously defensive and designed to protect me from harm.”

“I get it, Tom, I’m not a child. I have a blessed weapon, too, remember? Two, in fact.” His calm voice didn’t reflect any real irritation, though a hint of exasperation pervaded his final statement.

“Right, sorry. Anyways, when Celeste finally caught up to us, she was, predictably, rather irate. After what is best described as a verbal dogfight with Lady Heronslake, Celeste threatened to leave the party. As we were still in the middle of the forest, I decided now was a good time to intervene.”

“On whose side?”

“Lady Heronslake’s, of course.”

“Why not just let Firemouth leave, then?”

“I told you, we were still in the forest. I reminded Celeste that she knew the risks before she took the job, but she wouldn’t hear it. I had to offer her a portion of my own payment to finally settle her down.”

“Why didn’t the Lady offer her either of the Valiant’s payments?”

“She did. Both of their payments, in fact, but she wouldn’t give Celeste a single coin more. She claimed that she was already dipping too deep into her treasury for this journey. The money in the treasury was supposed to be for funding the local government and then for aiding the people, she said. Celeste got greedy, though, still a little mad about ‘being left behind.’”

“Aren’t you generous? A follower of Empathae, too, or maybe Compassia?”

“I am absolutely positive that I follow Sorowa, thank you. Besides, if I weren’t being paid so handsomely, I wouldn’t have been able to give much up. Fortunately, for both the caravan and my wallet, the rest of the journey went smoothly. We got to Despar’s Throne safely and squared away all the payments. The town guard and the Lady’s personal guard took it from there. Before she left, though, Lady Heronslake requested I escort her on the return journey, as well. For twice the pay, of course. How could I refuse?”

“Sounds like you caught her fancy. Quite the ladykiller,” Aaron dryly jested.

“Hardly. Trustworthy mercs are hard to find, I guess, and I guess I fit the bill. If anything, though, she was trying to hook me up with her granddaughter, the younger Lady Heronslake.”

“Wait, so Lady Heronslake is old, then?”

“Venerable and wise, yes.”

“More like wizened.”

“Show some respect. Anyways, apparently, Lady Heronslake the Younger is notoriously fickle and only seeks out a very particular type of man for her mate. No one has yet to capture her heart, even among the nobles.”

“Fickle, indeed. Still, mercs are an odd choice for a noble. You must be dreadfully righteous.”

“I try to be a good guy, that’s all. But, yeah, nobles are a strange breed.”

As Thomas and Aaron continued to walk and talk, a commotion began to stir in the streets. Since leaving the town, the crowd had grown from a few scattered people on an empty highway to a throng of merchants, soldiers, bards and all other manner of travelers. However, the great commotion was distinct from the bustle of a busy road. A man dressed in street clothes was running in Tom and Aaron’s direction, highway guards in hot pursuit.

“Stop that man! He’s a thief!” one of the guards shouted.

“You! Mercenary! Help us!” shouted another, clearly meaning Thomas.

In response to this command, Tom carefully weaved his way through the crowd, so as not to cause more harm than good. Aaron had disappeared from sight, and was nowhere to be seen. The thief, not taking the same consideration that Tom had, shoved his way through the crowd and broke into a clearing. When Tom came out behind him, Tom put the magic of his halberd to good use, calling forth a wall of water in front of the man. The man, though shocked, held his course, hoping to splash through the water. His hopes were dashed, however, when the magical liquid halted his advance, as if he had struck a brick wall.

“Nailed it,” Tom exhaled.

The guard quickly apprehended the man, and they searched in vain for the property he stole.

“Alright, you blackguard, what did you do with that coin purse? Tell us, or it’s to the stocks with you!”

“I--I don’t know,” the rogue stuttered, genuinely bewildered.

“I have it,” Aaron announced, appearing from behind the guards. “I liberated it from his pocket, in case my companion here was unable to stop him.”

“Ah, well, thank you.” The guard was relieved but confused. “Why did you not stop him yourself, then?”

“Physical altercations really aren’t my thing,” Aaron said coolly.

“I see. Well, you have our gratitude and the gratitude of the merchant to whom this belongs. Is there anything we may provide you with?”

“No, thank you. I am just happy to be of service.”

The guards reiterated their thanks and went off to return the stolen coin and jail the criminal. After a few moments, Tom and Aaron continued on their way.

“So,” Tom began, a wry smile on his face. “I didn’t picture you as a hero.”

