TELANAS

THE DRAGON KNIGHT



VOLUME ONE

HOME

TELANAS

The Dragon Knight

Volume 1 — Home

English edition

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PROLOGUE

Before the Sky



The egg floated in the void.

There was no sky around it. No ground beneath it. No distant light by which it might have been seen.

There was no sound.

It simply drifted, enormous and alone, through a darkness without edge or end.

Within it, two beings slept.

They had no words. There were no places to remember, no voices to recall, no world beyond the curve of the shell.

If they dreamed at all, perhaps they dreamed only of warmth, of closeness, of the other presence curled beside their own.

Then one of them stirred.

The other stirred with him.

The shell flexed around them.

Again.

Then once more.

A thin crack opened across the egg.

The sound was small.

It was also the first.

For the first time, the void knew what it was to be broken by sound.

And through that narrow crack came light.

Not from outside.

From within.

A pale glow slipped through first, soft and pearlescent. Beside it came a darker radiance, black at its heart but alive with violet, blue, green, and colors that had never needed names.

The crack widened.

A pale claw pressed through the shell. Almost at once, a dark claw broke through somewhere opposite it.

Both moved again.

More cracks answered the first.

The quiet ended in a rush of sharp, bright sounds as pieces of shell broke free and tumbled into the darkness.

Then the egg shattered.

Two young dragons emerged among the drifting fragments.

One was pearlescent white, glowing softly from somewhere beneath his scales. Rose, silver, blue, and gold moved through that light when he turned.

His brother was dark, but not like the emptiness around them. His scales shimmered like raw oil, black at first glance and then suddenly violet, green, blue, or something stranger. A dim iridescent glow lived beneath them, as though darkness itself had learned how to shine.

Neither brother reflected light.

They were light.

For a while, neither did anything.

They drifted among the remains of the shell, still curled close by instinct.

Then their eyes opened.

Awareness came quietly.

The pale one saw the dark one.

The dark one saw the pale one.

Neither recoiled.

Before either had known waking, the other had already been there.

The pale brother lifted a claw and touched the other's snout.

The dark brother blinked, then leaned into the touch.

They had no word for brother.

They had no word for love.

They needed neither.

When one moved, the other followed. When one drifted too far, the other reached for him.

The void held nothing else, and for a time they wanted nothing else.

Soon, stillness became boring.

The pale brother pushed away from a piece of shell and shot into the darkness.

Behind him, a thin ribbon of pearly light remained.

He stopped and looked back.

The ribbon did not disappear.

The dark brother saw it too.

Then he darted past.

His own trail followed him: dimmer, deeper, shimmering violet and blue against the black.

The pale brother chased it.

The dark brother twisted away.

Soon they were racing through the void, circling one another, diving through each other's glowing paths and turning sharply just to see what new shape their movement would leave behind.

Where they passed once, light lingered.

Where they passed again and again, it gathered.

Fine trails became broad veils. Curves crossed curves. Tiny points burned brighter where their paths met.

The brothers noticed only that the darkness was becoming prettier to play in.

They had no word for sky.

They had no word for star.

Those would come much later.

For now there was only their game, and the light it left behind.

Then the pale brother struck a drifting piece of shell with his tail.

It spun away.

The dark brother chased it, caught it between his claws, and threw it back.

The fragment sailed past the pale brother's head.

He twisted after it.

The dark one followed.

That was enough to begin another game.

They chased pieces of shell through the growing light. They struck them with claws, noses, wings, and tails. They collided with one another often enough that even surprise became part of

the fun. When one sent a fragment too far, both raced after it. When one discovered a new way to make a piece spin, the other immediately tried to do it better.

There was no purpose in any of it.

No design.

No thought of making anything.

They were awake. They were together. They were having fun.

During one collision, something small came loose from the pale brother's side.

It drifted between them.

A scale.

The dark brother caught it.

He turned it over between his claws, fascinated by the soft glow still living inside it, then flicked it toward his brother.

The pale brother caught it and tossed it back.

Neither noticed the fine dust of eggshell clinging to its edge.

Another throw gathered more.

A tiny splinter struck the scale and stayed.

Then another.

The dark brother batted it away too hard. It struck a larger fragment of shell, broke a piece loose, and carried that piece with it.

He chased it down.

The pale brother crashed into him before he could stop.

They tumbled together.

When they separated, a dark iridescent scale drifted free from the second brother and struck the little mass between them.

It fused there.

Both stared.

The object now carried both of their light.

That made it immediately more interesting.

The pale brother snatched it first.

The dark brother lunged after him.

They tossed it back and forth, faster now. Each catch sent it spinning. Each throw pressed shell, dust, and scales more tightly together. Each collision drew in another tiny fragment.

The little mass grew.

So did its heat.

At first it was only warm.

Then it began to glow.

The twins did not stop.

They threw it harder.

It spun faster.

Sharp edges softened. Loose fragments sank into one another. The uneven clump rounded as it turned, gathering more of the broken egg around itself.

Soon neither brother could catch it in one claw.

Then not in two.

They pushed it instead, striking it from opposite sides and racing after it whenever it escaped them.

The sphere grew hotter and brighter until even their own trails of light curled around its glow.

Still they did not understand what was happening.

They only knew that their toy kept changing.

Eventually it became too large to throw at all.

The brothers circled it, curious.

The pale one pressed a claw to its surface.

The dark one did the same from the other side.

Beneath them, shell and scale had become something neither had seen before.

The sphere continued to turn.

Its outer fire slowly dimmed. Its surface folded as it cooled. Ridges rose. Hollows opened. Dark seams crossed pale stone. Deep within, pieces of both brothers remained fused with the remnants of the egg.

The twins watched for a while.

Then something else caught their attention, and they raced away together.

They did not know that they had made a world.

They did not know that the light behind them had become the first heavens, or that bright points now burned where their paths had crossed.

They did not know that, long after the young sphere cooled, the places where their scales lay buried would not remain empty forever.

Something would stir there.

Something would grow.

Life would begin without either brother ever deciding that it should.

The sphere turning behind them was the first shard.

And it would not be the last.

CHAPTER 1

The Road



Much later, beneath a sky born from light neither brother had ever intended to leave behind, a hammer struck glowing iron.

The sound rang through Elwendun, a small roadside village.

It was a close-built scatter of timber and stone around the road and the well. Fenced gardens and animal pens filled the spaces between homes, sheds, and barns. The Elwen ran past the village on its way south toward the Breyn. Beyond the last roofs, fields spread toward low hills, while the Old Forest stood as a darker line on the far side of the village. In Elwendun, most people simply called it the old woods.

The morning was mild and clear. Sunlight caught on damp grass beyond the road, and thin chimney smoke climbed almost straight in the still air.

Eight-year-old Calist Griffith looked up from the floor of his father's smithy.

He had been sweeping metal filings into a small pile near the open doorway, though most of his attention had long since wandered outside.

The village was small enough that Calist knew every roof and most of the hands that had repaired them.

To the wider world, the road beside it mattered more.

The road ran west toward the stone bridge over the Breyn. Shortly before the crossing, a branch turned south toward Dunbreyn, a small fort near the river. Soldiers there watched the western frontier, and the roads kept the fort and the settlements around it connected to the interior. Merchants and supply wagons hauled food, lamp oil, salt, metal, leather, and other necessities toward the border. Soldiers came and went in small groups. Messengers carried orders outward and reports back inland.

Sometimes travelers brought broken tools.

Sometimes bent wheels.

Sometimes swords.

And almost always, they brought stories.

Calist liked the stories best.

His father, Alden Griffith, brought the hammer down again. Brown hair clung damply at his temples from the forge heat, and the sleeves of his work shirt were rolled above forearms marked by years of sparks.

The iron rang.

Outside, hoofbeats approached along the road.

Calist's broom stopped moving.

Three riders came into view beyond the open doors.

Calist knew the first one immediately.

Corvin Hale had visited often enough that Calist no longer thought of him as a stranger. He still wore the same sort of plain military coat and travel-stained boots as the soldiers who sometimes accompanied him, but he was older than most of them. Not old like the village elders, but old enough that gray showed at his temples and lines gathered around his eyes whenever he smiled.

Alden looked up from the anvil, hazel eyes already amused.

"You've worn out another horse?"

Corvin swung down from the saddle.

"Only the shoe. The horse has more sense than I do."

"That isn't difficult."

The other two riders laughed.

Calist grinned before remembering he was supposed to be sweeping.

Alden noticed.

"Finish the doorway. Then bring the hoof stand."

Calist immediately put the broom back to work.

The riders led their horses into the shade beside the smithy. One had a loose shoe. Another had a buckle on his sword belt that had nearly torn free. The third carried a dented piece of armor beneath one arm and set it carefully on the workbench.

Nothing about any of it looked like the stories Calist and the other village boys acted out.

There were no banners. No polished armor. No heroic procession.

There was mud on the soldiers' boots, dust in the folds of their clothes, sweat dried into the straps of their gear, and a smell of horse that reached the smithy before the horses did.

Calist loved their visits anyway.

Not because they brought violence with them. What fascinated him was that they had been somewhere else.

Every stain on a coat came from a road he had never walked. Every dent had happened beyond the fields he knew. Every unfamiliar coin, strange bit of cloth, new turn of phrase, or half-finished complaint suggested that the world continued far beyond the village even when Calist could not see it.

He carried over the hoof stand while Alden crouched beside Corvin's horse.

"Hold him steady."

Calist took the reins with both hands.

The horse barely seemed to notice him.

Alden lifted the hoof, inspected the worn shoe, and clicked his tongue.

"How long did you ride on this?"

Corvin looked away.

"Not long."

"How long?"

"Two days."

Alden looked up.

"Three."

Corvin sighed.

"Three."

Calist tried not to laugh.

Alden removed the bent nails one by one.

While he worked, the soldiers talked.

At first it was about the road. A bridge farther north had lost part of its railing. A wagon had broken an axle near the river bend. Rain had turned one of the smaller tracks into mud deep enough to swallow a boot.

One rider complained about a town where the innkeeper had charged him twice for the same meal. Another described a market so crowded that he had lost sight of his own horse while still holding its reins.

Corvin told them about a river crossing where the ferry had stopped halfway because a rope had come loose, leaving

everyone drifting slowly downstream while the ferryman shouted instructions no one could hear.

Calist forgot to breathe for a moment.

"How wide was the river?"

Corvin glanced at him.

"Wide enough."

"Could you see the other side?"

"Of course."

Calist was slightly disappointed by that.

"Was there a city?"

"On the southern bank."

"How big?"

Alden continued working on the hoof.

"If you answer that, he'll keep you here until dark."

"Bigger than this village," Corvin said.

Calist waited.

Corvin smiled.

"Much bigger."

That was better.

Later, one of the younger soldiers mentioned goblins they had seen near the road.

Calist's hands tightened around the reins.

"Four of them," the man said. "Maybe five. Hard to count when they're running."

"You said there were eight yesterday," Corvin replied.

"I said there might have been eight."

"By tomorrow there'll be twelve."

"There could have been."

Calist leaned forward.

"Did they attack you?"

The younger soldier smiled at him.

"They tried."

"What happened?"

"They saw him," Corvin said, pointing at the younger man, "and decided there were easier meals somewhere else."

The other rider laughed.

"That's not what happened."

"No?"

"I drew my sword."

"Then they saw you."

Calist laughed with them.

By the time the story was finished, the encounter seemed to involve less glorious combat than wet boots, shouting, two lost arrows, and one soldier falling into a ditch.

That did not disappoint Calist as much as the younger man seemed to expect.

He wanted to know about the ditch too.

Where had the road been? How far from the village? Were there hills there? What kind of trees grew beside it? Had they seen any ruins? Had they passed other settlements?

Corvin eventually raised both hands.

"Alden, your son asks more questions than an officer."

"Then stop answering them."

"I tried that years ago."

Alden fitted the new shoe and set the hoof down.

"There. Try not to ruin this one before your next visit."

Corvin promised nothing.

Calist's attention had already shifted to the sword at his hip.

Corvin noticed.

"Still interested in these?"

Calist nodded.

Alden picked up the damaged buckle.

"He's interested in anything that keeps him from sweeping."

"I swept."

Alden looked at the thin line of filings still glittering near the wall.

Calist followed his eyes.

"Most of it."

Corvin laughed.

"Come here."

Calist did.

Corvin did not draw his sword.

Instead he took the broom from Calist's hands.

"Show me how you'd stand."

Calist stared at him.

"With a sword?"

"With a broom, unless your father has decided to start giving children steel."

"No," Alden said.

Calist wrapped both hands around the broom handle and lifted it the way he had seen soldiers hold weapons in stories acted out by the village boys.

Corvin looked at his feet.

"You'll fall over."

"I won't."

Corvin pushed him lightly on one shoulder.

Calist immediately stumbled sideways.

The other soldiers laughed.

Calist's face grew hot.

Corvin handed the broom back without mocking him.

"Feet first. Everything else comes after."

He moved Calist's front foot a little farther forward with the side of his boot.

"Not too wide. Bend your knees."

Calist copied him.

"Now if someone pushes you, don't fight the push with your shoulders. Keep your weight under you."

He tried again.

This time Calist only rocked backward.

His eyes widened.

Corvin smiled.

"Better."

Calist looked toward Alden.

His father was already repairing the buckle.

"He can conquer the border after he finishes the floor."

The soldiers laughed again.

Calist did not mind.

Before he could put the broom back to the floor, running footsteps sounded outside.

Tarin reached the doorway first, his dirty-blond hair disordered from the run. Joric, bright blond even in the forge's shadow, nearly ran into him from behind. Eryn and Nalia were only a few steps back, Eryn's black hair and Nalia's red catching the forge light as they came.

"Corvin's here," Joric announced.

Corvin looked around at the four new faces.

"So I've been told."

In a village this small, three soldiers and their horses outside the smithy were enough to pull curious children from nearby chores, especially when one of them was Corvin. Calist was not the only one who wanted stories from beyond the village.

Joric wanted to hear about the goblins. Tarin asked about the river. Eryn paid more attention to the bows and road gear than the swords. Nalia wanted to know whether the dented piece of armor had happened in a fight.

Calist watched them crowd around and felt slightly less foolish about all his own questions.

Alden let it continue for a minute.

Then he pointed toward the doorway with the damaged buckle.

"Whatever work you abandoned to get here still exists."

There were several groans.

Corvin laughed.

"Your father remains a cruel man."

"Take him with you."

"I know better."

The children scattered slowly, each trying to get one last answer before going.

For the rest of the afternoon, Calist swept with his feet placed exactly the way Corvin had shown him.

* * *

Most days in the smithy were not like that.

Most days there were no soldiers.

The rush to see Corvin was unusual. The children themselves were not.

They came through the smithy all the time with small tasks adults had entrusted to them. Tarin brought kitchen knives that

needed sharpening. Joric was sent to help hold a wheel steady while Alden checked a fitting. Eryn carried Garran's knives over to be sharpened and took them home again. Nalia delivered shears, bent pins, and other small pieces that needed repair, usually with strict instructions not to lose anything on the way.

Alden treated whichever child happened to be there much the same way he treated Calist. He kept them away from flying scale and hot iron, corrected them when they handled something badly, and found a safe job for idle hands if they stayed long enough.

Calist received the same treatment elsewhere. Tessa had fed him when Mara was occupied with someone sick. Garran had put leather in his hands and shown him how to hold it while he cut. Farmers had taught him where to stand around frightened animals and how to stack hay so it did not collapse the first time someone leaned against it.

No one called any of this teaching.

It was simply what happened when children grew up surrounded by adults who knew things the children did not yet know.

And the children were expected to help while they learned.

There were kitchen knives that had gone dull, shears with loose pins, cracked hinges, bent hooks, worn shovel heads, broken handles, plow fittings, wagon hardware, and horseshoes.

Endless horseshoes.

Calist learned their shapes before he learned why some horses needed one kind and others another. He learned where Alden kept nails of different sizes, which tongs were safe for him to carry, how far to stand from flying scale, when the water bucket

needed filling, and how to tell from his father's voice whether "bring me the small hammer" meant now or immediately.

He liked the smithy.

He liked the heat in winter. He liked the rhythm of the hammer. He liked watching a useless bent thing become useful again beneath Alden's hands.

The work was necessary. It was honest. It also changed very little.

The same farmers came with the same tools. The same wagons lost the same fittings. Horses threw shoes. Knives dulled. Hinges bent. Alden repaired them, and sooner or later they returned.

Calist understood why people valued that life. He valued it too.

But when soldiers rode into the yard, the day became different.

He simply did not stare at a repaired hinge the way he stared at a sword, or remember the story of a plowshare the way he remembered a river he had never seen.

Whenever soldiers stopped, Calist found reasons to remain nearby.

He carried water before anyone asked.

He fetched tools that did not need fetching.

He swept the same patch of floor twice.

He listened.

Some stories were about fighting.

Most were not.

Soldiers complained about rain, bad food, commanders who changed their minds, boots that leaked, horses that bit, roads that

vanished beneath mud, and the astonishing number of ways a buckle could break at the least convenient moment.

They spoke about other villages and crowded towns. Rivers broad enough that distant buildings looked small. Markets that filled whole streets. Hills where the grass changed color in autumn. Roads that continued for days beyond anything Calist knew.

Those were the stories he remembered at night.

Violence was part of their lives, and Calist listened when they spoke of it. But blood was never the part he carried to bed with him.

He remembered the unfamiliar places.

He remembered the idea that a person could leave one horizon behind and eventually find another.

Corvin returned several times each year, sometimes alone and sometimes with other soldiers.

Calist eventually learned, mostly by listening when adults thought he was busy elsewhere, that Corvin had once served beside Alden during the war.

That fact fascinated him almost as much as Corvin's sword.

Alden almost never spoke about the war.

When Calist asked what battles he had fought in, his father answered with things like, "Too many," or, "None worth remembering."

When Calist once asked whether he had killed anyone, Alden went silent long enough that Calist never asked again.

But when a soldier brought in torn mail, Alden's hands knew exactly how the rings should sit.

When a sword had been mistreated, he could often say how before its owner admitted it.

And in a wooden chest at home lay a plain shirt of chainmail, wrapped in cloth and kept cleaner than many things that were used every day.

Calist had seen Alden take it out more than once.

Not to wear it.

To inspect it.

A weak ring was replaced. A spot of rust was cleaned away. Leather was oiled before it dried and cracked.

Then the armor went back into the chest.

To Calist, it was a relic from a life of stories.

To Alden, it seemed to be another thing that had been made well and therefore deserved not to be ruined.

CHAPTER 2

The Old Woods



Calist was ten when he made his first sword. It was terrible.

He knew that even before he finished it.

The blade was a length of scrap wood he had found behind the smithy. It was slightly crooked, too thick near the point, and thin where it should probably have been thick. The crossguard was another smaller piece of wood that he had forced through a rough slot with more determination than skill.

The grip was simply the part he had not cut away.

Calist held it out at arm's length and narrowed his eyes.

From far enough away, it looked like a sword.

Probably.

Alden came around the side of the smithy carrying a bundle of iron rod.

He stopped.

Calist slowly lowered the wooden weapon.

Alden looked at it.

Then at Calist.

"What is that?"

Calist frowned.

"A sword."

Alden studied it again.

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"Hm."

Calist waited for him to say he had wasted the wood.

Instead Alden set down the iron rods, took the wooden sword, and ran one thumb along the grip.

"You'll fill your hands with splinters."

Calist's shoulders fell.

"Oh."

Alden handed it back.

"Sand this part. And round the edges here."

He tapped the grip and then the end of the crossguard.

"If you're going to hit your friends with it, at least try not to open their heads."

Calist stared at him.

"I can keep it?"

Alden gave him a strange look.

"It's wood, Calist."

That was permission enough.

By evening, the grip was smoother.

By the next afternoon, Tarin and Joric had found sticks of their own.

The battle lasted nearly an hour.

No one agreed on who had won.

Calist insisted that getting struck after you were already "dead" did not count.

Tarin insisted that Calist had never said he was dead.

Joric declared himself a knight and therefore immune to being hit in the legs.

They argued until they forgot what they were arguing about and started again.

Calist tried to stand the way Corvin had shown him.

Feet first.

Not too wide.

Knees bent.

The stance did not make him a swordsman.

It did, however, make it harder for Tarin to knock him over.

That was enough to make him very proud of himself.

When Tarin and Joric finally ran home for supper, Calist followed not long afterward with the wooden sword across one shoulder.

The old woods waited beyond the far side of the village, as they always had.

The next morning, fog lay low over the fields.

It softened fences and swallowed the lower parts of distant trees. Roofs and chimney smoke faded into pale gray beyond a few dozen paces. The village was awake—Calist could hear a bucket at the well, a cart wheel complaining near the road, and Alden's hammer from the smithy—but the mist made every sound seem farther away.

Calist had a little time before Alden expected him at the forge. He took the wooden sword to the edge of the field to practice Corvin's stance again.

Instead, he found himself looking toward the woods.

He had seen them every day of his life.

There was nothing unusual to see.

Trees.

Dark trunks rising through the fog beneath a thick canopy. Old paths used by hunters. Brambles along the edges, their leaves wet with beads of mist. A few places where children were told not to wander because the ground became steep or the undergrowth too dense.

Calist started walking.

He did not decide to go into the woods.

Not exactly.

He simply crossed the field.

The wet grass brushed against his boots.

Then came the narrow strip beyond it.

Then the first line of trees.

The air changed beneath the branches. It was cooler there, carrying the smell of damp earth, wet leaves, and old bark. Fog drifted between the trunks in thin pale bands and hid the deeper woods a little at a time.

Calist slowed.

Behind him, the village sounds softened.

Alden's hammer in the distance.

A voice near the road.

A dog barking twice.

Ahead, there was only the woods.

He tightened his grip on the wooden sword.

He was not frightened.

That was the strange part.

He had no reason to be there. No game. No chore. No one to meet.

Still, going back immediately felt wrong in a way he could not explain.

So he walked a little farther.

Past a fallen tree silvered with age and slick with moisture.

Past a patch of ferns almost as tall as he was.

Past a narrow animal trail that disappeared between two ancient trunks and into the fog.

There.

For one moment, Calist stopped.

Something about that direction felt different.

Not a sound.

Not a voice.

Not even a thought.

Just a pull so quiet that if he had tried to explain it, he would have had nothing to say.

He took another step.

Then another.

Nothing happened.

No knight emerged from behind the trees. No hidden ruin appeared. No monster waited in the mist.

There was only forest.

Calist stood there until the fog between the trunks had begun to thin and another distant strike of Alden's hammer reminded him that he was supposed to be somewhere else.

He turned and hurried home.

Mara Griffith was waiting for him near the house with her arms folded. She had tied her black hair back for the morning's work, and her dark eyes moved from the damp hems of his clothes to the pale woods behind him.

"Where were you?"

Calist looked back toward the trees.

"In the woods."

"I can see that. Why?"

He opened his mouth.

Nothing sensible came to him.

"I don't know."

Mara stared at him for a moment, then sighed.

"Next time, tell someone before you disappear."

"I will."

He meant it.

The next time still came without him planning it.

And then another.

Sometimes months passed between those walks. Sometimes only weeks.

Calist never found anything waiting for him beneath the old trees.

But every so often, while carrying water to the forge or sweeping filings from the floor, he would look toward the woods and feel the same quiet pull.

As though he had forgotten something there.

Something he had never known.

* * *

By fourteen, Calist had changed in ways he usually noticed only after they had already happened.

At some point, the broom that had once reached almost to his chin became simply a broom.

At some point, Alden stopped moving the heavier buckets out of his reach and started saying, "Bring that here."

Calist's hands broadened. His shoulders began to fill out. The small burns on his forearms became older marks beside newer ones, and the work that had once required both hands and all his concentration slowly became ordinary.

The village changed less.

The same road still cut past the same fields. The same roofs caught the morning light. The smithy still woke to the sound of Alden's hammer, animals still had to be fed whether it rained or not, and firewood somehow always needed carrying from one place to another.

Calist had once thought every household had its own work.

By the time he was old enough to be trusted with more of it, he understood that this was only partly true.

Everyone had things they did best.

That did not mean anyone did only those things.

When one of the older farmers slipped from a wet cart and hurt his ankle badly enough that Mara ordered him to stay off it, no meeting was called. No one stood in the road and assigned duties.

The work simply moved.

Alden repaired the broken cart shaft that afternoon instead of waiting for it to be brought to the smithy. Mara carried a bundle of herbs to the injured man's house. Someone else checked his fields.

And before breakfast was properly finished the next morning, Calist, Tarin Vale, Joric Fenner, Eryn Venn, and Nalia Reed had been sent to deal with the animals.

Joric stared into the goat pen.

"Why do they look angry?"

"Because they know you're coming in," Tarin said.

"They don't know me."

"They've heard stories."

Calist laughed and lifted the latch.

The work was not difficult.

It was also not quick.

Feed had to be measured. Water troughs had to be filled. Bedding had to be turned and the worst of it carried out. A loose section of fence needed tying until someone could repair it properly.

Calist took two water buckets from the well.

Joric looked at him, then at the single bucket in his own hand.

"Show-off."

"You asked me to carry yours."

"I changed my mind."

"Then take it."

Joric looked at the second full bucket.

"I changed it back."

Calist carried both.

He had always been difficult to tire compared with the others. Work in the smithy had made that more obvious as he grew. So had the simple fact that he almost never seemed to stay ill for long.

When half the village children caught the same winter fever, Calist had spent two miserable days in bed and a third arguing with Mara that he was well enough to get up.

She had made him stay there anyway.

Tarin had been sick for more than a week and still complained about the injustice of it whenever Calist mentioned the matter.

"Stop," Eryn said.

Calist stopped.

She was crouched near the fence, one hand resting against the wood.

"What?"

Eryn pointed toward one of the goats.

"She's favoring that leg."

Calist looked.

At first he saw nothing.

Then the goat took three steps, and one hoof touched the ground more carefully than the others.

"Oh."

Eryn was already moving toward it.

"Probably caught it somewhere. Help me hold her."

The goat disagreed with this plan.

Loudly.

By the time Calist had both arms around it, Joric was laughing so hard that he had to put his bucket down.

"You look very heroic."

"Come closer and I'll give her to you."

Joric immediately stopped laughing.

Eryn checked the hoof, found a small stone wedged near the edge, and worked it loose with patient fingers.

"There."

She stood and brushed dirt from her knees.

The goat walked away as though none of them had ever existed.

Calist watched it go.

Then he looked at Eryn.

Her dark eyes were already fixed on a line of small tracks in the mud near the fence.

"Rabbit," she said.

Tarin glanced down.

"How can you tell?"

Eryn looked at him as if the answer were obvious.

"Because they're rabbit tracks."

Joric snorted.

Calist tried not to smile too much.

By midday, the animals were fed, the troughs were full, and most of the work was finished.

That was when Joric found the rake.

He held it sideways.

"Stand back."

Tarin looked at him.

"Why?"

"Because I am armed."

"With a rake."

"A very dangerous rake."

Joric lowered it like a spear.

Calist should have ignored him.

Instead he picked up another wooden-handled tool and raised it in both hands.

"Your reach is terrible."

"My reach is longer than yours."

"Your rake has teeth on the wrong end."

"They make it more dangerous."

Tarin lasted perhaps ten seconds before taking up a broom and announcing that he would defeat both of them because neither understood tactics.

The battle moved exactly three paces before Calist backed into a pile of clean straw and disappeared into it.

Eryn laughed.

That made it worse.

Calist pushed himself upright with straw in his hair just as Garran Venn came around the side of the pen.

The three boys froze.

Garran looked at Joric's rake.

Then Tarin's broom.

Then Calist sitting in the straw.

He was quiet for a moment.

"Did it surrender?"

Calist looked down at the straw.

"Almost."

Garran nodded thoughtfully.

"Good. When you've finished the war, the goats would still like to eat it."

Joric lowered the rake.

"Sorry."

"You will be if someone steps on that and breaks the handle. Tools are tools, even when you're bored."

His voice was firm, but there was no real anger in it.

Then he glanced toward Eryn and Nalia, both of whom were trying very hard not to laugh.

"And you two can help them put back whatever they scatter. Watching foolishness does not make you innocent of enjoying it."

"We didn't do anything," Nalia protested.

"Exactly. You had every chance to stop them."

Eryn grinned.

"You wouldn't have stopped them either."

Garran's mouth twitched.

"No. But I was also an idiot at your age. That is not the defense you think it is."

The work took another half hour.

No one complained very seriously.

* * *

That evening, Calist found a piece of straw in his hair while eating supper.

Alden noticed him pull it free.

"Successful day?"

Calist set the straw beside his bowl.

"Mostly."

Mara looked at him across the table.

"Garran came by."

Calist stopped chewing.

"Already?"

"This is a village," Alden said. "There is no 'already.'"

Mara smiled into her cup.

"He said no tools were broken. I decided that was close enough to praise."

"Joric started it."

"Of course he did."

"He did."

"And you heroically tried to stop him?"

Calist considered lying.

Alden raised one eyebrow.

"No."

"Good answer."

Supper was a thick vegetable stew with a little smoked meat cut through it, dark bread, and the last of a soft cheese Mara had traded for with another household two days earlier.

No one had counted what the cheese was worth.

Mara had spent half a morning treating that household's youngest child when a cough had settled badly in his chest. The cheese had appeared on their table later.

That was simply how things happened.

After the bowls were empty, Alden remained at the table with a small iron fitting in his hand.

Calist recognized it as part of a shovel socket.

"Why didn't you finish that at the forge?"

"Because I wanted to see whether you'd notice this."

Alden handed it to him.

Calist turned the piece over.

At first it looked ordinary.

Then he saw a thin dark line near one edge.

"Crack."

"Where?"

Calist pointed.

Alden nodded.

"Small one."

"Can you weld it?"

"I can."

"Then why replace it?"

"I didn't say I would."

Calist frowned.

Alden took the fitting back.

"Repairing something isn't the same as pretending nothing happened to it. You need to know what the piece does, where the strain goes, and whether the repair will hold when someone actually uses it."

He tapped the crack with one fingernail.

"This? Fine. Clean it. Heat it properly. Close it. It'll work for years."

He turned the fitting and tapped another place.

"If the crack were here, I'd make a new one."

Calist studied it again.

He liked these explanations more now than he had when he was small.

Perhaps because Alden had stopped giving him only the answers and started expecting him to understand the reasons.

Mara cleared part of the table and brought over three bundles of dried plants.

"Since you're both determined to keep working after supper."

Alden immediately stood.

"I have suddenly remembered something in the forge."

"Sit down."

Alden sat.

Calist laughed.

Mara placed the bundles in front of them.

"Separate those. Leaves here. Flowers here. Stems there. Anything blackened or damp goes out."

Calist picked up the first bundle.

"This one's for fever."

Mara looked at it.

"No."

He looked again.

"Stomach?"

"Also no."

Alden reached for the bread knife.

"Should I be worried?"

"Only if you let him make your medicine."

Calist frowned at the plant.

"Tarin would know."

"Tarin knew after I showed him once," Mara said.

"That's unnatural."

"That is memory."

"Same thing."

Mara took the stem from him and turned it between her fingers.

"Look at the leaves. Not the shape. The underside."

Calist did.

Fine pale hairs covered them.

He remembered.

"For aches."

"There you are."

He put it in the correct pile.

Calist was not bad at the work.

He simply had to learn it through repetition in a way Tarin never seemed to.

Mara could show Tarin two nearly identical leaves and months later he would remember which one smelled sharper when crushed, which flowered first, and which became useless if gathered after rain.

Calist remembered the things he used often.

The rest had a habit of escaping him.

He kept sorting anyway.

Outside, the village had grown quiet.

Someone closed a stable door. A dog barked once and stopped. Farther away, a hammer rang twice from a shed before whoever held it apparently decided the work could wait until morning.

Calist liked that hour.

He liked stories about roads he had never seen.

He liked hearing Corvin describe cities large enough to lose yourself in.

But there was something about the familiar quiet after supper that settled into him differently.

Every sound belonged somewhere.

Almost every light in every window belonged to someone he knew.

Nothing beyond the village had ever felt like that.

Not yet.

* * *

Two mornings later, Mara sent Calist into the woods with Tarin and Eryn.

"The lower baskets are for mushrooms," she said. "The tall one is for herbs. Do not mix them."

Calist took one of the baskets.

"I know."

Mara looked at him.

"And if you aren't certain?"

"Leave it."

"Good."

Tarin already had the taller basket over one arm.

"She means you."

"She means all of us."

"Mostly you."

Eryn adjusted the strap of the small bow across her back. A tiny wooden leaf hung from a short leather tie just below the grip.

"Can we go before you two become old men?"

They went.

The morning was cool beneath the trees. Sunlight came through in broken patches, catching on wet leaves and the pale tops of mushrooms pushing through the soil.

They stayed near the familiar gathering paths, far from the deeper parts of the old woods.

Mara had asked for two kinds of herb, a bitter root that grew near damp ground, and as many edible mushrooms as they could find without guessing.

Tarin found the first useful plants before Calist had finished deciding whether they were the right ones.

"Those aren't ready," Eryn said from several paces away.

Tarin looked up.

"I know."

"Then why are you looking at them?"

"Because I like knowing where they'll be later."

Eryn considered that.

"Strange."

"You spent five minutes looking at bird tracks yesterday."

"Those were interesting."

"So are plants."

"No."

Calist laughed.

They worked slowly through the morning.

Calist knew the common mushrooms well enough. Brown caps beneath the old oak roots. Small pale clusters near dead wood. One broad red-brown kind Mara sliced and dried for winter stews.

Then he found another cluster beneath a fallen branch.

The caps looked right.

Almost.

He crouched and cut three at the stems.

"Those aren't going in the basket."

Tarin's voice came from behind him.

Calist looked over his shoulder.

"They're the same ones."

"No, they aren't."

"They look exactly the same."

Tarin crouched beside him and took one.

"The gills are darker."

Calist turned it over.

"Barely."

"And the stem is thinner here."

Tarin pointed.

"And smell it."

Calist did.

There was something sharp beneath the earth smell.

He frowned.

"Oh."

"Yes. Oh."

Eryn came back toward them.

"Bad?"

"Not deadly," Tarin said. "Mara said you'd spend half the night being sick and the other half wishing your head would fall off."

Calist looked at the mushrooms in his hand.

"I was going to check them."

Tarin looked at the open basket beside Calist's knee.

"Of course."

"I was."

Eryn smiled.

"After putting them in?"

Calist threw the mushrooms aside.

"No one asked you."

"You nearly poisoned the village. I think everyone gets an opinion."

"They aren't deadly."

Tarin tilted his head.

"That is not the defense you think it is."

Calist stared at him.

"You sound like Garran."

Tarin looked horrified.

That ended the argument.

A little later, Eryn stopped so suddenly that Calist nearly walked into her.

She lifted one hand.

Neither boy spoke.

Eryn looked toward a patch of brush ahead.

For several seconds, Calist saw nothing.

Then something brown moved between the leaves.

A deer.

Only part of it was visible at first: one ear, the line of its neck, the dark shine of an eye.

Eryn's attention sharpened completely.

The herbs might as well have ceased to exist.

She crouched without being told and watched the animal pick its way between the trees.

Calist watched her instead.

She seemed to notice everything.

The direction of the wind.

Where the deer placed its feet.

The faint movement of branches before its body passed beneath them.

Eryn touched two fingers to the ground after it disappeared.

"Young one," she whispered.

"How do you know?" Calist asked.

She pointed to the tracks.

Calist looked at them.

They were tracks.

That was all they told him.

"Smaller," Eryn said. "And lighter. See how deep they are?"

Calist nodded as though he did.

Tarin looked at him.

Calist ignored him.

Eryn stood again.

"Come on. We still need the bitter root."

She walked ahead.

Tarin waited until she was several paces away.

"You didn't see it."

"I saw it."

"You saw a hole in the mud."

"Be quiet."

Tarin grinned and followed Eryn.

Calist picked up his basket.

He was smiling despite himself.

* * *

That evening, Alden waited until Calist had nearly finished eating before he spoke.

"Garran and I are going to Caerbreyn in three days."

Calist's spoon stopped halfway to his mouth.

Alden continued eating.

"We're low on good iron. Garran has hides and finished leather to take. Tessa has clothwork. A few others have things to send with us."

Calist put down the spoon.

"How far?"

Mara smiled.

Alden sighed.

"Far enough that asking every question tonight won't make us arrive sooner."

Calist stared at him.

"Us?"

"You heard me."

For a moment, Calist forgot every question he had intended to ask.

"I'm coming?"

"If you'd rather stay here and sort mushrooms with your mother—"

"I'm coming."

Mara lifted her cup.

"Probably safer for the mushrooms."

Calist looked at her.

"It was one mistake."

Alden's mouth twitched.

"Tarin told Joric. Joric told half the village."

Calist groaned.

Mara laughed.

Outside, beyond the familiar dark roofs and the quiet road, somewhere Calist had never been was waiting.

For once, he knew exactly when he would be allowed to go there.

CHAPTER 3

Beyond Home



Three days later, Calist was awake before Alden came to wake him.

The village wagon stood near the smithy in the gray light before sunrise.

It belonged to the village more than to any one household. Most of the year it carried sacks at harvest, timber, barrels, tools, or anything else too heavy or awkward to move by hand.

The ox harnessed to it spent far more time helping in the fields than traveling the road.

That suited the village.

They had little reason to keep horses of their own. Horses were useful to people who needed to move quickly and often. The village usually needed neither.

Today, no one was in a hurry.

Dew still silvered the grass beside the road, and the cool air smelled of damp earth and wood smoke.

Garran tightened the last strap across a stack of bundled hides while Alden checked one of the wheels.

Joric arrived with a small pack and the expression of someone who had dressed before fully waking. Nalia came after him, then Eryn with Tessa at her side.

Tessa handed Garran a wrapped bundle.

"These go to Mira Pell. Not Heddan Rell."

"I know."

"You said that last time."

"And I remembered eventually."

Tessa looked at Eryn.

"Make sure your father remembers."

"I will."

Garran sighed.

Calist climbed into the back of the wagon beside Joric.

"How long?"

Alden looked at him.

"We haven't moved yet."

"I know. How long until we get there?"

"About a third of the day, with the rests. Longer if the ox decides otherwise."

Joric leaned against a bundle of leather.

"Can we ask if we're there yet?"

"Once," Garran said.

"Are we there yet?"

"Good. Now you're finished."

The wagon started with a wooden groan.

The village moved past slowly.

The smithy.

The well.

The familiar pens and fences.

Mara stood outside their house with one hand raised until a bend in the road hid her from view.

Calist kept looking back for another few moments anyway.

Then he turned around.

The road stretched ahead.

For the first time in his life, he was following it somewhere.

He had expected that to feel faster.

It did not.

The ox walked at the same patient pace whether Calist was excited or not.

The wheels creaked. Harness leather shifted. Birds called from the hedges.

They passed fields Calist had seen from a distance before, then fields he had not.

That alone was enough.

"Corvin once told us about a wagon that broke an axle near a river bend," Calist said.

Joric looked around.

"Is there a river?"

"No."

"Then why are you telling us?"

"Because that bend looks like the one he described."

"Did he describe what it looked like?"

Calist thought about it.

"Not exactly."

Eryn smiled from the other side of the wagon.

A little later they passed a ditch, which reminded Calist of the soldier who had fallen into one while chasing goblins years earlier.

A low hill reminded him of something Corvin had once said about autumn grass farther north.

A stand of old willows somehow reminded him of the ferry story, though even Calist admitted there was no ferry anywhere nearby.

By the fourth story, Nalia asked, "Does everything on this road remind you of something someone told you?"

"Not everything."

Joric pointed at an ordinary tree.

"What about that?"

Calist looked at it.

"No."

"Disappointing."

They stopped several times along the way.

The stops were not for the children.

The ox needed water, grass, and a chance to stand without the wagon pulling behind it. Garran loosened part of the harness. Alden checked the wheels. The children stretched their legs, ate bread and hard cheese, and were repeatedly told not to wander too far from the road.

Nothing attacked them.

No wheel broke.

No mysterious traveler appeared.

The most dramatic event of the journey was Joric nearly sitting in a patch of thistles.

Calist thought the entire trip was wonderful.

Later in the morning, the first roofs appeared ahead.

Then more.

A pair of weathered stone posts and open wooden gates marked Caerbreyn's edge. Beyond them, the road widened and another road joined it. Carts came from both directions, and people Calist did not know walked past without greeting him.

The quiet rhythm of the wagon disappeared beneath wheels on hard-packed road, voices, hammering, animals, and the occasional shout from a stall. The smells changed too: dust and fields gave way to horse, wood smoke, hot metal, leather, and somewhere ahead, baking bread.

Calist sat straighter.

Alden had told him several times that the town was small.

It still seemed enormous.