“Oh, I’m not. I just think, if you’re going to be a thief, you should be good enough not to be caught. Besides, I stole all his money. His ill-gotten gain is mine now. All except for one merchant’s coin purse.”

“Nice. Glad I’m not a thief, then. I’d lose all my money to you.”

“I would come back with a snarky remark, but I just don’t care enough.”

The two continued their conversation for a while longer, until they came to a bridge over a waterfall.

“Ah, the Weeping Falls. Aren’t they beautiful?” Tom extolled. “Such majesty and grace infused with the raw power of nature. Isn’t it exhilarating?”

“Slow down, Romeo,” Aaron interrupted. “If you keep up like this I might actually believe that you have a crooked arrow.”

“How crude,” Tom retorted, half jokingly, half appalled. “There is nothing effeminate about admiring the fact that nature could destroy you at any given moment. Furthermore, as a follower of the goddess Sorowa, water and its many forms hold a special place in my heart. And at this exact moment, my bladder, as well. If you’ll excuse me for a moment.” Tom ran off to the nearby woods to take care of his burden.

Aaron, left to his own thoughts, reflected on what brought him here. As a follower of the god Apathos, he too was drawn to the hypnotic nature of the waterfall. The crashing river did not stir any emotions within him, either good or bad. They simply mesmerized him, taking him to rarely seen places of his mind. As long as he could remember, he felt nothing. Tragedy did not faze him, and victory did not excite him. Neither pride nor shame haunted him. The only thing that he ever felt was the pressing sense of boredom. His only goal in life was to escape that boredom, to find something that could excite him, but nothing ever came. Even the mild entertainment that traveling with Thomas afforded did not alleviate his lethargic nature. He could not reflect on a single instance that might have cause him to be like this. Rather, it seemed

as if he was like this from the beginning. A brief sense of irritation and curiosity passed over him, but it just as hastily disappeared. His mind drifted from these dismal thoughts to more current issues, such as where he would find his next job. Suddenly, from behind him came a bellowing roar, akin to that of an enraged bull.

“Hey, Deepscar!” The guttural sound emitted from a large man, whose height dwarfed Aaron’s 6’2” stature, and whose size would make a trained soldier shrink in fear, but Aaron felt nothing. “Yeah, you! You remember me, right? I got a score to settle with you!”

“Oh, Damien Bailey, was it? How’s your sister?” Aaron casually addressed the angry behemoth.

“You know damn well how Kelly is doing! You broke her heart, you bastard! Now I’m going to break your spine!” The giant flared his nostrils, furthered embodying the image of a minotaur.

“Ah, Kelly. Such a sweet girl. It’s a shame she had to be in the way of my job.” Aaron completely ignored the man’s fury.

“You’re going to die!” Damien charged at Aaron, teeth bared and fists at the ready. He grabbed Aaron by the shoulders and lifted him high off the ground. “I’m going to break each and every one of your bones, one by one, until you are dust beneath my feet!”

Just then, a sharp pain struck his foot. Aaron had managed to loosen one of his spears, and the butt of the spear fell onto Damien’s foot. It caused just enough pain that Damien released his grip. Grabbing the pilum lying on the ground, Aaron shoved it into his opponent, unleashing a blast of water from the tip. This was the power of his “False Mask,” the ability to emit water from its tip when it struck an object. The spear did not pierce his opponent, however. Instead, a layer of mail managed to block the spearhead, causing the water blast to knock Damien back a little, but do no damage. Using this brief gap to his advantage, though, Aaron readied his other spear, the hasta “Empty Eyes.” The Goliath, having recovered from his stagger, reinitiated his charge. Aaron holding his spear at the ready, prepared to run him through.

At the moment of impact, instead of pierced mail and a scream of pain, there was only the sound of a heavy object being dropped and the sight of water coursing from the ground. A familiar spell had rebuffed Damien’s assault and deflected Aaron’s spear.

“Children, no roughhousing,” came the mocking voice of Tom.

“Yes, mom. Sorry, mom,” Aaron snapped right back.

“You’re both blessed!?” Damien uttered in bewilderment.

“Yessir,” Tom affirmed. “What’s going on here?”

Damien began to explain, as he rose to his feet. “This man defiled my sister. He used her, and then left her, and for that he has to pay!”

“Aaron?”