There were more buildings along one street than Calist could see from the center of his entire village. Some had upper floors. Signs hung above doors. Stalls stood beneath cloth awnings. Smoke rose from workshops he could not identify by smell alone.

A bell rang somewhere beyond the roofs.

Calist almost missed Garran telling him to climb down.

"If you stare with your mouth open, someone will charge you for it," Garran said.

Calist closed his mouth.

Eryn laughed.

* * *

Their first stop was an iron yard off the market square.

Calist had imagined a smithy.

Instead there were racks of bars, bundles of rod, rough plates, broken pieces meant for remelting, crates of nails, and metal in shapes Alden never kept in such quantities.

Heddan Rell greeted Alden by name and Garran with a complaint about the smell of hides.

Garran told him the hides smelled better than he did.

Business began immediately.

The children helped unload what they had brought while the adults talked weights, quality, and prices.

Calist tried to listen to everything at once.

Alden picked up one iron bar, checked its edge, then struck it lightly against another.

"Cleaner than the last lot."

"And more expensive," Heddan said.

"Of course it is."

"You picked a good week. It may cost more again by next month."

Alden looked at him.

"Why?"

Heddan lowered his voice only a little.

"More trouble at the far border."

Garran stopped checking a bundle of straps.

"Morcant again?"

"That's what the traders say. More crossings. More farms hit. A few small posts too. Nothing like a war. Not yet."

"Traders say a lot," Alden said.

"They do."

Heddan shrugged.

"One says their winter was bad enough that whole districts lost stores. Another says they're short of grazing land and good fields. Another says some lord over there decided our side looks richer than his."

Garran snorted.

"So nobody knows."

"Nobody who talks to me."

Alden looked down at the iron again.

"Rumors get cheaper the farther they travel."

Heddan smiled.

"Iron doesn't."

That ended the serious part of the conversation.

They went back to arguing over price.

Calist remembered the words anyway.

A far border. More attacks. Morcant, a neighboring kingdom he had never seen.

Even trouble could exist beyond the horizon.

By the time the first deals were settled, Garran finally turned toward the four children.

"You can go look around."

Joric brightened immediately.

"Really?"

"For about two hours."

Alden held up one finger before any of them could move.

"You stay together."

"We will."

"Together," Alden repeated. "Not two here and two somewhere else. Not 'we could still see them from the corner.' Together."

Calist nodded.

Garran pointed back toward Heddan.

"If you get lost, come here. Heddan knows us."

Heddan raised a hand without looking up from his ledger.

"Unfortunately."

"Or ask for Mira Pell. She keeps the bread shop on the west side of the square. She knows us too."

"Meeting point is the wagon," Alden said. "Two hours. If you're late, you spend the ride home walking beside it."

Joric looked at the ox.

"That might be faster."

Alden stared at him.

"I can make it slower."

Joric stopped smiling.

Garran handed each of them a few copper coins.

Calist stared at the money in his palm.

"For what?"

"Whatever small useless thing convinces you the trip was worth making," Garran said. "Or food. Preferably food."

Eryn closed her fingers around hers.

"Anything else?"

Garran looked at his daughter.

"Do not climb anything."

"Why would I climb anything?"

"Because I know you."

Nalia laughed.

Then the four of them were on their own.

Not truly alone.

There were people everywhere.

That was almost stranger.

In the village, an adult was never more than a few houses away, and almost every adult knew exactly who they were.

Here, most people did not care.

Calist loved it immediately.

They crossed the square twice before agreeing on a direction.

Joric bought a twisted piece of honeyed bread before they had been free for ten minutes.

Nalia spent one copper on a narrow blue ribbon and then spent the next five minutes insisting she had not wasted it.

Eryn stopped at every stall with knives, hunting gear, feathers, horn, or leatherwork.

Calist stopped at nearly everything.

There were colored glass beads. Small carved animals. Spices that made him sneeze. Books he could not afford even if all four of them combined their money. Tiny painted figures of soldiers, none of whom looked as tired as the real soldiers Calist knew.

Then Calist saw the dwarf.

He stopped so suddenly that Joric walked into his back.

"What?"

Calist pointed before remembering that pointing at people was rude.

The dwarf stood behind a metalwork stall near the edge of the square.

He was much shorter than Alden, but broad enough through the shoulders that the difference in height did not make him look small. His beard was tied into two thick braids to keep it away from his work, and his hands looked almost too large for the delicate ring he was adjusting with a tiny pair of pliers.

Bram looked much as Calist had heard dwarves described.

He had never seen one.

Eryn elbowed him.

"Stop staring."

The dwarf looked up.

"No, let him."

Calist froze.

The dwarf's eyes narrowed with amusement.

"First one?"

Calist nodded.

"Yes, sir."

"Bram Ordek. There. Now you've met one too. Come look at the work. It's more interesting."

Calist did not need to be invited twice.

The stall was full of metal things that had almost no practical reason to exist.

Rings. Pendants. Small chains. Decorative clasps. Tiny animals made from twisted wire. Buckles engraved with patterns too fine for Calist to imagine doing with Alden's ordinary tools.

He picked up a small copper pendant and turned it over.

The back was almost as clean as the front.

"How did you join this?"

Bram glanced down.

"Which part?"

"Here. I can't see the seam."

That earned Calist a different look.

Bram took the pendant and showed him the edge.

"Because the seam is where you aren't looking. Heat, clean surfaces, and patience. Mostly patience."

"My father says bad joins show when the piece is under strain."

"Your father is right."

"He's a smith."

"Then he'd better be."

Calist smiled.

Beside him, Eryn had gone quiet.

He looked over.

She was holding a necklace.

The pendant was small and silver-colored, shaped like a narrow leaf with a tiny copper arrow worked across it. Nothing about it was extravagant. The detail was simply very fine.

Eryn ran one thumb over the edge.

"How much?"

Bram named a price.

Eryn's expression changed only a little.

It was enough for Calist to notice.

The few coins Garran had given them would not come close.

Eryn set the necklace back carefully.

"Maybe another time."

Bram nodded as though this happened often.

"Metal keeps better than bread. It'll exist somewhere."

Eryn moved on to a set of small hunting clasps.

Calist looked at the necklace once more before following her.

He did not say anything.

He did remember exactly which one it had been.

* * *

They still had nearly half their time left when the trouble began.

It started with laughter behind them.

Not friendly laughter.

Calist turned.

Four town boys stood near a stack of empty crates. They were around the same age, perhaps one or two years older at most.

One looked at the dust dried along Joric's trouser leg.

"Lose your field?"

Joric frowned.

"What?"

"Thought farmers stayed in their fields."

Another boy wrinkled his nose dramatically.

"Smells like goats."

Their clothes were cleaner than the village children's, but not fine. They were ordinary town boys, not little nobles. They simply had not spent a third of the day behind an ox on a dusty road.

Nalia looked at the boy who had spoken.

"At least goats are useful."

Eryn made a choking sound that might have been a laugh.

The boy's face tightened.

Calist already knew where this was going.

He wished Joric did too.

Joric stepped forward.

"You should try working sometime. Might improve the smell."

"Joric," Calist said.

Too late.

The first boy shoved Joric in the chest.

Joric shoved him back.

Then everyone made bad decisions at once.

One of the town boys swung at Joric.

Calist stepped between them and took the blow high on his shoulder.

It hurt.

He had expected it to.

He also knew what it felt like to drop a heavy bar against himself, to take a kick from an annoyed goat, to slip carrying wood, or to finish a day's work with bruises he had forgotten receiving.

A fist was not pleasant.

It was not enough to make him move.

The boy looked surprised.

Calist remembered Corvin nudging his foot into place years earlier.

Feet first.

Weight under you.

He set himself.

The second shove did even less.

"Move," the boy snapped.

"No."

Calist pushed him backward into the crates.

Wood clattered.

Someone grabbed Calist from the side.

Joric threw himself at that someone with more enthusiasm than skill.

Nalia shouted something Calist did not hear and hit another boy with her folded market bag.

Eryn moved past Calist's shoulder.

She did not try to overpower anyone.

She did not need to.

A boy lunged toward her. Eryn slipped aside and stuck out a foot. He stumbled.

Before he recovered, a small stone struck him sharply in the shin.

He yelped.

Eryn already had another in her hand.

Calist had watched her hit knotholes with pebbles from farther away than this.

He knew what came next before the boy did.

The stone struck between his legs.

He folded with a sound that made every boy in the street instinctively wince.

"Eryn!" Calist said.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Another town boy came at Calist.

Calist let him.

That was the strange advantage he had.

He was not faster than Eryn. He was not especially clever about fighting. But he knew he could take a hit and still be there afterward.

So he stayed in front.

A punch caught his ribs. Another glanced from his forearm. He closed the distance, got both hands on the boy's coat, and shoved hard.

The boy stumbled into his friend just as Eryn moved around Calist's other side.

Neither of them had planned it.

It simply worked.

When someone tried to get around Calist, Eryn was there first. When one of them turned toward her, Calist got in the way. She moved quickly where he held ground.

Joric and Nalia did their best in the confusion, both too stubborn to leave and too inexperienced to do anything gracefully.

The town boys were not weak.

They were simply surprised by how difficult the village children were to put down.

Calist and the others spent their days carrying water, splitting wood, moving sacks, wrestling stubborn animals, walking fields,

and working until a job was finished because there was no one else to finish it for them.

That did not make them trained fighters.

It did make them hard to bully.

For several confused moments the street became a knot of elbows, dust, shouting, and bad decisions.

Calist took another hit that split the inside of his lip against his teeth.

That one made him angry.

He caught the boy by the front of his coat.

"Calist Griffith."

The voice stopped him more effectively than a punch.

Calist froze.

Still holding the boy.

He turned his head.

Corvin Hale stood in the street with two soldiers beside him.

Calist knew both of them from the smithy. Merek Dain had once spent an entire afternoon complaining while Alden repaired three broken buckles on the same harness. Oren Voss was the soldier who always brought apples for the village children and then pretended he had not.

For a moment no one moved.

Corvin looked at Calist's bleeding lip.

Then at Joric half-kneeling on another boy's coat.

Then at Nalia gripping her market bag like a club.

Then at Eryn, who still had a stone in one hand.

Finally he looked at the boy bent over several paces away.

"I am going to regret asking," Corvin said. "What happened?"

"They started it," Eryn said immediately.

One of the town boys pointed at her.

"She threw a rock at my—"

"I can see where," Corvin said.

Merek turned his head and coughed into one fist.

Calist strongly suspected he was hiding a laugh.

Corvin was not.

"Up. All of you."

The town boys were suddenly very interested in leaving.

Corvin let them go after making certain none of them was badly hurt.

Then he looked at the four children he knew.

"Are any of you actually injured?"

There were bruises. Scraped hands. Calist's lip.

Nothing worse.

"Good," Corvin said. "Then you can walk."

Joric looked uneasy.

"Where?"

"Back to the people you came here with."

"We didn't start it," Nalia said.

Corvin started walking.

"You may explain that to them. I'm sure they'll be fascinated by the distinction."

* * *

Alden was not fascinated by the distinction.

Garran was even less so.

They listened while the four children explained what had happened, sometimes all at once, until Alden finally held up one hand.

"Enough."

Silence fell.

Corvin stood beside the wagon with Merek and Oren, looking much too comfortable for someone responsible for returning them.

Alden looked at Calist's lip.

"Did they start it?"

"Yes."

"Could you have walked away?"

Calist hesitated.

"Maybe."

"That's the part I care about."

Garran turned to Eryn.

"You threw stones."

"They were trying to hit us."

"At their legs?"

Eryn said nothing.

Garran closed his eyes for a moment.

Oren looked very carefully at the sky.

"I taught her to aim," Garran said at last. "I may regret that."

Eryn almost smiled.

"Don't."

"That was not permission to feel proud."

Her smile disappeared.

Mostly.

Corvin finally spoke.

"For what it's worth, they weren't losing."

Alden looked at him.

"That doesn't help at all."

"I thought so."

Only then did Calist realize why Corvin was in town at all.

Several military packs and supply crates stood near the soldiers' horses. A leather case of papers was strapped behind Corvin's saddle.

"Are you staying?" Calist asked.

"Long enough to collect supplies and deliver reports," Corvin said. "Then we're back on the road."

Calist immediately wanted to ask what reports.

Alden saw it happen on his face.

"No."

Calist closed his mouth.

Alden pointed toward the ox.

"You four wanted something to do. Now you have it."

Joric's shoulders sank.

"What?"

"Water first. The ox needs it before we leave. Full bucket, not half because you're tired."

Garran pointed toward the goods stacked beside the wagon.

"Then those crates get loaded. Metal low and toward the center. Food above it. Leather where it stays dry."

Nalia stared at one of the iron-filled crates.

"That's heavy."

"Yes," Garran said.

Calist wiped the blood from his lip with the back of his hand.

Alden looked at him.

"And since you're the one who likes proving how much you can carry, you can start with that one."

Calist looked at the crate.

Then at his father.

"Fair."

Corvin's mouth twitched.

"I remember saying something once about conquering the border after you finished the floor."

Calist groaned.

"That was years ago."

"Good stories improve with age."

Merek laughed.

Calist bent, got both hands under the crate, and lifted.

It was heavier than he expected.

Eryn immediately took the other side without being asked.

For one second they looked at each other.

Then they carried it toward the wagon together.

Behind them, Joric and Nalia started toward the well with the buckets.

The punishment was work.

Which, Calist reflected, made it remarkably similar to being at home.

* * *

It also gave them plenty of time to discuss the battle.

Quietly.

At least, quietly enough that the adults standing on the other side of the wagon could pretend not to hear.

"You should have seen his face," Joric whispered as he returned with one of the water buckets. "When Calist pushed him into the crates."

"I did see it," Nalia said. "I was there."

"I mean properly."

"I saw it properly."

Calist and Eryn lowered another crate into the wagon.

Eryn straightened and rubbed her hands together.

"Calist mostly stood there and got hit."

Calist stared at her.

"I was keeping them off you."

"You were very good at standing there."

"Thank you."

"Like the ox."

Joric nearly dropped the bucket laughing.

Calist looked toward the animal tied nearby.

The ox chewed slowly and showed no interest in defending him.

"That's not funny."

"It is a little," Nalia said.

Calist pointed at Eryn.

"Fine. Then she's a fox."

Eryn raised an eyebrow.

"Why?"

"Because you kept running around everyone and attacking whatever they weren't protecting."

Joric grinned.

"And because foxes bite."

"I didn't bite anyone."

"You did worse."

Calist and Joric winced in perfect agreement.

Eryn looked entirely unrepentant.

Nalia carefully checked the small blue ribbon tucked into her market bag.

"At least this survived."

Joric stared at her.

"We nearly got beaten up in the street and you're worried about the ribbon?"

"I paid for it."

"One copper."

"My copper."

She folded the ribbon more carefully and tucked it deeper into the bag.

Joric sighed and looked toward the market.

"We barely got to see anything."

Eryn looked at him.

"Whose fault was that?"

"Theirs."

"You told them they smelled worse than goats."

"After they called us farmers."

Nalia snorted.

"We are farmers sometimes."

"That's not the point."

Calist lifted one end of another crate.

"You could have ignored them."

Joric looked offended.

"You didn't."

Calist opened his mouth.

Then closed it.

Eryn smiled.

"None of us did."

That ended the blame quickly.

They all knew there had been other choices.

They also knew, with the uncomfortable certainty of people who had known one another most of their lives, that none of them would actually have made those choices once the shoving started.

Joric took the other end of the crate.

"Still their fault."

"Mostly," Calist agreed.

On the far side of the wagon, the adults were having a conversation of their own.

Corvin had unfolded a short list and was comparing it with the supplies beside Merek's horse.

"Salt, lamp oil, two bundles of cord, dried meat," he said. "We still need the grain sacks."

"Other side of the square," Oren said.

"I know where they are."

"You said that about the lamp oil."

"I found the lamp oil."

"Merek found it."

Merek smiled.

Alden glanced toward the clouds gathering over the western roofs.

"You're still riding out today?"

Corvin followed his look.

"That was the plan."

"Was?"

"I'm learning from your ox. Never hurry when the sky is making threats."

Garran snorted.

"Smartest thing you've said all day."

The children worked until the water was carried, the iron was packed low in the wagon, and the remaining provisions were wedged where they would not shift on the road.

Joric leaned against the wheel when they were done.

"Can we sit now?"

Alden looked over the load.

"For a moment."

Joric closed his eyes in relief.

Then Garran said, "After that, we'll walk the market."

Joric's eyes opened again.

"What?"

"You heard me."

Nalia straightened.

"We're still allowed?"

Alden gave them a long look.

"You're still being punished. That doesn't mean the entire trip has to be ruined."

Eryn looked toward the square.

"Together?"

"Very much together," Garran said. "With us this time."

Joric decided supervision was a small price to pay.

* * *

The market felt different with Alden and Garran walking behind them.

Not worse.

Just less like the four of them had somehow been released into another world without anyone watching.

Joric bought another piece of honeyed bread and was told this was becoming a poor use of money.

He answered that bread could not be a poor use of money because it was food.

Nalia found a small wooden comb and spent several minutes deciding whether it was worth another copper before keeping her coin instead.

Eryn stopped at a bowyer's stall long enough that Garran eventually had to remind her they were not buying a new bow.

Calist kept looking at metalwork.

Hinges with decorative leaves worked into the plates. Small knives with patterned handles. Buckles finer than anything

needed for a work belt. Brass cups. Copper pins. Tiny tools whose purpose he could only guess.

They passed Bram Ordek's stall again.

The dwarf was speaking with a customer and did not notice them.

Calist slowed anyway.

The leaf-and-arrow necklace was still hanging where Eryn had left it.

He looked at the narrow seam around the pendant.

Then at the chain.

Then at Bram's hands moving as he spoke.

"Calist."

Alden's voice came from several paces ahead.

Calist hurried after the others.

Their last stop was Mira Pell's bakery on the west side of the square.

Calist smelled it before they reached the door.

Warm bread, browned crust, dried fruit, and something sweet he could not name filled the little shop.

Mira herself was a broad woman with flour on one sleeve and the habit of speaking while continuing three other tasks.

"Garran. You remembered Tessa's bundle this time."

Garran placed it on the counter.

"I always remember."

Eryn looked at Mira.

Mira looked at Eryn.

Neither said anything.

Garran sighed.

"Eventually."

Mira laughed and passed him a wrapped parcel in return.

"And this is for Nessa. Fresh this morning. Apples, dried berries, enough honey that she can't complain it's too plain."

"She'll complain anyway," Eryn said.

"Of course she will. She's earned the right."

Calist knew Nessa Venn as Eryn's grandmother and as the oldest person in the village. She still insisted on doing more for herself than Mara thought sensible, but journeys like this had stopped being an option for her some time ago.

Mira added a second, smaller loaf.

"That one is for the road."

Joric immediately looked interested.

"No," Garran said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You didn't need to."

By the time they stepped outside again, the light had changed.

The western clouds had thickened into one dark mass. Wind moved between the buildings in short cold gusts, lifting dust and tugging at awnings.

Alden looked at the sky for only a few seconds.

"We're not going home today."

Calist looked at him.

"Why?"

"Because we'd reach the worst stretch near dark, and I don't like those clouds."

Garran nodded.

"Neither does the ox."

The ox was nowhere in sight.

Eryn looked at him.

"You can't see the ox."

"I know him well."

They took the wagon to a stable yard behind an inn near the southern gate. The stableman found space for the ox, helped them pull the wagon beneath a long lean-to, and promised the animal hay, water, and more respect than Garran usually showed it.

Garran said the ox was already becoming spoiled.

The children were delighted by the change of plan.

Spending one day away from home had already been extraordinary.

Spending the night made it something else entirely.

* * *

Supper at the inn was louder than any meal Calist had ever eaten at home.

People spoke over one another. Cups struck tables. A chair scraped every few moments. Someone near the hearth laughed loudly enough to make half the room look over.

Calist tried to watch everything until Alden told him to eat before the stew went cold.

Corvin, Merek, and Oren joined them not long afterward.

Apparently the weather had changed their plans too.

Oren dropped onto the bench beside Joric.

"I hear you've been fighting wars without us."

Joric looked at Corvin.

"He told you?"

"The entire market probably knows by now," Merek said.

Eryn pointed her spoon at him.

"You laughed."

"I coughed."

"You laughed while coughing."

"Very different thing."

The conversation stayed easy while the children were at the table.

Corvin told Alden which roads were in poor shape. Garran asked about leather prices near the fort. Oren complained about a cook who believed salt was a personal insult. Merek claimed Oren would eat boot leather if enough onion was put on it.

Calist listened to every word.

He also noticed that Alden asked nothing about the reports Corvin had mentioned earlier.

Not yet.

When the bowls were empty and the younger four had begun fighting sleep despite insisting they were not tired, Alden stood.

"Wagon."

Joric blinked at him.

"Already?"

"Yes."

"But—"

"Wagon."

Garran handed Eryn the stable-yard lantern.

"Straight there. All four of you."

Nalia yawned.

"Together. We know."

"Good. You're learning."

The wagon had been emptied enough to make room among the remaining bundles. Blankets went down over boards and folded sacks. It was not a bed.

To Calist, that made it better.

For several minutes the four of them whispered in the dark, replaying the day in fragments.

The dwarf.

The fight.

The market.

Joric's bread.

Nalia's ribbon.

The boy Eryn had hit with the stone.

Eventually Nalia stopped answering.

Then Joric.

Eryn told Calist to stop moving because the wagon creaked every time he shifted.

He whispered that he was trying to get comfortable.

"Then do it quietly."

A few minutes later, her breathing became slow and even too.

Calist remained awake.

He was too tired not to sleep.

He was also far too excited to manage it.

The day kept repeating behind his eyes.

The road.

The first roofs.

Bram's hands.

The necklace.

Corvin appearing in the street.

The inn.

Every time Calist thought he was finally drifting off, some other piece returned.

Much later, footsteps crossed the stable yard.

Adult voices followed them.

Calist went still.

Alden and Garran had returned with Corvin, Merek, and Oren. Someone set down a lantern outside the wagon. Hay shifted as blankets were spread nearby.

They were still talking.

Quietly now.

"So Heddan wasn't exaggerating," Garran said.

"Not about the attacks," Corvin answered.

A pause.

Calist stared into the darkness above him.

"How bad?" Alden asked.

"Bad enough that the reports are real. Not bad enough that I'd call it war."

"Yet."

Corvin did not answer immediately.

"Yet," he said at last.

Someone shifted in the hay.

Merek's voice came next, lower than Calist was used to hearing it.

"Three crossings we know of this month. Two farms stripped. One burned after the family fled. A patrol traded arrows with men on the other side two days ago."

"Soldiers?" Garran asked.

"Nobody got close enough to ask," Oren said. "But they weren't hungry peasants wandering over a line by mistake."

Alden was quiet.

Calist could picture his father's face without seeing it.

"I've seen this before," Alden said.

Corvin sighed.

"I know."

Garran shifted somewhere outside the wagon.

"Three and a half centuries since Dunareth split, and Caelren and Morcant are still fighting over the same crown."

"Not continuously," Corvin said.

"No," Alden agreed. "Just often enough that men like us get called up."

Corvin was quiet for a moment.

"Treaties. Marriages. Years when neither side wanted to spend the men or coin. Then another ruler decides an old claim matters again."

Garran gave a quiet snort. "And both crowns still say they should have inherited Dunareth."

"Of course they do," Corvin said.

Alden gave a quiet breath.

"That claim is why you and I were sent east."

"One reason," Corvin said.

"And while they were fighting east, Breynach kept growing west," Garran said.

Corvin took longer to answer.

"It did. Farms first. Roads after them. Forts once there was something to protect. Orc and goblin tribes were already using much of that country."

"So we moved into their land," Alden said.

"Some of it."

"And they pushed back."

"Sometimes. Sometimes they raided first. Sometimes we did. Then one attack answered another until nobody living remembered the first one."

For a few breaths, nobody spoke.

Garran finally asked, "So who was right?"

Corvin gave a quiet, humorless laugh.

"Ask a chronicler in Caelren and he'll tell you Caelren was. Ask one in Morcant and he'll change the names. Ask an orc and I doubt he'll agree with either."

Alden was silent for a moment.

"One raid. Then another. Patrols answer. Someone sends more men because the first lot wasn't enough. Then someone dies who matters to the wrong person."

"We're not there."

"No."

Alden's voice remained calm.

"I hope we never are."

For a while only the ox could be heard shifting in its stall.

Then Corvin said, "The command knows. That's what some of my reports are about. For now we're watching it. That's all I can tell you because that's all I know."

"That's enough," Alden said.

The conversation moved on after that, quieter still.

Calist did not hear every word.

He did not try to move closer.

He knew what would happen if he sat up and asked questions.

Alden would tell him to sleep.

Corvin would tell him nothing he had not already heard.

So Calist stayed still.

The excitement of the day had not vanished.

It had simply gained something heavier beside it.

Eventually the voices stopped.

This time, Calist slept.

* * *

Morning made the previous night's worry feel strangely distant.

The clouds had passed without much more than a short rain. The road shone wet beneath a pale sky, and the ox looked deeply unimpressed by being harnessed again.

Calist climbed into the wagon expecting the same slow journey home.

Then Corvin led three saddled horses into the yard.

Calist grinned.

"You're coming with us?"

"Part of the way," Corvin said. "Our road runs past your village before we turn for the fort."

Joric looked at the horses.

Then at the ox.

"You'll have to ride very slowly."

Oren leaned over his saddle.

"We considered tying your wagon behind us."

Alden looked at him.

"Try it and I'll charge you for the axle."

"See? No sense of adventure."

They left town together.

The journey remained exactly as uneventful as the day before.

No ambush waited beyond the gate. No wheel broke. No neighboring army appeared over a hill.

There was only wet road, fields, hedges, and the patient rhythm of the ox.

With the soldiers beside them, however, the time passed differently.

Calist asked questions until Corvin threatened to ride ahead.

Joric asked whether cavalry training included learning how not to fall off while sleeping.

Merek said that was Oren's greatest military skill.

Oren denied having ever fallen asleep on a horse.

His horse chose that moment to stumble slightly over a rut.

Everyone laughed except Oren.

At one of the rests, Eryn showed Corvin how far she could hit a tree with a pebble.

Corvin watched the stone strike exactly where she had pointed.

Then he looked at Garran.

"You really did teach her to aim."

Garran sighed.

"Apparently too well."

Eryn looked pleased.

The familiar hills returned one by one.

Then the fields Calist knew.

Then the old woods in the distance.

By early afternoon, the first roofs of the village appeared.

Calist had been gone barely more than a day.

The sight still settled something in him.

The town had been fascinating.

The village looked like home.

Corvin and the soldiers stopped only long enough for Oren to hand three apples to children who had come running toward the road, while insisting the fruit had somehow fallen from his saddlebag.

Then Corvin raised one hand to Alden.

"We'll see you on the next pass."

"Try to keep the same horse alive until then."

"No promises."

Calist watched the three riders continue along the road until they reached the turn that would eventually take them toward the fort.

Then Alden tapped the side of the wagon.

"Don't stare too long. We still have to unload it."

Calist climbed down.

* * *

Unloading did not remain their job for long.

A loaded village wagon returning from town attracted people almost immediately.

Someone came for the sack of salt. Someone else helped Alden with the iron. Tessa appeared before Garran had finished loosening the first leather bundle. Tarin arrived with two other children and demanded a complete account of everything that had happened before lifting anything at all.

Joric began with the fight.

Naturally.

"Work first," Garran said.

The story continued while they worked.

Crates were carried toward the smithy. Cloth and thread went to Tessa. A small sack of seed changed hands twice before reaching the right household. Oil, nails, salt, dried fruit, and other purchases disappeared through the village almost as quickly as they came off the wagon.

No one stood beside the load counting who had paid for what.

People simply knew what had been needed and where it belonged.

The children were sent off with the smaller things.

Nalia carried sewing needles and a packet of buttons to Tessa.

Joric and Tarin took salt and lamp oil toward two houses farther down the road.

Calist and Eryn were given Mira Pell's wrapped fruit bread.

"Straight to your grandmother," Garran told Eryn.

"I know."

"And don't eat it."

"I know."

Calist looked at the parcel.

"Was that for me too?"

"Especially for you."

They carried it together to Nessa Venn's house near the far end of the village.

Nessa was sitting outside beneath a blanket despite the mild afternoon, sorting beans into a shallow bowl.

She looked up as they approached.

"You came back."

Eryn held up the parcel.

"Mira sent this."

Nessa's eyes narrowed.

"That woman puts too much honey in everything."

"She said you'd say that."

"Then she should listen."

Eryn kissed her grandmother's cheek and set the bread beside her.

Nessa looked past her at Calist.

Then at his swollen lip.

"Town attacked you?"

Calist opened his mouth.

Eryn answered first.

"We won."

Nessa stared at her.

Then she began to laugh.

"Your father knows?"

"Unfortunately."

"Good. Then I don't need to scold you."

She broke one bean between her fingers and dropped it into the discard bowl.

"I can enjoy the story instead."

Calist decided immediately that Nessa was his favorite elder.

They stayed only long enough to tell a shortened version before Eryn remembered they still had work waiting.

By then the sun had begun to lower.

The village slowly settled around them.

Doors closed against the cooler evening air. Animals were brought in. Smoke rose from chimneys. The noise around the wagon faded as the last goods found their places.

One by one, people went home.

Calist did too.

* * *

Mara had barely put supper on the table before Calist started talking.

He told her about the road first.

Then the town.

Then Heddan's iron yard.

Then the market.

Then Bram Ordek.

"A dwarf," Mara said.

"A real one."

Alden sat down across from him.

"As opposed to?"

Calist ignored him.

"His work was tiny. Not bad tiny. Fine. He had chains where you could barely see how the links were closed, and pendants with joins hidden inside the edges, and this little copper animal made from wire that—"

Mara smiled and let him continue.

He told her about the inn.

About sleeping in the wagon.

About riding home with Corvin.

He nearly managed to skip the fight.

Then Mara looked at his lip.

"And that?"

Calist stopped.

Alden ate another spoonful of stew.

He was no help at all.

"There was a small problem."

"How small?"

"Four boys."

Mara slowly put down her spoon.

By the time Calist finished explaining, Alden had to cover his mouth when Mara reached the part involving Eryn's second stone.

"You are not laughing," Mara told him.

"I'm not."

"You are."

"Internally."

Calist decided the safest thing was to eat.

Later, once the story had been told properly and Mara had inspected his lip despite his insistence that it was already fine, the house became quiet again.

The familiar kind of quiet.

The kind Calist had missed without knowing he would.

He went to bed tired enough that sleep should have come immediately.

It did not.

He thought about the town.

Mostly, he thought about Bram's stall.

The clean seams.

The fine chains.

The way something made of metal could be useful for nothing at all and still be worth making because someone had made it beautifully.

Then he remembered Eryn holding the necklace.

The narrow silver-colored leaf.

The tiny copper arrow.

The way she had asked the price and put it back without complaint.

Calist stared into the darkness.

He did not have enough money to buy something like that.

That thought bothered him for perhaps a minute.

Then another thought replaced it.

He was a smith's son.

Or at least, he was trying to become one.

Maybe buying it was not the point.

Someday, he decided, he would learn to make one himself.

Not that necklace exactly.

Something better.

Something Eryn would look at the same way.

Calist closed his eyes.

For once, the future he imagined did not contain a sword, a distant road, or a soldier's story.

It contained a small piece of metal in his hands.

And enough skill to make it beautiful.

CHAPTER 4

Useful Hands



The thought did not become a necklace the next morning.

It did not become anything for quite a while.

Summer continued around it.

The days stayed long and warm. Brief rains darkened the packed earth around the smithy and left the gardens shining; on dry afternoons dust clung to boots and wagon wheels.

The forge still needed water. Animals still needed feeding. Fields still needed hands. Hinges broke, knives dulled, wheels loosened, and every time Calist thought he had found an afternoon with nothing pressing to do, someone found something for him.

Days became weeks.

The leaf-and-arrow pendant stayed in his memory anyway.

So did Bram's hands.

Not merely because the dwarf had made something beautiful.

Calist had watched Alden make hundreds of things that worked exactly as they should. He understood that kind of skill better every year.

Bram had shown him something else.

Precision so fine that Calist had not even known to look for it until he saw it.

The feeling irritated him.

Not in a bad way.

It was simply difficult to look at the work he already knew and remain satisfied with knowing only that much.

One evening, several weeks after the town trip, the day's fire had burned down to a red bed beneath the forge. Cooler air came

through the open doors carrying the smell of cut grass, but inside there was still charcoal, hot iron, and the damp mineral smell of the quench bucket. Hammers and tongs hung dark against the wall, each in a place Calist knew well enough to find without looking.

Alden was cleaning the face of a hammer when Calist stopped beside the workbench.

"Teach me."

Alden kept rubbing the metal with an oiled cloth.

"I have been."

"Properly."

That made Alden look up.

Calist immediately realized how the word sounded.

"I mean—more properly."

"Better."

Calist leaned one hand against the bench.

"I don't want to only fetch things and hold things anymore."

"You don't."

"Mostly."

Alden set the hammer down.

"You make nails."

"Those are nails."

"People need nails."

"I know."

Alden waited.

Calist tried again.

"I want to make things people will actually use. Without you doing the important part afterward."

His father studied him for long enough that Calist became aware of how hot the forge still was despite the evening air.

"Why?"

Calist had expected the question.

He had not prepared an answer.

Bram came to mind first.

Then the necklace.

Then Eryn holding it.

He said none of those things.

There were other reasons now anyway.

He had watched adults stop asking him merely to carry things and start trusting him to finish small jobs. He had liked the difference more than he expected.

He liked being the person someone looked for when something heavy had to move.

He wanted there to be more things people could look for him to do.

"I want to be useful," he said.

Alden's eyebrows rose slightly.

"You are useful."

"More useful."

That answer seemed to satisfy him more.

Alden picked up the hammer again.

"Tomorrow you make hinges."

Calist smiled.

"Really?"

"Bad ones, probably."

The smile faded.

Alden's mouth twitched.

"Then you make them again until they aren't bad."

Calist nodded.

"All right."

"And Calist?"

"What?"

"If you rush because you want to get to the interesting work, you'll spend twice as long doing the boring work again."

Calist looked at the hammer in his father's hand.

"I know."

Alden handed him the oily cloth.

"Then finish this."

Calist took it.

Apparently proper teaching began with cleaning someone else's hammer.

* * *

Alden had not been joking about the hinges.

The first pair did not match.

The second matched only if Calist held them far enough apart.

The third pair was usable.

Alden made him produce another pair anyway.

Then came hooks.

Brackets.

Pins.

Simple fittings.

Small repairs in places where a mistake would be annoying rather than dangerous.

Alden checked everything.

He did not always fix what was wrong.

Sometimes he simply handed the piece back.

"Again."

Calist learned to hate that word.

He also learned that it usually meant Alden believed he could do better without being shown how.

By late summer, the first thing Calist made entirely himself that someone genuinely needed was a gate hook.

It was not beautiful.

It was not even especially interesting.

It was a thick piece of iron bent to hold a gate closed against animals that had no respect for gates.

Calist still stared at it as though it were a sword fit for a king.

Alden turned it over in his hand.

Calist waited.

His father inspected the curve, then the flattened end where the nail holes had been punched.

One hole sat slightly farther from the edge than the other.

Calist already knew.

Alden ran his thumb over it.

"Would you trust it?"

Calist looked at the hook.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"The bend is thick enough. The holes aren't close enough to the edge to split it. And it doesn't need to look even."

Alden looked at him.

"It should still look even."

Calist sighed.

"But?"

"But it will hold."

He handed it back.

"Clean it."

Calist blinked.

"That's it?"

"What else do you want?"

"I thought you'd fix it."

"Does it need fixing?"

Calist looked down at the hook again.

"No."

"Then stop trying to give me more work."

That afternoon Calist carried it to one of the pens near the far side of the village.

The old hook there had worn thin where it rubbed against the staple. Joric was already nearby, helping one of the farmers replace a cracked section of fence.

Calist removed the old fitting, set the new one, and drove the nails home.

When he was finished, he closed the gate.

The hook dropped neatly into place.

He opened it.

Closed it again.

Then once more.

Joric leaned on the fence.

"Are you planning to spend the rest of the day doing that?"

Calist ignored him.

Nalia came around the pen carrying a short stack of cut boards.

She stopped beside him.

"What are you doing?"

"Testing it."

"You already tested it."

"I'm making sure."

She looked at the hook.

Then at Calist.

"You made that?"

Calist tried not to sound too pleased.

"Yes."

Nalia touched the iron with one finger.

"Yourself?"

"Alden checked it."

"That isn't what I asked."

Calist smiled.

"Yes. Myself."

Nalia's green eyes stayed on the hook.

It was only a hook.

It would spend the next several years being rained on, struck by a gate, rubbed by dirty hands, and entirely ignored unless it broke.

For some reason, she kept looking at it.

Then she said, quietly enough that Calist almost missed it,

"I want to be able to say that."

"Say what?"

She pointed.

"I made that."

Joric looked from Nalia to the hook.

"You can make one."

"I don't want to make a hook."

"Then what do you want to make?"

Nalia frowned.

"I don't know yet."

She picked up the boards again.

"But something."

* * *

Once Calist began paying attention to his own work differently, he started noticing the same change in his friends.

Tarin was easiest to notice because he was almost always at Calist's house.

He had stopped arriving as a visitor often enough that Mara sometimes opened the door, handed him a basket, and told him what needed gathering before he had properly said hello.

One afternoon Calist came in from the forge and found Tarin at the table grinding dried leaves with a stone pestle while Mara measured beeswax beside him.

A much younger girl from another household sat on a stool between them, carefully pulling damaged leaves from a pile.

"Not that one," Tarin told her.

The girl froze.

"Why?"

He held up the leaf she had almost discarded.

"The brown edge is fine. Feel it. Dry, not soft."

She touched it.

Tarin put it back into the good pile.

"If it's damp or black underneath, then it goes."

The girl nodded with enormous seriousness.

Mara looked toward Calist.

"You're blocking the door."

Calist stepped inside.

"When did he start teaching people?"

Tarin did not look up.

"When they began listening."

Mara smiled.

"Put the water down before you drop it."

Calist obeyed.

The little girl was not Tarin's sister.

No one in the room behaved as though that mattered.

* * *

A few days later Alden sent Calist across the fields with a repaired hoe.

He found Joric before he found the owner.

Joric was knee-deep in a ditch beside the field, clearing mud and weeds from the narrow channel that carried rainwater away from the crops. Two younger boys were working farther along under his eye.

One of them had stopped working entirely to watch a beetle crawl over his hand.

"If the beetle clears more ditch than you do, I'm giving it your supper," Joric called.

The boy immediately returned to work.

Calist held up the hoe.

"Where's Halven?"

"Other field."

Joric climbed out of the ditch.

He took the hoe, checked the repaired socket, and swung it once experimentally.

"Alden?"

"Me."

Joric looked at him again.

"Really?"

"He checked it."

"Still counts."

Calist tried not to smile.

Joric handed the tool to one of the younger boys.

"Take that to Halven. Don't swing it at anything with legs."

"What if it has four?"

"Especially then."

The boy ran off.

Calist watched him go.

"They listen to you now?"

Joric looked toward the other boy, who had discovered something else fascinating in the mud.

"Sometimes."

He sighed.

"I understand Garran better every day."

Calist laughed.

Joric went back into the ditch.

There was no single job that seemed to belong to him.

Animals one day. Fields the next. Fences, feed, harvest, wagons, drainage, whatever needed hands.

Joric seemed perfectly content with that.

* * *

Calist crossed Eryn's path just as often without either of them arranging it.

Alden sharpened and repaired enough of the hunters' tools that there was always something to take or collect.

One afternoon Calist carried a freshly sharpened skinning knife to Garran's yard and found a deer hanging beneath the shade behind the house.

Harlan and Bren were working nearby.

So was Eryn.

Her sleeves were rolled above her elbows. There was blood on both hands and a dark streak across one forearm.

Calist stopped for half a second.

Eryn looked up.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You stopped."

"I brought the knife."

He held it out.

She wiped one hand before taking it from him.

"Finally."

"It was there for one day."

"A very long day."

Harlan snorted without looking up.

Eryn tested the edge lightly against her thumb, then handed it to him hilt first.

Harlan checked it in turn.

"Good."

Calist felt a small spark of pride before remembering that Alden had sharpened this one.

Eryn returned to the deer.

Her movements were slower than Harlan's but sure enough that he did not need to correct every cut.

Calist watched for another moment.

"Are you going to stand there all afternoon?" she asked.

"No."

"Good. Hold this."

She gave him a basin.

Calist took it automatically.

Bren smiled.

"Useful lad."

"That's what I'm trying for," Calist said.

Eryn glanced at him.

He immediately wished he had not said it out loud.

She only smiled and went back to work.