“He’s right,” Aaron conceded without a hint of remorse. “In order to complete a job, I had to use unconventional methods. A certain family had a rare gem that my employer wanted. However, they were so well guarded that I couldn’t just sneak in and steal it. So, instead, I endeared myself to the locals, caught the affections of a young lady who was friends of the family. I played my cards in such a way that I bedded her. After that, I used her to get into the family home and acquire the gem. Without a word I left the city, which crushed Kelly’s heart.”

“And now you have to die!” Damien growled.

“Whoa, there, big fella,” Tom stepped in. “I can see that you’re angry, and I understand why, but I can’t stand by and watch you murder someone. A broken heart isn’t a crime, regardless of how terrible it is. Trust me, I know. Here, take this. Tell your sister that this is from Aaron, and that he deeply regrets his actions.” Tom handed a vivid purple gem to Damien.

“I don’t, though,” Aaron said.

“Shut up, I’m saving your skin.”

“Whatever.”

After mulling it over, Damien Bailey finally gave his answer. “Fine. I’ll accept this. At least it’s something. But if I ever see you again, gutter grime, you’re dead!”

“No worries, you won’t,” Aaron assured him.

“And you, beardy, try to stay out of my way. You seem reasonable, so I’ll give you some slack.”

“Thank you for your kindness.”

“I’m out of here.” With that, the barbarian departed.

“You really ought to try making more friends,” Tom said when the hulking mass was gone.

“Geez, Mom, we were just playing around. Why’d you have to ruin the fun?” A blank expression accompanied this response.

“You are hopeless. You just don’t care, do you?”

“Glad we’re on the same page for once.”

“Let’s get going. Ramsthorne is a long way away, yet.”

“By the way, was that a Despar diamond? How does one so obviously not wealthy part so easily with such wealth?”

“I have more. I am not without wealth, I just don’t flaunt it.”

“How many more?”

“About three more. They are half of the payment for the delivery, given to me upfront. I get another four after the package is delivered.”

“This all seems very shady.”

“That’s an interesting statement coming from a professional thief. Regardless, I know what I’m picking up, and I assure you it’s all legal. Speaking of wealth and shady business, how come a professional thief of your caliber isn’t living a little higher on the hog?”

“I just don’t care enough about anything to use my money. My cloak is in working order, my spears never need to be repaired, and my boots are in good shape. There is nothing else for me to spend money on.”

“Figures. Let’s get going. It’s still going to take a while before we get to Ramsthorne, and I’d like to get at least as far as the border of Ramsrest Province before we stop.” The two wanderers picked up their pace and carried on down the road. The conversation carried on for some time, but eventually died away. After travelling for a time, they took a brief break for a small meal, and then continued on their way. After several hours, a tiny village appeared on the horizon.

“That’s Pasture’s Edge,” Tom informed Aaron. “It’s the first village within the border of Ramsrest. Normally, we could have gotten all the way to Cronehall, but between the pickpocket, your friend, and that detour near Goldsun, we’ve been on the road for nearly seven hours. Not to mention we didn’t leave until late in the morning.”

“That was your fault,” Aaron reminded him.

“Right. Well, at any rate, this may still work out in our favor. The Drunk Skunk, Pasture’s Edge’s local tavern, is owned by a man named Erwin Korsekeep. As you may or may not recall, he is Cleo’s father, and he usually gives me a discount. It’s not like the fancy city inns, but it’s comfortable and inexpensive.”

“Says the man carrying around Despar diamonds.”

“Hey, man, you never know when that money might come in handy.”

After roughly half an hour they came into the town proper. It wasn't much to look at, a few drab buildings representing the various shops in town, a couple houses belonging to the non-farmers in the village, and a rustic old tavern that looked like it could use more than a little repair work.

“That's it, the Drunk Skunk.” Tom sighed in relief. “Let's go secure ourselves a room.”

Aaron followed Tom into the small inn and was shocked to find that the outside was rather misleading. The bar was warm and welcoming while the rest of the tavern seemed clean and well to do.

“Hey, Erwin! I'm back!” Tom shouted to the man tending the bar.

“Ah, Mista Riversedge! Good to see ya again! 's been too long, lad! Cleo's been missin' ya, too!” The middle-aged barkeeper shouted back, working swiftly despite his rotund features. “Give me a moment, and Ah'll have ya set up in no time.”

Tom chuckled quietly as he observed the jolly old man buzz about his business, but he wondered where his daughter might be. Normally she would have gleefully greeted him, leaving him with little room to breathe. Not that he wanted to suffocate to death. The barkeeper had finally finished his duties and approached Tom and Aaron.