* * *

Nalia began appearing at the smithy for different reasons too.

At first Tessa sent her.

"Is the loom piece done?"

Alden looked up from the anvil.

"Which loom piece?"

Nalia held her hands apart.

"The one this long."

Alden stared at the distance between them.

"Very helpful."

Calist laughed.

Nalia glared at him.

Eventually she found the cracked metal pin on the workbench herself.

"That one."

Alden picked it up.

"Tell Tessa I'll bring it when I've fitted the new end."

Nalia looked at the part rather than leaving.

"Why did it break there?"

Alden turned it so she could see the worn edge.

"Because the wooden arm has started sitting crooked. If I only replace this, you'll be back with another broken one."

"Can you fix the wood?"

"I can look at it. Someone who works wood every day would be better."

Nalia frowned thoughtfully.

A few weeks later she came back carrying a narrow chisel whose edge had been chipped.

This time no one had sent her to ask what it was.

"Can you fix this?"

Alden took it.

"Whose?"

"I'm using it."

Calist looked over from the bench.

Nalia noticed.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You did the same thing Eryn does."

"What thing?"

"The thing where you say nothing after obviously thinking something."

Calist smiled.

Alden inspected the chisel.

"I can regrind it. You chip it again this quickly and I'll make you do it yourself."

Nalia considered that.

"Can you show me anyway?"

Alden looked at her.

Then he moved aside at the bench.

"Come here."

Calist returned to his own work.

Behind him, Alden began explaining angles to someone else's child exactly as he had once explained them to Calist.

* * *

By the time the main harvest began, Calist no longer needed to think about how much the village's work crossed from one household to another.

Harvest made the truth impossible to miss anyway.

For days, almost everything that could wait did wait.

The forge stayed open because tools still broke, but Alden spent as much time in the fields as he did at the anvil. Mara gathered and dried what needed gathering, then joined the others when she could. Tessa worked until there was enough light to sew and then spent the remaining hours wherever another pair of hands was useful. Garran moved between animals, leather, wagons, and fields.

The children and older youths moved with them.

The youngest carried water, gathered dropped stalks, watched smaller children, or did whatever could be done without getting beneath the feet of carts and animals.

Calist's group had become old enough to be trusted with more.

That did not stop adults from telling them what they were doing wrong.

It only meant the corrections came while they were already doing real work.

When the last of the main harvest was finally safe, the village held its harvest feast.

The day was dry and bright, with a light wind moving chaff through the stubbled fields. The air still smelled faintly of cut grain, but the evenings had begun to cool.

No one household could have hosted it.

So the village did.

Tables came first.

Some were carried whole from houses. Others were nothing more than boards laid over trestles. Benches followed. Chairs. Stools. Lanterns. Heavy cooking pots. Baskets of bread. Jugs. Blankets for the evening. Someone dragged out a long awning in case the weather changed. Someone else produced two strings of old colored cloth that had apparently decorated every harvest feast since before Calist was born.

By midday, the open space near the center of the village looked as though half the houses had emptied themselves into it.

Calist carried one end of a table with Joric.

Three younger children followed them.

"Move," Calist said as one darted in front of his feet.

The child moved exactly far enough to be in Joric's way instead.

"Not there either," Joric said.

"Where then?"

"Somewhere that isn't beneath a table."

The child considered this unreasonable.

Calist and Joric finally put the table down.

"Were we this bad?" Calist asked.

Joric looked at him.

"Worse."

"You were worse."

"Probably."

Across the clearing, Garran was preventing another group of children from climbing a cart that had been brought over to carry barrels.

Joric watched him for a moment.

"Definitely worse."

* * *

Nessa Venn had been given the most comfortable chair anyone could find.

She had also been placed beneath shade, wrapped in a blanket she insisted she did not need, and provided with a small table beside her before she had managed to object to any of it.

As the oldest person in the village, Nessa received this treatment every year.

As the best cook in the village, she immediately used the position to command everyone within hearing distance.

"Not those onions. The smaller ones."

A boy changed baskets.

"More water in that pot. Not that much. Do you intend to feed soup to the ground?"

A girl carefully stopped pouring.

"Where is Tarin?"

"Here," Tarin called from behind two other children.

"Taste this."

Tarin obeyed.

He thought for a moment.

"Needs the bitter leaf."

Nessa pointed at him.

"Good. Mara has trained one of you properly."

Calist was carrying firewood past them.

"One?"

Nessa looked at him.

"You nearly fed us the wrong mushrooms."

"That was months ago."

"And I am old. My memory is one of the few things people still let me carry."

The children around her laughed.

Calist put down the wood and stayed.

There were always children around Nessa these days.

She could no longer follow them through the fields or walk to town, but she could sit with a knife and show small hands how thin roots needed to be cut. She could smell a pot and know what was missing. She knew which fruits kept longest, how much salt a crock needed, what could replace an ingredient when stores ran low, and which mistakes could be eaten anyway if no one admitted making them.

The children did the reaching, carrying, cutting, stirring, fetching, and running.

Nessa supplied the knowledge and enough criticism to keep all of them awake.

A little girl beside her was peeling a root far too thickly.

Nessa caught her hand gently.

"Like this."

She demonstrated one slow strip.

"We want food in the pot, not on the peel."

The girl tried again.

"Better."

Nessa let her continue.

Calist sat on an overturned bucket and began splitting the smaller pieces of firewood.

One of the children asked why everyone in the village had to help with everything.

Nessa looked at him.

"Because everything needs doing."

The child frowned.

"But Alden is the smith."

"He is."

"And Mara does herbs."

"She does."

"Then why does Alden harvest?"

Nessa smiled.

"Because wheat has never cared what a man's usual work is."

The boy seemed to consider this.

Nessa looked toward Alden, who was helping move another table at the far end of the clearing.

"It was always like that here, more or less. We were never rich enough in people to pretend otherwise."

Her expression changed slightly.

"The war taught us to be better at it."

Calist stopped splitting wood.

Nessa noticed.

"There. Now I've caught one of them."

"Caught what?"

"A child who wants a story."

"I'm not a child."

Nessa looked at the younger children around her.

Then at Calist.

"Compared with me, you're all still children."

Tarin laughed.

Nessa settled more comfortably into the chair.

"When the crown called the young men, your father went with them. So did several others."

Calist knew that part.

He had never heard Nessa tell it.

"They didn't take the work with them," she continued. "Fields still needed planting. Animals still needed tending. Roofs still leaked. Tools still broke. Winter still arrived because apparently nobody had informed winter that we were short of hands."

A few of the older children smiled.

Nessa did not.

"It was hard."

Her voice remained matter-of-fact.

"Harder than most of you have seen. The older men did work they had already begun giving to younger backs. Women who already had more than enough to do took on still more. Older children worked beside us instead of only under us. We planted less in some places because there were not enough hands to manage everything. Repairs waited. Everyone was tired."

Calist looked toward Alden again.

He had never thought much about what the village had been doing while his father was away fighting.

Nessa continued.

"And we learned."

She pointed toward the cooking pot.

"One person knowing how to do something is useful. Only one person knowing it is dangerous."

Tarin nodded slowly.

Nessa looked at him.

"Mara should know more about herbs than you. For now."

"For now?"

"If you keep following her around, she'll have to work hard to stay ahead of you."

Tarin looked pleased.

"But if Mara falls ill tomorrow," Nessa continued, "the village should not suddenly forget what helps a fever. Alden should be the best smith here. That doesn't mean every simple repair must wait if he breaks an arm. Harlan should track better than the rest of us. That doesn't mean nobody else should know which way a deer went."

She picked up another root.

"We helped each other before the war. After it, we became less willing to let one pair of hands be the only pair that knew how to keep something going."

Calist looked at the children around her.

One was peeling roots.

Another was stirring.

Tarin was correcting a bundle of herbs.

Calist himself had spent the morning carrying tables and the afternoon cutting wood despite being a smith's son.

None of it had ever seemed like a lesson.

Perhaps that was why all of them had learned so much of it.

Nessa pointed the root at him.

"And if you're finished listening, that pot still needs your firewood."

Calist smiled.

"Yes, Nessa."

* * *

By evening the elders had been seated together near the warmest fire.

No rule said they had to sit there.

No one needed one.

The best-backed chairs appeared beneath them. Plates reached them before they had to stand. Cups were refilled before they were empty. When one of the older men tried to carry his own stool, two younger adults took it from him while he complained that his arms had not fallen off yet.

Nessa complained more than any of them.

It changed nothing.

She had spent most of a lifetime feeding people, remembering what had worked in difficult years, settling arguments, caring for children who were now old enough to have children of their own, and helping keep the village alive when too many younger hands had been elsewhere.

Nobody was going to let her carry a bench merely because she remained convinced she could.

The feast itself was loud.

There was more food than Calist had seen gathered in one place all year, though much of it was simple. Bread. Root vegetables. Stew. Roasted meat. Cheese. Preserved fruit opened

because this was exactly the sort of day it had been preserved for.

Joric ate enough that Nessa eventually told him she had not survived a war just to watch him empty the village stores alone.

He considered that a challenge until three adults told him it was not.

There were songs.

There was dancing, some of it better than the rest.

Children ran between the tables until someone older caught them and redirected them toward games farther from the fires.

Calist did that twice himself.

The second time, the little boy he stopped stared up at him and said,

"You're not my father."

"No."

"Then why do I have to listen to you?"

Calist opened his mouth.

Alden's voice came from behind him.

"Good question."

Calist turned.

His father was smiling.

The boy looked hopeful.

Alden pointed away from the fire.

"Listen to him."

The boy's hope vanished.

He ran back toward the other children.

Calist looked at Alden.

"You could have helped."

"I did."

"Not me."

"You'll survive."

Alden handed him a cup.

A moment later Joric shouted from across the clearing that Calist was needed for something extremely important.

It turned out to be a contest involving a sack, a wooden spoon, and rules nobody could agree upon.

Calist joined anyway.

He had spent the day carrying tables, tending fires, moving food, watching younger children, and doing work adults once would not have trusted him to do alone.

He still ended the night in the grass arguing with Joric over whether falling outside the marked line counted if someone had been pushed.

Growing older, Calist decided, did not seem to happen all at once.

He was glad of that.

* * *

A few weeks after the harvest feast, Alden mentioned town over supper.

"Garran and I are going in three days."

Calist looked up automatically.

The first trip returned to him in pieces.

The road.

The market.

Bram.

The fight.

He waited for the rest.

Alden tore a piece of bread in half.

"You're coming."

Calist stared at him.

"Really?"

"No. I thought I'd say it to see what your face did."

Mara hid a smile.

Calist ignored her.

"Why?"

Alden looked at him as though the answer should have been obvious.

"Because you're useful."

Calist said nothing.

Alden continued.

"You're strong enough that taking you makes loading easier. You know how to harness the ox. You know how the wagon needs to be packed. And you've spent the last few months proving I can give you a job without standing over your shoulder until it is finished."

Warmth spread through Calist that had nothing to do with the food.

Then Alden raised one finger.

"That includes in town."

Calist's hand unconsciously touched the place where his lip had split months earlier.

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"If someone calls you a farmer?"

"I walk away."

"If Joric calls them something worse first?"

Calist hesitated.

Mara laughed.

Alden waited.

"I drag Joric away."

"Good."

Calist frowned.

"Is Joric coming?"

"No."

"Then why—"

"Preparation."

Mara reached for her cup.

"Your father believes in training for unlikely disasters."

Alden nodded.

"I've met Joric."

Calist laughed.

* * *

The second journey to town felt different before the wagon had even left the village.

There was no group of children climbing into the back this time.

Alden went because the smithy needed iron.

Garran went because there was leather to sell and supplies to bring home.

Calist went because his hands made their work easier.

He liked that more than he expected.

Before sunrise he checked the harness with Garran, carried the last sacks to the wagon, and shifted a crate when Alden decided too much weight sat behind the axle.

No one congratulated him.

No one needed to.

The morning was colder than on his first journey. A little mist lay in the hollows between harvested fields, and the damp road stayed dark where the rising sun had not yet reached it.

The road was familiar now.

Calist knew the first resting place before the ox began slowing. He knew which wheel Alden would check when they stopped. He knew the rise from which the first town roofs would eventually appear.

When they arrived, he did not stare with his mouth open.

Garran noticed anyway.

"Disappointing. I was hoping to charge you for it this time."

Calist smiled and lifted the first bundle down.

At Heddan's yard he worked while Alden and Heddan argued over iron.

The new bars were heavier than the things Calist usually carried alone, so Garran took the other end.

Heddan watched them move one stack.

"Feeding that boy coal?"

Alden did not look up.

"Too expensive."

Calist grinned.

Later, while Alden counted the delivery, Calist checked the ropes.

One bundle sat too close to the edge.

He moved it inward before anyone told him.

Alden noticed.

He said nothing.

Calist had learned that sometimes this meant more than praise.

When the main work was done, Garran handed him a wrapped package.

"Mira."

Calist took it.

"Anything else?"

"Bring back Tessa's cloth."

Alden looked over from the wagon.

"Straight there and back."

Calist nodded.

There was no warning about getting lost.

No order to stay beside someone else.

They trusted him to cross the market alone and return.

He noticed that too.

Mira gave him the cloth, a loaf nobody had ordered, and strict instructions that the loaf was for everyone rather than for Joric if Joric happened to intercept him on the road home.

Calist promised to defend it.

Then he stepped back into the square.

He still had time.

Bram's stall stood near the same edge of the market.

Calist went there without pretending he had another reason.

The dwarf was filing the edge of a narrow metal plate when Calist approached.

Bram looked up.

His eyes narrowed for a moment.

Then he pointed the file at Calist.

"Smith's boy."

"Calist."

"Still a smith's boy."

Calist smiled.

"Bram."

"Still a dwarf."

Calist laughed.

Bram returned to the plate.

Calist stood there.

After several seconds Bram said,

"You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Watching without asking anything."

Calist looked down at the work.

"You're filing the edge before joining it."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Bram nodded once.

"There. Much better."

He turned the plate slightly.

"Why do you think?"

Calist leaned closer.

The edge looked clean already.

He thought about the cracked fitting Alden had shown him months earlier.

"Anything trapped between the pieces weakens the join."

"And?"

Calist hesitated.

"If the surfaces don't meet properly, the heat won't fix that."

The file stopped.

Bram looked up at him.

"No."

Calist's shoulders dropped.

"The heat will make it worse."

Calist looked at the plate again.

"Oh."

Bram continued filing.

"People like blaming heat for bad work. Heat is usually innocent."

Calist smiled.

"Can heat be innocent?"

"It can when the smith is guilty."

Calist stayed until Bram finished the edge.

Then he remembered the cloth beneath his arm.

"I have to go."

"I assumed someone had sent you here for a reason."

"They didn't."

Bram raised an eyebrow.

Calist lifted the package.

"They sent me over there."

"Ah."

Bram nodded toward the wagon.

"Then go before your father decides dwarves steal children."

"He knows I came this way."

Bram looked toward the distant wagon.

"Does he?"

Calist paused.

Bram smiled.

Calist left quickly.

* * *

He went again the next time the wagon went.

And often enough after that for town to stop being a place Calist only visited in stories.

Not every trip included Alden.

Sometimes Garran went with another adult. Sometimes the wagon carried more leather than metal. Once it went mostly for salt, lamp oil, grain, and a replacement part for a hand mill that nobody in the village could make properly.

Calist went when the village could spare him and when another strong pair of hands made the journey worthwhile.

There was usually something heavy.

There was always something to load.

By then he could harness the ox with only a quick check from whichever adult traveled with him. He knew how much weight could sit behind the axle before the wagon became unpleasant to handle. He knew sacks went where water could not reach them,

that leather hated being crushed beneath iron, and that Mira would add something nobody had ordered if she decided the village children looked too thin.

He also knew Heddan complained about prices whether they rose or fell.

Town stopped feeling enormous.

It never stopped feeling interesting.

And whenever the work allowed it, Calist found Bram.

At first Bram answered questions.

Then he began asking them.

"Which would you use?"

"For what?"

Bram held up two small hammers.

Calist looked at the piece on the bench.

"The lighter one."

"Why?"

"I don't want to move much metal."

"Good."

Another visit:

"Too hot or too cold?"

Calist watched the color.

"Too cold."

"For?"

Calist frowned.

"For what you're trying to do."

Bram nodded.

"Better answer."

Another:

"What's wrong with that?"

Calist stared at a tiny clasp.

He turned it over.

Then again.

"The pin isn't straight."

"No."

"The loop is too thin?"

"No."

Calist kept looking.

Bram waited.

Finally Calist noticed that one side of the clasp sat slightly higher than the other.

"That."

Bram nodded.

"Now tell me why it matters."

Sometimes Calist knew.

Sometimes he did not.

Bram never seemed especially impressed when he knew.

He also never seemed disappointed when he did not.

He simply expected Calist to look again.

That was familiar enough that Calist liked him for it.

* * *

The others kept moving along their own paths at the same time.

Eryn spent more mornings with Harlan, Bren, Edrin, or Garran beyond the fields. Short outings became longer ones. She learned when to speak and when silence mattered more. She learned to clean what they brought home and to read signs Calist still saw only as marks in mud.

One afternoon she returned talking about a bear.

They had seen it safely across a broken stretch of woodland and had been quite content to leave it there.

"Old," Eryn said. "I think. Big."

Joric looked interested.

"How big?"

"Big enough that Harlan decided we had somewhere else to be."

"That big?"

"That big."

She touched her own face.

"It had a scar across its snout. A huge one. Crooked, like this."

Nalia had been sitting nearby with a scrap of wood in her hands.

She looked up.

"Which side?"

Eryn showed her.

Calist forgot the question before supper.

Nalia did not.

Several days later he found her behind her family's house with wood shavings around her feet.

"What are you doing?"

Nalia immediately turned the object away.

"Nothing."

"That doesn't look like nothing."

"It does from this side."

Calist sat beside her.

She sighed and showed him.

It was supposed to be a bear.

Calist knew this only because Eryn had told the story.

The body was too narrow. One front leg was shorter than the other. The head looked vaguely like a dog that had been insulted.

A deep crooked line crossed its snout.

Calist stared at it.

Nalia stared at him.

"Well?"

"It has a scar."

She hit his arm.

"I know it has a scar."

"It looks like the bear."

"You never saw the bear."

"Neither did you."

"That's not the point."

Calist took the little figure carefully.

The surface smelled fresh where Nalia had cut into it.

"Where did you get the wood?"

"Old broken stool."

Calist looked at her.

"That was firewood."

"Not anymore."

She took the bear back and scraped a little more from one shoulder.

"I saw those carved animals in the market."

"So?"

"So I wanted to try."

"Do you like it?"

Nalia looked down at the ugly little bear.

"Yes."

That answer came much faster than the others.

Calist smiled.

"Then make another one."

"This one isn't finished."

"I know."

"It might still become good."

Calist considered the bear.

"Definitely."

Nalia hit him again.

* * *

Town journeys became less frequent in winter. Frost whitened the fields on clear mornings; on milder days rain turned the road heavy and brown, and darkness arrived before the day's work felt finished. The changes did not stop.

Tarin became such a regular part of Mara's work that people sometimes came to the Griffith house asking for him when Mara was elsewhere.

Joric remained impossible to place into one trade. He was good with animals, increasingly useful in the fields, and willing to do almost anything that needed another pair of hands. Nobody seemed especially worried that he had failed to choose one thing.

Nalia's first attempts at sewing with Tessa proved competent enough to be useful and dull enough that she complained about them afterward. Wood was different. She kept finding reasons to work with it.

Calist kept making practical things for Alden and finer mistakes whenever Bram gave him the chance.

By the time the roads became easy again the following spring, Calist was fifteen, and Bram had begun keeping small scraps aside.

Not gifts.

Work.

A bent strip of copper.

A rough ring that needed filing smooth.

A piece of wire that had to be straightened without thinning it.

Things that did not matter much if Calist ruined them.

Which, Calist understood, was exactly why Bram let him touch them.

On one visit Bram pushed a small pair of pliers across the bench.

"Close that."

Calist looked at the open copper ring.

"Me?"

"No, the ox. Of course you."

Calist picked up the pliers.

The ring was tiny compared with almost everything Alden had ever asked him to make.

He squeezed too hard.

The circle became an oval.

Bram looked at it.

Calist closed his eyes.

"I know."

"Good."

Bram took another ring from a small dish.

"Again."

Calist did better.

Not well.

Better.

On the fourth ring, the ends met without one riding over the other.

Calist held it up.

Bram took it, turned it between thick fingers, and put it into another dish.