“Now, what can Ah do for ya'll?” he asked in his gravelly, yet friendly, voice.

“We need a room for the night, if you have any to spare,” Tom politely requested.

“Is that a joke, Tom? There's always room for ya here. Even if we had ourselves a full inn, Ah'd make room for ya. Ah do owe ya, after all.”

“Nonsense, Erwin. You've done so much for me. You don't owe me anything.”

“Nevertheless, ya always have a place here, should ya need it. Now, about yer room. Did ya want one room or two?”

“One will do just fine. We don't want to take up too much space. If you have a room with two beds, though, that would be preferable.”

“Oh, Ah think Ah can swing that. Give me a moment, Ah'll have Cleo take care of ya'll. That'll be twenty wilks.”

“Thanks. That's three more than last time. Has the price gone up?” Tom inquired as he handed over two gold coins.

“Afraid so. Taxes have gone up. Ah assure ya, ye’re still getting the same discount.”

“Thanks. I guess I’ve been gone too long. Who knew so much could change in three months?” Tom asked rhetorically.

“That ain’t even the half of it,” Erwin continued. “Ya know, Old Father Bradley, the local priest, took to drinkin’ after his wife passed. That apprentice of his, Terrance, is a little too popular with the ladies than Ah think a priest should be. Ah’m just glad my Cleo ain’t interested.”

“Wait, Terrance? Terrance Green? He was little more than a wallflower when I was last here.”

“Yessah, a lot has changed. He got over bein’ shy right fast.”

Just then, two thin, pale arms wrapped themselves around Tom’s neck, cutting off his airways.

“Tom, ya came back! Ah missed ya so much! Ah thought Ah might die!” A high-pitched, female voice yelled into his ear.

“Easy, Cleo! Easy! I don’t want to die!”

“Aw, Ah’m sorry, Tom. It’s just that Ah’m so excited to see ya again. It’s been three months!” The girl released her death grip and moved to her father’s side. The resemblance was palpable: both father and daughter shared a shock of short red hair, broad shoulders and a cheerful smile. If Tom had to say, though, the young woman was infinitely more attractive.

“Cleo, honey, show Thomas to his room, please,” Erwin politely asked.

“Yes, Daddy,” Cleo said before bounding off to the stairs. Tom followed close behind.

“You know, for a twenty-one-year-old, you sure do act a lot like a teenager.”

“Oh, and ye’re so much more mature at twenty-five?”

“Actually, yes! You’d be amazed at what four years does for you Cleo!”

“Whatever. Ye’re so full of crap, ya might as well call yerself fertilizer.”

“Harsh! But you might be right! Haha!”

“Of course, Ah’m right, Tom!” Cleo gave a hearty laugh, reminiscent of her father’s before stopping in front of a room. “Here it is. Are ya staying here alone tonight?”

“Unfortunately for you, no. A friend of mine, who seems to have disappeared on me, will be joining me later on this evening. If you see him, do tell him to hurry up. Also, tell your dad to keep his valuables extra secure tonight. Aaron is a fan of the five finger discount.”

“Can do, Tom. If ya need any company, though, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“I don’t feel like dying today, really. I must refuse your offer.”

“True. Not even ya’ll would see the light of day if Daddy got wind of it. Well, if ya ever change yer mind, ya know where to find me.”

“I already told you, I’m not interested. I see you as a little sister, so I couldn’t date you.”

“Too bad. Ya don’t know what ye’re missin’.”

“And I don’t want to. I’d rather be your friend, if I must be honest.”

“Well, at least, Ah can hold on to that, Ah suppose. Well, goodnight, Tom. If Ah see your friend, Ah’ll be sure to let him know where ya are. What’s his name?”

“Aaron. Aaron Deepscar. He’s a redhead, but it’s a bit brighter than yours, more orange. He’s tall and carries two spears with him.”

“Right. Well, see ya tomorrow, lover boy.”

“Don’t call me that! Jeez, crazy woman.”

Cleo just laughed as she walked away, giving him a slight wave.

“How many times do I have to say it?” Tom wondered to himself. “So, I saved her life once. That’s not a big deal, really.”

Tom went into the room and settled himself down. After trying and failing to get to sleep, he mulled over the thoughts running through his head. He briefly wondered at what Aaron might be doing at the moment but decided he would rather not know. Eventually his thoughts turned into dreams and his eyelids shut, not to open again until the morning.