No praise.

Calist waited anyway.

Bram noticed.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Then stop standing like a dog waiting for meat."

Calist looked away.

Bram's beard moved slightly.

He was smiling.

"Next one."

Calist reached for another ring.

Outside the stall, the market continued around them.

Someone shouted over the price of onions.

A cart wheel struck a stone.

A child laughed somewhere near Mira's bakery.

Calist bent over the little piece of copper.

For the first time, Bram did not explain what to do.

He expected Calist to remember.

Calist liked that even more.

CHAPTER 5

The Hunt



Harlan arrived at the smithy while Alden was fitting a new handle to a hammer.

"We leave before sunrise."

Calist looked up from the hinge he was filing.

"Who?"

"You, if Alden can spare you."

Alden glanced at Harlan.

"For what?"

"Three nights at most. Maybe two."

Harlan rested one hand against the doorframe.

"Renn is still laid up from the boar. Bren and Edrin are coming. Eryn too. I need another pair of hands that can carry without complaining every ten steps."

Calist looked at Alden.

Alden looked at him.

"Can you carry without complaining every ten steps?"

"Yes."

Harlan snorted.

"Good enough."

Alden set the hammer down.

"You're not going as a hunter."

"I know."

"You do what Harlan tells you."

"I know."

"And if he says stay where you are—"

Calist sighed.

"I stay where I am."

Harlan's expression did not change.

"That one matters."

Calist looked at him.

Then nodded.

"All right."

* * *

The pack felt reasonable when Calist lifted it in the yard.

It felt less reasonable half an hour later.

Eryn noticed.

"Still not complaining?"

Calist adjusted one shoulder strap.

"No."

"You made a face."

"Faces aren't complaints."

"That one was."

Harlan walked ahead with Bren. Edrin followed several paces behind them, his bow already unstrung across his back for the first part of the walk.

Eryn moved more easily than Calist despite carrying her own gear.

That irritated him enough to stop shifting the pack.

The village disappeared behind them before sunrise had fully reached the fields.

The old woods looked different when entered with hunters.

Calist had walked beneath those trees many times. He knew the paths nearest the village, the places where children gathered mushrooms, the streambeds, the fallen trunks, and several clearings where the light reached the ground.

Harlan ignored most of those paths.

He moved where the deer moved.

Sometimes that meant a faint track through fern and brush that Calist would never have called a path at all.

Sometimes it meant stopping for no reason Calist could see.

The first time, Calist almost walked into Eryn.

She had stopped because Harlan had raised two fingers.

Nobody spoke.

Calist listened.

At first there was only wind moving high in the leaves.

Then a small tapping somewhere ahead.

A bird.

Farther away, something heavier moved through brush.

Harlan waited.

The sound faded.

They continued.

Calist leaned toward Eryn.

"What was it?"

"Probably deer."

"Probably?"

"Could have been something else."

"Helpful."

She smiled.

"You're learning."

By midmorning Calist had learned that hunting involved far more standing still than he had expected.

He had also learned that Eryn could read signs he barely noticed.

She crouched near a patch of soft ground and touched the edge of a print.

"Two."

Calist looked at the marks.

"How do you know?"

"Different size."

He looked again.

One was perhaps slightly broader.

"Right."

Eryn glanced at him.

"You don't see it."

"I see it."

"You see mud."

Calist kept walking.

She laughed quietly behind him.

Near midday they found fresher sign.

Harlan changed their direction without explanation.

The next hour passed slowly.

Then Bren crouched.

Everyone stopped.

Ahead, between young trees, something moved.

A deer stepped into view.

Calist's first instinct was to look at Eryn.

Her bow was already in her hand.

Harlan did not signal her to draw.

The wind shifted.

The deer lifted its head.

Calist could hear his own breathing.

A fly landed on the side of his neck.

He wanted very badly to slap it.

He did not move.

The deer stared toward them for several seconds.

Then bounded away.

Harlan remained still until the sound was gone.

Only then did he look back.

His eyes passed over Calist.

He gave one small nod.

That was all.

Calist felt absurdly pleased.

* * *

They made camp late in the afternoon near a shallow rise where the ground stayed dry.

There was no proper shelter.

Only a broad patch between trees, a small fire, bedrolls, packs, and a low place where Bren set the cookpot.

Calist spent the next hour doing exactly the sort of things Harlan had brought him to do.

Water.

Firewood.

Helping Edrin hang food high enough that animals would have difficulty reaching it.

Clearing stones from where they would sleep.

He discovered that camp work was ordinary work with worse furniture.

Eryn came back with an armful of branches and dropped them beside his pile.

"Mine are drier."

Calist picked up one of hers.

"Barely."

"Still drier."

"You want praise?"

"Yes."

"Excellent branches."

"Thank you."

Bren looked over from the fire.

"If the two of you are finished judging sticks, we need more kindling."

Harlan pointed through the trees.

"Calist. Dry stuff. Stay where you can see the fire."

Calist stood.

"I know."

Harlan looked at him.

Calist corrected himself.

"Stay where I can see the fire."

"Good."

Calist took the small collecting bundle and walked away from camp.

At first he could see the fire easily.

Orange between trunks.

Voices behind him.

The smell of the cookpot.

He bent to gather dry twigs beneath a fallen tree.

Then he looked deeper into the woods.

The pull was there.

It had been there all day.

It was almost always there now, quiet enough to ignore while people talked or work demanded his hands.

Out here, with the light falling and the voices behind him softer, it became easier to notice.

Not stronger because he was closer.

Just harder to cover with anything else.

Calist straightened.

Something about the direction ahead felt familiar.

Not safe.

He knew the woods were not safe.

Familiar was different.

As though he had walked that way before.

As though someone had shown him the path long ago and he had forgotten everything except the feeling of following it.

He took several steps.

Then another.

The bundle remained in one hand.

A low branch brushed his shoulder.

He stepped around it.

The ground dipped slightly.

He kept walking.

There was no moment when Calist decided to leave the fire behind.

One tree became another.

The warm light between the trunks became smaller.

Then it was gone.

Calist stopped.

His hand was empty.

He looked back.

The bundle of kindling lay several paces behind him where he had apparently dropped it.

He could not see camp.

For one confused second, Calist simply stood there.

Then the smell reached him.

Smoke.

Not their fire.

This was greasier.

Something cooked too close to flame.

Calist lowered himself without thinking.

Ahead, through brush, a small orange glow moved between trunks.

Not a fire exactly.

A torch.

A figure crossed behind it.

Shorter than an adult human.

Another followed.

Calist's stomach tightened.

Goblins.

At least two.

The first stepped closer to the torch. Small—scarcely more than half the height of a grown man—and lean rather than thickset, with long arms and large pointed ears. Olive-ochre skin caught the firelight.

A spear rested in one hand. Rough cloth showed beneath a patched leather vest.

The second moved behind, similarly small, wrapped in mismatched hide, leather, and cloth. Something hung from one shoulder, perhaps a sack or a rolled hide. Everything they wore looked used, repaired, and kept because it still served.

Calist did not move.

The spear-carrying goblin stopped.

The goblin's head turned.

For an instant the firelight caught a broad nose, a wide mouth, and small sharp teeth.

Calist saw one hand begin to move.

Something struck him from behind.

An arm clamped across his chest.

A hand covered his mouth.

Calist jerked once.

Eryn's voice was almost against his ear.

"Don't."

He stopped.

She pulled him backward slowly.

Behind her, Harlan crouched near a tree with Bren farther to the left. Edrin had an arrow nocked.

The goblin shifted their spear.

Edrin loosed.

The arrow struck the ground hard in front of them.

Both goblins jumped back.

Harlan stood just enough to be seen.

Bren did the same.

For several breaths nobody moved.

Then the goblins retreated.

Not running at first.

Backing away.

Then disappearing through the trees.

Edrin started to rise.

Harlan caught his sleeve.

"No."

"They're going."

"Exactly."

Edrin looked after them.

Harlan's voice stayed low.

"Dark soon. We don't know how many more are with them. We don't know the ground. We have a camp behind us and one idiot already missing from it."

Calist winced.

Bren looked toward the place where the goblins had vanished.

"Mark it. Warn Garran."

Harlan nodded.

Then he turned to Calist.

Calist wished he had not.

* * *

The scolding did not begin until they were back at camp.

That made it worse.

Harlan waited until Calist had put down the recovered bundle of sticks.

Then he stood in front of him.

"You did everything right today."

Calist looked up, surprised.

"You carried what you were given. You listened. You kept quiet when it mattered. I sent you for kindling because I trusted you to manage that without someone holding your hand."

Calist said nothing.

Harlan's voice remained controlled.

"Then you disappeared."

The words hit harder than shouting would have.

Calist looked at the ground.

"I know."

"Four people left camp to find you."

"I know."

"We found your sticks before we found you."

Eryn stood near the fire with her arms folded.

"I thought you'd fallen."

Calist looked at her.

"Or been taken," she continued. "There were tracks going away and no answer when we called."

Harlan stepped closer.

"If those goblins had found you first, you might be dead. If they'd followed you back, you might have brought them straight to camp."

Calist swallowed.

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

Harlan watched him.

Calist rubbed one hand over the other.

"It happens sometimes."

Nobody spoke.

Harlan's face changed only slightly.

"What happens?"

Calist looked toward the dark trees.

He had explained pieces of it before.

Never well.

"I start walking."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"That's not enough."

"I know."

Calist tried again.

"It feels like somewhere I'm supposed to be."

Edrin frowned.

"Someone calling you?"

"No. No voice. Nothing like that."

"Then what?"

Calist struggled for the words.

"Familiar."

Harlan waited.

"When I'm away from the village, sometimes it feels like being pulled home."

Eryn's arms tightened around herself.

"But when you're home?"

"It doesn't stop."

Calist looked toward the woods.

"It keeps going that way."

Harlan followed his gaze.

"Into the old woods."

"Yes."

"And you never thought this was something people around you should know?"

Calist opened his mouth.

Then closed it.

"Mara knows I wander sometimes. Alden too."

"Do they know you can walk far enough that you don't notice leaving a fire behind?"

Calist looked down.

"No."

Harlan exhaled slowly.

"Then they will."

Calist nodded.

"Next time you feel it, you tell someone."

"All right."

"Not after. Before you start walking."

"I will."

Harlan looked toward the bedrolls.

"Good."

Then he pointed at the edge of camp.

"First watch."

Calist blinked.

"What?"

"You wanted to spend the evening wandering through dark trees. Now you can sit still and look at them."

Bren turned away quickly.

Calist suspected he was smiling.

Harlan continued.

"Anything you see, hear, smell, or merely dislike, you wake me. Two hours."

Calist looked at the fire.

Then the trees.

"Fair."

* * *

The forest changed after dark.

Calist sat with his back against a log near the edge of camp.

The fire was low behind him.

Everyone else had settled.

He held Harlan's spare short spear across his knees, though Harlan had made it very clear that Calist was to wake him rather than attempt anything heroic with it.

For the first half hour Calist heard danger in everything.

A branch settling.

Leaves moving.

Something small scratching near a root.

Each sound eventually became ordinary.

The pull remained beneath them.

Quiet.

Familiar.

Patient.

Calist did not move toward it.

A blanket rustled behind him.

Eryn sat down at his side.

"Go back to sleep."

"Can't."

"You should try."

"You should try not walking into goblins."

Calist looked at her.

She looked ahead.

"Fair."

For a while they sat without speaking.

Then Eryn said, "I can take over."

"No."

"You're tired."

"It's my punishment."

"Harlan doesn't care who looks at the trees."

"I do."

Eryn looked at him.

Calist kept his eyes ahead.

"I made everyone come looking. I can sit here for two hours."

She did not argue again.

A little later she asked, "Is it there now?"

Calist knew what she meant.

"Yes."

"Strong?"

He thought about it.

"Not exactly."

"You are terrible at explaining this."

"I know."

Eryn waited.

Calist sighed.

"It's there most of the time now."

She turned toward him.

"Most of the time?"

"Quietly."

"You never said that."

"I didn't know how."

"Try badly."

Calist almost smiled.

"In town it feels like being called home. At first I thought that's what it was."

"Homesick?"

"Something like that."

"But home doesn't stop it."

"No."

"And it points here."

"Not here exactly."

Calist looked deeper into the forest.

"Somewhere in the old woods."

Eryn was quiet.

Then she said, "I thought you were dead."

Calist looked at her.

She kept watching the darkness.

"When we found the sticks."

Her voice had lost its teasing completely.

"You weren't answering. Harlan found the tracks and we followed them. I kept thinking we'd find you on the ground somewhere."

Calist tightened his hands around the spear.

"Sorry."

Eryn shook her head.

"What if one day we don't find you?"

He had no answer.

"I don't want to lose you because you followed something you don't understand."

Calist felt heat rise into his face despite the cold night air.

He looked away from her.

The silence became uncomfortable immediately.

He searched for anything else to say.

"Have you seen goblins before?"

Eryn stared at him.

Calist continued quickly.

"You weren't surprised."

She let out a breath that might have been annoyance.

"Once. Farther away. With Bren and Garran."

Calist relaxed slightly.

"Just one?"

"One that we saw. Tracks more often."

"How often?"

"Not enough that people talk about it every week."

She rested her hands on her knees.

"They usually avoid us."

"The soldiers make them sound like they attack anyone they see."

"Soldiers also tell stories about falling into ditches."

Calist smiled.

Eryn continued.

"They steal things sometimes. Traps. Food. Tools if they can carry them. Livestock."

"And kill people."

"Yes."

She did not soften it.

"People kill goblins too."

Calist looked into the dark.

"If there had been more tonight?"

"We would have left."

"Just run?"

"If Harlan said run."

"What if he was wrong?"

Eryn shrugged.

"Then we could tell him later if we were alive."

Calist looked at her.

She smiled faintly.

"Knowing when someone else gets to make the decision is part of being useful."

"That sounds like something Harlan says."

"He says it a lot."

Footsteps approached behind them.

Harlan appeared with a blanket over his shoulders.

He looked at Eryn.

"You volunteering for punishment too?"

"No."

"Shame. I have several jobs tomorrow."

He held out one hand to Calist.

"Anything?"

"Nothing."

"Good. Sleep."

Calist stood.

Harlan took the spear.

As Calist passed, Harlan added, "You managed not to disappear."

Calist looked at him.

"Was that praise?"

"Don't ruin it."

Eryn laughed quietly.

Calist went to his bedroll.

The pull followed him into sleep.

* * *

The next morning Harlan sent Calist for water.

Eryn went with him.

Nobody explained why.

Nobody needed to.

Calist followed every instruction exactly.

He noticed the difference in how the others watched him.

Not distrust exactly.

Attention.

He had earned it.

By midday the awkwardness had faded into work.

They found deer sign farther south.

Eryn showed Calist where a branch had been rubbed smooth.

This time he actually saw the difference in the prints before she pointed it out.

"Two," he whispered.

Eryn looked at him.

"Good."

Calist smiled.

Later they took a young buck.

The shot was Harlan's.

Calist helped with everything afterward.

He did not enjoy all of it.

That was not the same as being unable to do it.

He carried more weight on the return journey than he had on the way out.

This time Eryn did not ask whether he was complaining.

She knew he was too tired to answer.

* * *

Harlan spoke to Alden before Calist had properly put down his pack.

"He wandered off."

Calist closed his eyes.

Eryn stood beside him.

"We brought you back."

Calist looked at her.

"Helpful."

"Accurate."

Harlan continued speaking to Alden.

"Otherwise he worked well."

Alden crossed his arms.

"That doesn't cancel the first part."

"No."

Harlan looked at Calist.

"I told him the same thing."

Then he described the goblins.

Alden's expression changed.

Not dramatically.

Enough.

Garran was told before evening.

So were the other hunters.

Two goblins in the woods did not become a village alarm.

The village remembered the place and the direction.

Old tracks there would not be dismissed again.

Before Eryn left, she caught Calist near the side of the smithy.

"You frightened me."

Calist looked at her.

"I know."

"Next time, tell me."

He nodded.

"I will."

She held his gaze for another moment.

Then went home.

* * *

At supper, Mara was quieter than Harlan had been.

That was worse too.

Calist had almost finished eating when she said, "You disappeared."

He looked up.

"At dusk," she continued. "Without telling anyone. And you found goblins."

"Two that I saw."

Mara stared at him.

Calist looked down at his bowl.

Alden sat across from him.

"Tell us about the walking."

Calist rubbed his thumb against the edge of the table.

"I already told Harlan."

"Now tell us."

Calist tried again, stumbling through the same explanation he had given Harlan.

Mara listened without interrupting.

When he finished, she asked, "Does it feel dangerous?"

Calist shook his head immediately.

"No."

"Then what?"

He looked toward the dark window.

"Familiar."

Mara frowned.

"The woods?"

"Not exactly."

Calist searched for the feeling.

"Whatever it is. It feels like I should know."

Alden remained still.

Calist continued.

"When I'm away, it feels like being called home. But when I'm here, it's still there. Past the house. Past the smithy. Toward the woods."

Mara's fingers tightened around her cup.

"And sometimes you can walk without noticing?"

"Yes."

"Then you tell someone every time."

Calist nodded.

"I will."

Alden looked at him.

"Every time."

"Yes."

For a while they ate.

Then Calist asked, "Are goblins always like that?"

Alden looked up.

"Like what?"

"Ready to attack."

"No."

Calist waited.

Alden tore a piece of bread.

"They're dangerous," Alden said. "That doesn't mean they want every fight they can get. Humans are dangerous to them too."

"Then why steal from us?"

"Because a goat is food. A knife is useful. Cloth is useful. A trap already has work in it."

Mara added, "Being frightened of people does not make hunger disappear."

Calist thought about the two figures between the trees.

"But they kill people."

"They can," Alden said. "So can people."

"Why didn't Harlan follow them?"

"Because he has sense."

Alden leaned back.

"Two goblins you see can be two goblins. Or they can be the front of ten more you don't. It was nearly dark. He didn't know the ground ahead. He had a camp and people behind him. Chasing them would have risked more than it gained."

Calist nodded slowly.

"So two goblins aren't a major problem."

"They're a reason to pay attention. Not panic."

Alden looked at him for a moment.

"The goblins aren't the part I'm most worried about."

Calist waited.

Alden pointed at him.

"You."

Calist frowned.

"I can teach you what to do if you see goblins. Harlan can teach you better. None of us can help with a danger you hide from us."

Calist looked down.

"I'm not hiding it."

"You didn't tell us how strong it was getting."

That was true.

Calist had no answer.

Mara reached across the table and touched his wrist.

"Tell us. That's all."

Calist nodded.

"All right."

* * *

For several weeks Calist avoided the deeper woods.

That did not stop his feet from occasionally choosing the wrong direction.

Once, carrying a repaired latch toward Joric's house, Calist looked up and found Garran standing beside the road.

"Wrong direction."

Calist stopped.

The latch was still in his hand.

He had passed the turn toward Joric and was walking toward the old forest.

Calist looked back.

"Right."

Garran said nothing else.

Calist turned around.

That evening he told Alden.

Alden nodded.

"Good."

Calist frowned.

"Good?"

"You noticed before the trees."

Calist thought about that.

"I suppose."

Another time Eryn caught his sleeve while they were carrying rope from one field to another.

"Calist."

He stopped.

They had drifted off the path.

Not far.

Enough.

Eryn looked toward the woods.

"Is it happening?"

Calist listened to the feeling.

"Yes."

"What does it feel like right now?"

He thought.

"Like I'm going the right way."

Eryn stared at him.

"That's horrible."

"It doesn't feel horrible."

She let go of his sleeve slowly.

"I think that's worse."

Calist could not argue with that.

He began telling people when he deliberately went walking near the woods.

He stayed on known paths.

Most of the time that was enough.

Sometimes the pull still took him farther before Harlan's voice, Eryn's question, or the memory of four people following his tracks after finding the abandoned sticks brought him back to himself.

And when Calist went to town again, the pull went with him.

At first it felt almost exactly like homesickness.

Then, after the wagon brought him back past the familiar fields and roofs, he understood the difference.

Home was here.

The pull continued beyond it.

Toward the old woods.

Calist carried that knowledge with him the next time he stood at Bram's bench.

The dwarf placed a tiny copper ring in front of him.

"Close it."

Calist picked up the pliers.

This time the circle stayed a circle.

CHAPTER 6

Apprentice



The next ring closed cleanly too.

Bram turned it between his fingers.

"Again."

Calist reached for another.

Town visits had settled into a rhythm by then.

He worked for Alden at home. He helped with the wagon when the village needed supplies. He found Bram whenever the work in town left enough time.

Bram stopped treating those visits as interruptions.

A small place appeared for Calist's tools at one end of the bench.

Not much.

A pair of pliers.

A fine file.

A flat stone.

A shallow dish for pieces Calist was not supposed to lose.

The first time Calist put something in the wrong place, Bram moved it without comment.

The second time he said, "If I have to look for your tools, they become my tools."

Calist never misplaced that file again.

The work became smaller as Calist became better.

That seemed backward.

At Alden's forge, more skill had meant heavier responsibility. Hinges. Tool heads. Fittings. Repairs that had to survive actual use.

At Bram's bench, more skill meant thinner wire and less room for error.

A ring too small to notice from across the room could still be wrong.

A clasp could function and still sit crooked.

A chain could hold and still feel rough against the skin.

"Strong is not the same as good," Bram said one afternoon.

Calist looked at the clasp in his hand.

"It won't break."

"Congratulations. You have made a very durable ugly thing."

Calist frowned.

Bram took it from him and laid it beside another clasp.

The difference was obvious once they were together.

Calist's sat a little high on one side.

"Again," Bram said.

Calist sighed.

"I liked you better when I only visited."

"You still visit. You simply ruin more metal while doing it."

* * *

The offer came without ceremony.

Bram was repairing the setting on a silver brooch when he said, "You keep coming back."

Calist looked up.

"Yes."

"You remember what I show you."

Calist waited.

"Usually."

"And you ruin fewer things than you used to."

"Thank you."

"It was not praise."

"It sounded almost like praise."

Bram ignored him.

"Travel costs practice time."

Calist stopped smiling.

Bram put the brooch down.

"If you want to learn this properly, stay."

Calist stared at him.

The market continued beyond the stall.

A cart rolled past.

Someone called out the price of onions.

Calist heard all of it without understanding any of it for several seconds.

"Stay here?"

"No. In the river. Yes, here."

"As an apprentice?"

Bram looked at him.

"If I meant as a chair, I would have asked you to sit down."

Calist's mouth opened.

Then closed.

Bram returned to the brooch.

"Think before you answer."

Calist did.

That made the answer slower.

It did not change it.

"I want to."

Bram nodded once.

"Then ask your parents."

* * *

Calist thought about it all the way home.

The village appeared after the familiar bend in the road.

The smithy roof came into view.

The old woods beyond the fields.

The pull was there as it had been in town.

The village still felt like home.

The pull still continued past it.

Calist climbed down from the wagon and unloaded before saying anything.

He carried iron into the smithy.

Stacked it where Alden wanted it.

Helped Garran move a crate toward the storehouse.

Only after the ox had been unharnessed did he find Alden alone.

"Bram offered to take me as an apprentice."

Alden stopped sorting bars.

"Did he?"

"Yes."

Alden looked at Calist for several seconds.

"Do you want it?"

"Yes."

The answer came so quickly that Calist felt guilty immediately afterward.

Alden noticed.

"That wasn't a trick."

Calist looked at the iron.

"I know."

"Can Bram teach you things I can't?"

Calist hesitated only because saying it felt wrong.

"Yes."

Alden nodded.

"Then learn them."

Calist looked up.

"Really?"

"You asked me for serious teaching because you wanted to become better. I would be a poor teacher if I kept you from someone who knows what I don't."

Alden set one bar aside.

"You come back when the village needs you. Harvest. Winter if the roads turn bad. Other times if we ask."

"Of course."

"And when you are here, you work here."

"Of course."

Alden smiled faintly.

"Then I don't see the problem."

Mara found several.

Where would he sleep?

What would Bram feed him?

Was the room dry?

Did the roof leak?

How much work did Bram expect before breakfast?

Had Calist actually seen the bed or merely accepted Bram's claim that one existed?

Calist answered what he could.

The rest he promised to ask.

Mara did not tell him no.

That mattered more than the questions.

Two weeks later Calist packed clothing, tools, and enough food for the road.

He left with the village wagon expecting to return for harvest.

Nothing about it felt permanent.

* * *

Calist learned on his first evening that he would sleep above the workshop.

He also discovered that the stairs creaked, the window stuck in damp weather, and the bed was narrow enough that his feet nearly reached the end.

Mara would have had opinions.

The roof did not leak.

Calist decided this made the room excellent.

His first morning as a proper apprentice began with sweeping.

He stood in the workshop holding a broom.

Bram pointed toward the floor.

Calist stared at him.

"I know how to sweep."

"Wonderful. Then this should go quickly."

Calist swept.

Then he cleaned files.

Sorted wire.

Counted clasps.

Polished a tray.

Carried water.

By midday he had touched almost no hot metal.

"I thought I came here to learn fine work."

Bram looked over his spectacles.

"You did."

"I've been cleaning."

"Yes."

"All morning."

"Also yes."

Calist waited.

Bram returned to his work.

"Clean work begins with clean tools, clean metal, and a bench where you can find what you need. If that disappoints you, the door remains where it was yesterday."

Calist looked at the floor.

Then at the bench.

Then picked up the cloth again.

"This tray still has a mark."

Bram's beard moved slightly.

"Good."

* * *

The town taught Calist things Bram did not intend to teach.

How early bread arrived at the market.

Which streets flooded after heavy rain.

Where to buy a bowl of stew cheaply near closing time.

Which merchants would wait for payment until a customer had paid for a repair and which wanted payment up front.

How loud a town could remain long after the village would have gone quiet.

People came to Bram with objects Calist had rarely seen at home.

Brooches passed through families.

Bent earrings.

Decorative buckles from people with enough money to care whether a buckle was decorative.

Small boxes with metal corners.

Chains broken at one link.

Rings that needed widening.

Rings that needed making smaller.

A silver cup whose owner cared more about a shallow dent than any farmer cared about a scarred shovel.

At first Calist found that ridiculous.

Bram did not.

"They pay for what matters to them."

"It still works."

"So does a shirt with one sleeve. Wear one tomorrow."

Calist looked at him.

Bram continued filing.

Calist learned not to make that argument again.

Fine work had its own honesty.

If someone paid for a straight line, the line should be straight.

If a clasp was meant to disappear into the design, it should not announce itself because the smith had been impatient.

If both sides were supposed to match, almost matching was wrong.

* * *

Bram discovered by accident how little Calist could read.

It happened several weeks into the apprenticeship.

He handed Calist a folded piece of paper.

"Order."

Calist took it.

There were several lines of writing.

He recognized the number six.

He recognized something that might have been silver.

The rest became a row of hostile marks.

Bram waited.

Calist kept staring.

"Well?"

"Six."

"Yes."

"Silver."

"Yes."

Calist looked at the paper again.

"Spoons?"

Bram lowered the file in his hand.

"Can you read?"

Calist hated the question immediately.

"A little."

"How little?"

Calist held up the order.

"This little."

Bram took it back.

He did not laugh.

That made Calist like him more than he wanted to admit.

"A craftsman reads orders."

"Alden doesn't get written orders."

"Alden works in a village where someone walks into his forge and says, 'My hinge is broken.'"

Bram tapped the paper.

"I get this."

Calist looked at the letters.

"I can learn."

"Yes."

Bram handed it back.

"Start."

"Now?"

"The letters will not improve overnight out of pity."

So Calist learned.

Badly at first.

Bram used the things already around them.

Labels on drawers.

Names on orders.

Numbers and measurements.

Lists of materials.

Receipts.

Short notes from customers.

Calist learned the words he needed because he saw them attached to real things.

Numbers came quickly.

Letters did not.

He confused similar shapes.

Forgot spelling.

Wrote words the way they sounded and then became annoyed when Bram told him that sound had apparently not been consulted when the language was invented.

Bram corrected him without treating the difficulty as a joke.

When Calist truly did not understand, Bram waited.

When Calist was merely careless, Bram made him do it again.

* * *

Calist began seeing flaws everywhere.

The town became full of crooked hinges, uneven handles, badly set rivets, and chains whose links had been closed by people Bram would have insulted for an hour.

* * *

The first harvest return felt shorter than it was.

There was too much work for anyone to spend long greeting him.

Mara hugged him.

Alden asked about the road.

Joric demanded to know whether Calist had become rich.

Nalia asked whether Bram had any broken wooden boxes she could have.

Tarin wanted to know whether town healers used anything Mara did not.

Eryn looked at Calist's hands.

"More burns."

Calist looked at hers.

"More cuts."

"Mine are useful."

"So are mine."

"Some of yours are from being stupid."

"Probably."

Then Garran called them to move grain sacks and the conversation ended.

During that first return, Calist found himself looking at Alden's work differently too.

Most of it remained good.

That pleased him more than he expected.

Alden caught him inspecting a strap fitting.

"Something wrong?"

"No."

"Then stop looking offended by it."

Calist smiled.

Several evenings later, after most of the work was done, Calist found Eryn sitting on the low fence behind Garran's house.

He sat beside her.

For a while neither said anything.

The fields beyond the houses had been cut low.

Smoke from the feast preparations drifted faintly above the village.

Eryn nudged his arm.

"Town made you quieter."

"Bram talks enough for both of us."

"No, he doesn't."

"You don't know him."

"You complain about him in every second sentence. I know enough."

Calist smiled.

He looked toward the houses.

"It feels strange being back."

Eryn turned slightly.

"Bad strange?"

"No. Just strange."

"Town better?"

"No."

The answer came easily.

Calist thought about it.

"Bram is better at different metalwork. That's not the same thing."

Eryn nodded.

Then she said, "Does he still sell that necklace?"

Calist looked at her.

"What necklace?"

"The one from the first time. Leaf and arrow."

Calist tried to look as though the question meant nothing.

"I don't know."

Eryn smiled.

"You remember it."

"You just described it."

"Calist."

He looked away.

The words came out before he could stop them.

"One of the reasons I wanted Bram to teach me was—"

He stopped.

Eryn waited.

Calist felt his face growing hot.

"Was?"

"Reading."

Eryn stared at him.

Calist immediately knew this had been the worst possible escape.

"Reading?"

"Yes."

Eryn began laughing.

"Don't."

"You went to Bram because of reading?"

"Not because of it. He makes me do it."

"That is a completely different sentence."

Calist rubbed both hands over his face.

Eryn was still laughing.

"I'm bad at it."

That finally made her stop enough to listen.

"How bad?"

"I can read some things."

"Some?"

"Numbers are easy. Letters are stupid."

Eryn smiled.

"Letters aren't stupid."

"Mine are. One leaned so far Bram asked whether it was tired."

She laughed again.

Calist groaned.

"My writing looks like the letters are trying to escape."

"I can read a little."

Calist looked at her.

"Since when?"

"Nessa taught me some. Harlan marks things. Garran keeps simple lists."

"Of course you can."

"Not well."

"Better than me?"

Eryn considered that far too seriously.

"Probably."

Calist looked offended.

She bumped his shoulder with hers.

"I'm glad you went."

Calist looked down.

"Really?"

"You wanted it."

The answer was simple.

Calist stared at the cut field.

"I miss home."

Eryn said nothing.

"Everyone," he added.

She looked at him.

Calist nearly returned to the sentence he had abandoned.

Instead he said, "Maybe by next harvest I'll be able to write properly."

Eryn smiled.

"Then you can send me a letter."

Calist spent the walk back deciding which was worse: writing Eryn a letter or telling her why he had wanted to learn fine metalwork.

He reached no conclusion.

* * *

By winter Calist could read simple orders without asking for every second word.

He could write names.

Quantities.

Short messages.

His handwriting remained ugly.

He could write well enough now to finally attempt a letter to Eryn.

He sat upstairs with a piece of paper for nearly an hour.

The first line looked terrible.

He started again.

The second looked worse.

Bram came up the stairs, saw the paper, and stopped.

"That is not an order."

Calist covered it with one hand.

"No."

"A complaint?"

"No."

"Debt?"

"No."

Bram's beard moved.

"Ah."

Calist looked at him.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You know something."

"I know my apprentice has spent an hour writing twelve words."

Bram went back downstairs.

Calist stared after him.

Then continued writing.

The letter was short.

He told Eryn the market had been crowded.

That Bram had made him remake the same clasp four times.

That he had learned to spell silver and disliked the word.

That he hoped the harvest stores were holding.

He read it three times before sending it with a wagon heading toward the village.

Eryn's reply came two weeks later.

It began:

Your letter was readable. Mostly.

Calist laughed aloud.

She wrote that deer were moving farther north.

That Nalia had carved another bear and this one now looked like a bear.

That Joric had fallen off a fence while insisting he knew how to repair it.

That Mara wanted to know whether Bram was feeding him.

At the bottom Eryn had added:

You spelled silver right.

Calist kept the letter.

* * *

Months became seasons through work rather than announcements.

Calist learned to draw wire evenly.

To close chain links without crushing them.

To make clasps that did not catch hair or cloth.

To polish without rounding away detail.

To solder pieces so the join belonged to the object rather than merely holding it together.

He learned that a design drawn on paper could lie.

A line that looked elegant could become weak in metal.

A delicate loop could be too delicate to survive use.

A chain could look balanced and hang badly.

Bram made him sketch before certain jobs.

Calist hated that almost as much as writing.

"I can make it."

"Then draw what you intend to make."

"Why?"

"Because your hands should not be the first part of you to discover you have no plan."

Calist glared at the paper.

Bram placed charcoal beside him.

"Again."

Calist drew.

He returned home for harvests.

Sometimes for parts of winter.

Each time the village looked almost the same from the road.

Each time the people inside it had changed a little.

Nalia's carvings became recognizable without explanation.

Tarin began preparing simple remedies when Mara was busy elsewhere.

Joric could take younger workers into a field and return with both the workers and the work mostly intact.

Eryn stopped describing herself as going with the hunters.

She simply hunted.

Her letters became less frequent during busy seasons and longer when winter kept people near home.

Calist wrote back.

Slowly.

Sometimes Bram corrected his spelling before Calist could stop him.

Once Bram crossed out silver and wrote it correctly above.

Calist stared at him.

"She knows I can spell that."

"Then stop proving otherwise."

* * *

In Calist's second year, Bram placed a blank sheet of paper on the bench.

"Design a pendant."

Calist looked at the paper.

"For what order?"

"None."

"Then why?"

"Because you can follow a design. I want to know whether you can make one."

Calist picked up the charcoal.

"What kind?"

Bram shrugged.

"A gift."

"For who?"

"Someone dear to you."

Calist looked up sharply.

Bram's face remained perfectly calm.

"Why?"

"Because if the recipient's opinion matters, your bad decisions become embarrassing."

Calist looked back at the paper.

Bram moved to the other side of the bench.

"Shape. Proportion. Material. Thickness. How it hangs. Where the chain sits. How much metal you need including what you will waste. Clasp too."

Calist stared at the blank page.

"That's a lot for one pendant."

"Yes."

"I thought this was practice."

"It is."

Calist drew a leaf.

It looked like a spoon.

Bram looked over.

"A hungry person will appreciate it."

Calist rubbed it out.

The next leaf was better.

He added an arrow across it.

Bram frowned.

"Why is the arrow stabbing the leaf?"

"It isn't."

"It certainly appears angry at it."

Calist erased again.

Hours became days.

The design changed slowly.

The leaf became larger and softly curved.

The arrow narrowed and passed behind it instead of through it.

Separate shapes.

Connected without one destroying the other.

Bram turned the final sketch around.

"Why these?"

Calist looked at the leaf.

He had started from the memory of a market necklace years earlier.

What sat on the paper no longer copied it.

"The leaf is home."

The answer surprised him.

Bram waited.

Calist touched the arrow with one finger.

"And this is leaving it. Moving."

Bram looked at him.

"There."

"What?"

"That is the design."

He pushed the paper back.

"Now make it look less terrible."

Calist stared at him.

Bram walked away.

* * *

The first leaf was too flat.

The second curved badly near one edge.

The third survived long enough for Calist to dislike the arrow.

The arrow's fletching became three different problems before becoming one acceptable shape.

The join between them looked heavy.

Then weak.

Then obvious.

Calist remade it.

Bram rarely interfered before Calist asked.

When Calist finally had both pieces ready, he spent longer cleaning the joining surfaces than he once would have spent making the entire object.

Bram watched from the next bench.

"Afraid of heat?"

"Heat is innocent."

Bram nodded.

"Good."

Calist fitted the pieces.

Checked them.

Removed them.

Cleaned again.

Fitted them once more.

Then applied heat.

When it cooled, the arrow sat behind the leaf exactly as it had on the paper.

Calist polished carefully.

The silver leaf caught light softly.

The narrow arrow remained clean behind it.

He made the chain himself.

That took longer than expected.

The first clasp worked but sat badly.

Calist remade it.

The second opened too easily.

Again.

The third closed with a small clean movement and stayed closed when he pulled the chain.

Bram inspected the finished necklace beneath the workshop lamp.

He checked the back first.

Then the join.

Then the clasp.

Finally he turned it over in his hand.

"Good."

Calist waited.

That was all.

It was enough.

Bram handed it back.

"I wouldn't sell it."

Calist's stomach dropped.

"What?"

"You made it as a gift."

Bram looked at him.

"So give it."

Calist looked down at the necklace.

"I never said who it was for."

Bram snorted.

"I am short. I am not blind."

Calist felt heat rise to his face.

Bram returned to his bench.

"Pack it properly. Silver scratches."

Calist wrapped the necklace in soft cloth and tied the small pouch closed.

He thought of Eryn standing at the market years ago.

Maybe another time.

Someday, Calist had thought.

The pouch fit easily in one hand.

Someday had arrived.

* * *

Calist left for home at the beginning of winter with the necklace packed safely among his things.

He expected to return to Bram when the roads improved.

Bram expected the same.

"Do not forget how to hold a file."

"I'll practice on Alden's work."

"Then he will send you back early."

Calist smiled.

"Spring."

"Spring."

The wagon carried him north.

By evening the town was far behind him.

By the next day the familiar hills returned.

Then the old woods.

Then the village roofs.

Calist touched the pouch once through his pack.

He had not decided how to give it to Eryn.

He decided he had the whole winter to work that out.

CHAPTER 7

The Long Winter



Alden was coughing when Calist came through the door.

Calist noticed because Alden almost dropped the cup in his hand.

"You all right?"

Alden cleared his throat.

"Cold air."

Mara looked up from the table.

"He has been saying that for three days."

Alden frowned at her.

"Because it has been cold for three days."

Calist set down his pack.

Mara hugged him before he could say anything else.

"You got thinner."

"Bram feeds me."

"That was not what I said."

Alden coughed again.

Calist looked at him.

Alden waved one hand.

"Unpack."

Calist did.

The small pouch with the necklace went into the chest at the foot of his bed.

He intended to take it out again later.

There was no hurry.

* * *

The first days at home were ordinary winter days.

Snow came overnight, thin enough that the road still showed through it by noon.

Calist worked beside Alden in the smithy.

Eryn came by with two knives from Garran and stayed long enough to ask what Bram had made him ruin lately.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Almost nothing."

"That sounds more believable."

Calist considered telling her about the necklace.

Then Joric came through the doorway carrying a bent shovel head and complaining that the ground had frozen in exactly the wrong place.

The moment passed.

Calist did not mind.

There would be another.

Alden's cough remained.

By the end of the week Mara had stopped accepting his explanations.

"Bed."

Alden stood in the kitchen wearing his work shirt.

"No."

"That was not a question."

"The wagon hook for Halven—"

"Calist can finish it."

Alden looked at him.

Calist nodded.

"I can."

Alden looked betrayed.

"Both of you."

Mara pointed toward the bed.

Alden went.

Calist finished the wagon hook.

Then a hinge.

Then a broken strap fitting from Garran.

By evening he had forgotten that the smithy was supposed to be temporary work while Alden rested.

Two days later Alden tried to return.

He lasted less than an hour.

Calist heard the hammer strike wrong.

Not badly.

Just without the weight Alden usually put behind it.

He looked over.

Alden had one hand against the edge of the bench.

"Sit down."

Alden glared at him.

Calist pointed toward the stool.

"Mara has trained me."

That earned a tired laugh.

Alden sat.

He did not come back to the forge the next morning.

* * *

Illness moved through the village every winter.

Usually it moved on too.

This one stayed in more houses than Mara liked.

Tarin spent most days with her.

Calist saw them crossing the road with baskets of dried plants and jars wrapped in cloth.

Some people had fevers.

Some only coughed.

One of the youngest children developed a chest sickness that kept Mara awake for two nights.

The child recovered.

Alden did not improve as quickly.

His fever came and went.

When it was gone, he became impatient.

When it returned, he slept.

Calist kept the forge open.

At first everyone asked where Alden was.

Then they asked how he was.

After that they simply brought Calist the work.

Halven came in with a plow fitting one morning.

He looked toward the house.

"Still inside?"

"Yes."

"Tell him the east field is waiting for him to stop being lazy."

Calist smiled.

"I will."

Halven placed the fitting on the bench.

"This split yesterday."

Calist turned it over.

"I can repair it."

Halven nodded.

"I know."

That was all.

Calist liked that.

Alden's illness did not make everyone forget who Calist had become.

* * *

The stores were good enough at the start of winter.

Nobody said otherwise.

The harvest had been smaller than the best years, but not disastrous.

There was grain.

Root vegetables.

Dried meat.

Cheese.

Preserved fruit.

Tessa opened one of the crocks, tasted it, and said Nessa was going to complain that someone had used too much salt.

For a moment everyone at the table smiled.

Then they ate.

The snow deepened after midwinter.

The road vanished beneath it more often.

Wagons came less frequently.

That happened in winter.

No one found it remarkable.

People mended what they had instead of waiting for new things.

Old cloth became patches.

Broken handles became shorter handles.

A cracked bowl was bound with wire if the crack did not leak too badly.

Calist spent more time repairing objects that would once have been replaced.

Bram would have hated some of the work.

Alden approved of it.

"Useful first," he said from the chair beside the hearth one evening.

Calist handed him a repaired buckle.

"It's ugly."

"Does it hold?"

"Yes."

"Then it's beautiful enough for a winter coat."

Calist smiled.

Alden's voice was stronger than it had been a week earlier.

He still could not work a full day.

That was enough improvement for now.

* * *

Calist wrote to Bram when it became clear he would not return as soon as the roads became passable again.

The message took him less time than letters once had.

That pleased him until he read what he had written.

Alden is still sick. I need to stay until he is better. I will come back when I can.

The words looked too small for what they meant.

Corvin arrived two days later with a patrol heading toward the fort.

Calist met him beside the road.

"Can you get this to Bram?"

Corvin took the folded letter.

"Town?"

"Bram Ordek. Metalworker near the market. Mira knows him if whoever carries it can't find him."

Corvin tucked it into his document case.

"I'll see it gets there."

"Thanks."

Corvin looked toward the house.

"Alden?"

"Better. Slowly."

"Good."

He mounted again.

Calist almost asked how things were at the fort.

Instead Corvin said, "More trouble west."

Calist looked at him.

Corvin adjusted one glove.

"Nothing you can do about it from here."

"I know."

Corvin nodded and rode on.

Three weeks later a trader brought Bram's answer.

It contained six words.

Family first. Bench will still exist.

Below that he had added:

Practice your letters.

Calist laughed.

He folded the note and kept it with Eryn's letters.

* * *

Spring came late.

Alden returned to the forge before the last snow had left the shaded ground.

Calist did not try to stop him.

Mara did.

They compromised on half days.

Alden hated the compromise.

He obeyed it anyway.

By planting time he could work most mornings.

Calist thought about Bram.

He thought about the room above the workshop.

The bench.

The tiny files.

The unfinished lessons.

Then Joric came to the forge and asked for help with a broken plow.

Nalia needed a new edge put on a carving tool.

Mara needed someone to carry a basket to a house near the fields.

Garran needed hooks repaired for meat racks.

The village needed hands.

Calist stayed through planting.

Then through the first hay cutting.

He wrote Bram again.

Bram replied:

You know the road.

Nothing more.

Calist understood.

The apprenticeship had not ended.

It was simply waiting.

* * *

The next harvest was smaller.

Nobody announced that either.

Calist noticed because the village wagon made fewer trips between the fields and storage.

Because one bin that was usually filled to the top stopped a hand's width below it.

Because Joric stood inside a grain store and stared at the level before closing the door.

"Could be worse," he said.

Calist nodded.

"Has been before."

Joric looked at him.

"Nessa would say that."

"She would say we're measuring it wrong first."

Joric smiled.

"Also true."

They closed the store.

The harvest feast still happened.

Nessa was still alive, but she no longer had the strength to sit through a whole feast. Tessa carried a plate back to her instead.

The stew held more roots and less meat.

No one complained.

Children still ran between the tables.

Someone still knocked over a cup.

Joric still ate enough that Tessa said Nessa would have accused him of emptying the village stores by himself.

Calist laughed.

The laugh hurt a little.

He let it.

* * *

Game became harder to find that autumn.

At first it was only a subject the hunters argued about.

Harlan thought the deer had shifted north.

Garran thought they had moved deeper into the woods.

Edrin blamed the dry summer.

Eryn listened to all three and went looking.

She returned after two days with a small deer and an opinion of her own.

"Farther."

Garran looked at her.

"North or deep?"

"Both."

Harlan made a dissatisfied sound.

Eryn shrugged.

"They're still there."

The hunters simply walked farther.

That meant leaving earlier.

Returning later.

Sometimes staying out overnight when they once would have come home.

Calist helped more often with the work after they returned.

He repaired arrowheads.

Sharpened knives.

Fixed buckles.

Helped carry meat when tired hunters reached the village after dark.

One evening Eryn dropped her pack beside the smithy and leaned against the wall.

"If deer move any farther, we're going to need to ask them for directions."

Calist handed her water.

"You'd still find them."

"Probably."

She drank.

Calist looked at her bow.

A new wrap covered part of the grip. The little wooden leaf still hung just below it, carried over from the smaller bow she had used when they were children.

"That mine?"

"Your leather? No. Garran did it."

"I meant the clasp."

Eryn looked down.

The small metal clasp on her quiver strap was one Calist had made.

"Still holds."

"Good."

"You checking your gate hook again?"

Calist smiled.

"Maybe."

Eryn pushed away from the wall.

"Come by later."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

Calist watched her walk home.

He thought of the necklace in his chest.

Then Alden called for him from inside the forge.

Calist went back to work.

* * *

The next winter began with rain instead of snow.

Cold rain.

The road turned to mud.

A wagon carrying salt arrived with one wheel tied together by rope and an axle that sounded as though it wanted to die.

Calist and Alden spent half a day repairing it.

The driver said the road south was worse.

A bridge had washed out on a side route.

Two merchants had turned back rather than risk a flooded crossing.

The salt cost more in town.

That mattered when the village bought it.

Inside the village, the sacks were divided where they were needed and the wagon went on.

Nobody passed coins from one village household to another.

The village kept its own account in work, food, memory, and the expectation that help would return when needed.

Calist had grown up inside that system so completely that town prices still felt like a different language.

The winter tightened slowly.

Portions at supper became a little smaller.

Mara watched the grain jar more carefully.

Tessa repaired blankets that had already been repaired twice.

Joric began checking animal feed before anyone asked.

Children were told not to waste lamp oil.

Nobody went hungry.

Not yet.

They simply stopped being careless with what they had.

* * *

The first missing trap did not concern Harlan.

The second annoyed him.

The third came back with the chain cut.

Garran laid it on Alden's bench.

Calist picked up the severed link.

"Tool?"

"Looks like it."

Alden examined it.

"Not broken by an animal."

Garran nodded.

"Tracks nearby. Goblin. Maybe more than one."

Calist looked toward the road.

"Same place as before?"

"No. Closer."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

Alden handed the trap back.

"I'll replace the chain."

Garran took it.

"Make it heavier."

Calist did.

The traps continued farther out anyway.

Food did not come closer merely because danger did.

* * *

Orc tracks appeared near the northern path before anyone saw an orc.

Harlan brought Garran to look.

Then Corvin when a patrol passed through.

Calist went with them because he had been helping repair a boundary fence nearby.

The print was larger than a human foot and broader through the front.

Corvin crouched beside it.

"One?"

Harlan pointed toward another faint mark.

"At least two."

"How old?"

"Day. Maybe less."

Corvin stood.

"Anything taken?"

"No."

"Anyone seen?"

"No."

Corvin nodded.

"Then we know two orcs walked through here."

Joric, standing behind Calist, frowned.

"That's all?"

Corvin looked at him.

"What would you like me to know from a footprint?"

Joric considered that.

"More."

"So would I."

Corvin sent two soldiers along the path.

While they waited, Calist looked at the print again.

"I've never actually seen an orc."

"Keep it that way if you can," Corvin said.

Calist looked at him. "What do they look like?"

"Usually taller than most men. Broader too. Heavy jaws. Lower tusks. Gray or greenish skin, at least among the ones I've met. Big hands and feet."

He nodded toward the print.

"That last part is useful when all you've got is mud."

Calist looked toward the northern path.

"Have they always been enemies?"

Corvin considered the question longer than Calist expected.

"People say that. It isn't really true."

Calist remembered the voices outside the wagon in Caerbreyn.

"You said people kept moving west."

"That's the part people here remember," Corvin said. "Farms and roads spread into country orc and goblin tribes were already using. Sometimes people traded. Sometimes they kept apart. Sometimes somebody raided a herd or cut timber where the other side said they shouldn't."

"And then?"

"Then somebody answered. After enough generations, each side can list its dead more easily than it can remember the first bargain or the first boundary."

Calist stared at the footprint.

"So they're our enemies because we've been enemies for a long time."

Corvin gave him a tired look.

"That's how 'always' starts sounding true."

The soldiers returned without finding anything else useful.

The village remembered the tracks.

Life continued.

* * *

Alden recovered fully enough that by Calist's eighteenth year most visitors to the forge stopped asking about his health.

He still tired sooner after long days.

He pretended he did not.

Calist pretended not to notice until Alden became unreasonable about it.

Their arguments had become very efficient.

"Sit."

"No."

"Mara."

Alden sat.

Calist considered this one of the advantages of adulthood.

The harder years did not end with Alden's recovery.

The next harvest was better in one field and worse in another.

Game remained farther out.

Trade remained irregular.

The fort patrols passed less often.

Corvin still visited, but sometimes months separated one visit from the next.

When he came, he brought familiar complaints and fewer familiar faces.

Merek was still with him most often.

Oren appeared once after nearly a year away and distributed apples to the village children as though no time had passed.

Calist asked where he had been.

"East."

"Bad?"

Oren looked at Corvin.

Corvin answered.

"Busy."

Calist no longer asked what that meant.

He could see it in their equipment.

More patched straps.

More repairs delayed too long.

Horses worked hard.

Men tired before supper.

The organized threat from Morcant had not vanished simply because Calist's village had its own problems.

The crown sent people where the larger armies were.

That left fewer here.

Calist understood the reason.

He disliked the result.

Both could be true.

* * *

The pull toward the old woods remained through all of it.

By then it no longer surprised Calist when he felt it in town, at the edge of a field, beside the forge, or walking the road.

Distance did not matter much anymore.

He could be farther from the forest than he had ever been and still know the direction.

He told people when it sharpened.

Sometimes he stopped working and stood still until the almost-dreaming urge to walk passed.

Sometimes Eryn noticed before he spoke.

"There?"

Calist would nod.

She would stay nearby until he looked like himself again.

Neither pretended to understand it.

That did not make it less familiar.

If anything, the years made the familiarity stranger.

The feeling had become stronger without becoming threatening.

It still felt like recognition hovering just beyond memory.

That was why it remained dangerous.

Fear would have been easier.

* * *

Near the end of winter, Calist opened the chest at the foot of his bed while looking for a spare belt.

The small pouch lay beneath a folded shirt.

He touched it.

For a moment he thought about taking it to Eryn that evening.

Then Mara called from downstairs that Garran needed help moving a lame goat.

Calist closed the chest.

He went to help.

The necklace remained where it was.

CHAPTER 8

What Remains



Nessa died in the first week of spring.

Tarin came to the smithy before breakfast.

Calist knew from his face before he spoke.

Alden put down the tongs.

"When?"

"During the night."

Tarin looked exhausted.

"Mara was there. Tessa too."

Calist stood very still.

He had seen Nessa three days earlier.

She had complained that Mara's tea tasted like boiled fence bark.

Mara had told her to drink it anyway.

Nessa had drunk it while complaining the entire time.

Calist had carried firewood inside before he left.

She had told him he stacked it badly.

He had promised to improve before she inspected it again.

There would be no inspection.

Alden touched Calist's shoulder once.

Then they closed the forge for the morning.

* * *

The village had buried people before.

Calist had attended funerals as a child without understanding why adults became quiet afterward.

Nessa's felt different because she seemed to be everywhere even while no longer being anywhere.

The chair on Tessa's porch.

A jar in Mara's workroom labeled in Nessa's old hand.

A way of cutting roots Tarin said she had taught Mara, who had then taught him.

A stew nobody could make without someone saying Nessa would have added something else.

Stories whose beginning had belonged to people now dead longer than Calist had been alive.

At the burial, children stood with adults who had once been children in Nessa's kitchen.

Nobody gave a speech long enough to contain her.

They simply remembered things.

A harvest she had organized during the war.

A winter when she had stretched one crock of preserved fruit through three households.

A time she had chased Garran from her kitchen with a spoon because he had stolen cooling bread.

Garran denied the story.

Tessa said she had seen it.

For the first time that day, people laughed.

Calist did too.

Afterward he helped carry Nessa's chair back to the porch.

Tessa stopped him before he moved it inside.

"Leave it."

Calist set it where it had always stood.

The blanket remained over one arm.

For several weeks nobody sat there.

* * *

Spring work gave grief places to go.

Fields needed preparing.

Tools needed repairing.

Animals had survived winter and immediately began creating new problems.

A roof leaked.

A wheel split.

Joric discovered that three younger boys could turn a simple fence repair into an argument about ownership of a hammer.

Calist repaired the hammer after one of them dropped it on a stone.

Nalia brought him a carved spoon and asked for a narrow metal cap on the end of the handle.

"Why?"

"Because I want one."

"Good reason."

Calist made it.

Eryn hunted.

That had become as ordinary as Alden working the forge or Mara carrying herbs.

She went with Harlan, Bren, Edrin, Garran, or the younger hunters depending on the trip.

Sometimes she led the route because she had found the sign first.

Sometimes a younger hunter came to her with a question.

Calist noticed without anyone telling him that she was no longer being brought along to learn.

She was one of the people others learned from.

The trips grew longer because the game remained farther away.

Two nights became three.

Three became four when the weather or tracks forced it.

They returned tired and dirty, carrying what they had found.

Usually enough.

Sometimes less.

The village used all of it.

* * *

Calist still had the necklace.

He thought about it more after Nessa died.

Not because Nessa had known about it.

As far as Calist knew, she had not.

He simply became more aware of unfinished things.

One evening Eryn sat on the fence outside the smithy while Calist repaired a buckle from her pack.

"You've had that for years," he said.

"It still works."

"Barely."

"That's why you're fixing it."

Calist replaced the worn pin.

Eryn watched his hands.

"Bram would complain about that scratch."

Calist looked up.

"You have never met Bram."

"You complain about him enough that I can hear him."

"He would complain about the scratch."

Eryn smiled.

Calist thought of the pouch upstairs.

He could have told her to wait.

He could have gone inside.

Instead he finished the buckle.

"There."

Eryn tested it.

"Better."

"Obviously."

She looked at him.

"Still humble too."

Then Garran called her from the road and she left.

Calist watched her go.

He told himself he would bring the necklace the next time she came by.

* * *

There was always a next time.

Eryn came for arrowheads two days later.

Calist was helping Alden with a wheel band.

The next evening she ate at the Griffith house because Garran and Tessa were helping Harlan prepare hides.

Calist remembered the necklace only after she had gone home.

A week later they walked part of the old path together to check snares.

The pull toward the deeper woods became noticeable halfway there.

Eryn caught the change in his pace.

"There?"

"Yes."

They stopped.

Calist looked between the trees.

The feeling was warm in the strangest way.

Not comfort exactly.

Recognition without memory.

Eryn waited beside him.

After a while Calist turned back toward the path.

"All right."

"All right?"

"It passed enough."

They continued.

Calist thought about the necklace on the walk home.

Then they found one of the snares torn apart and spent the rest of the afternoon following tracks with Harlan.

The thought disappeared beneath work again.

* * *

A goat vanished from an outer pen before summer.

Then two traps.

A cart driver reported seeing three goblins near the north road.

A patrol found old fire pits where no travelers usually camped.

None of it stopped ordinary work.

It changed how people did it.

Children stopped going beyond the last fields alone.

Hunters left in larger groups.

People checked pens at dusk.

Garran kept more arrows near the door.

The fort sent patrols when it could.

Sometimes that was often enough to notice.

Sometimes it was not.

Corvin arrived after nearly two months away with four soldiers and an exhausted horse.

Calist repaired a broken stirrup strap while Corvin spoke with Harlan and Garran.

"How many sightings?"

"Six we trust," Harlan said. "More tracks."

"Orcs?"

"Twice."

Corvin rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"I'll send a patrol north tomorrow."

Garran looked at the four soldiers.

"From where?"

Corvin looked at him.

Garran sighed.

"Right."

Corvin did not pretend otherwise.

"I can give you two for a day. Maybe three."

Harlan nodded.

"We'll use them."

Calist tightened the repaired strap.

The war with Morcant was far away.

Its effects could still be felt in the number of horses outside the smithy.

* * *

The hunters ranged farther toward the end of summer.

Five prepared to leave one morning: Harlan, Bren, Eryn, and two younger hunters.

One of the younger men, Renn, had been on several proper hunts but still followed Harlan more than he trusted himself. The other, Kell, was younger still and had never been part of a serious fight beyond chasing animals from a pen.

Calist saw them near Garran's house while carrying a repaired pot hook to Tessa.

Eryn was checking the strap of her quiver.

"How long?" Calist asked.

"Two nights."

Harlan looked over.

"Three if the tracks keep moving."

Eryn shrugged.

"Three, apparently."

"Far?"

"Far enough."

Calist nodded toward Renn and Kell.

"They ready?"

Eryn glanced at them.

Kell was trying to tighten a pack strap while Renn told him he was doing it wrong.

"Harlan thinks so."

"That wasn't what I asked."

"I know."

She smiled.

Harlan shouldered his pack.

"Move."

Eryn adjusted her bow.

"I'll come by when we're back. One of my buckles is starting to crack."

"Bring it before it does."

"Yes, smith."

Calist frowned.

She grinned and followed the others down the road.

Calist delivered Tessa's hook and went back to the forge.

* * *

They were expected back sometime on the third day.

By the following morning Garran had begun looking toward the road whenever someone passed.

Calist noticed because he had started doing the same.

Near midday, someone shouted from the edge of the village.

Calist came out of the smithy.

Three people were approaching.

Harlan walked on his own, but one arm was pressed tightly against his body. A broken arrow shaft protruded from the blood-darkened sleeve above his elbow.

Beside him, Kell had Renn almost entirely across his shoulders.

Renn dragged one leg behind him.

Calist looked past them.

Nobody else followed.

Mara was already running.

So were Tarin and several others.

Garran reached them first.

"Where are Bren and Eryn?"

Harlan stopped.

His breathing was ragged.

"Get him inside first."

Renn's leg gave beneath him.

Garran caught him with Kell.

Mara knelt immediately.

"What happened?"

"Arrow," Harlan said, indicating his own arm. "His leg's worse."

Mara looked once at the wound.

"Tarin. Water. Clean cloth."

Tarin ran.

Calist remained where he was.

Tessa had come outside.

She looked from Harlan to the road behind him.

"Eryn?"

Harlan closed his eyes briefly.

"We were ambushed."

Garran stepped closer.

"Where is she?"

"Bren stayed behind."

Silence.

Harlan swallowed.

"There were too many of them. I couldn't use the bow. Renn's leg gave out under him."

He nodded toward the injured young hunter.

"Kell had to help carry him."

Garran stared at him.

"And Eryn?"

"I told her to come with us."

Harlan's voice became quieter.

"She did."

Kell was staring at the ground.

Harlan continued.

"Bren held them while we moved."

His good hand tightened.

"Then she looked back."

Kell spoke.

"She stopped."

Harlan said nothing.

Kell looked toward Tessa.

"Harlan told her to keep moving."

His voice shook.

"She turned around."

Tessa covered her mouth.

Harlan looked back toward the road.

"I shouted at her."

Garran's face had gone pale.

"You let her go back?"

Harlan looked at him sharply.

"No."

The word came harder than anything else he had said.

"I had an arrow through my arm. Renn couldn't walk. Kell was carrying half his weight."

He breathed once through his nose.

"I went after her."

Kell shook his head.

"You couldn't."

Harlan did not look at him.

Kell continued.

"He almost dropped Renn trying."

Harlan's jaw tightened.

"By the time I could move again, she was gone through the trees."

Garran said nothing.

Neither did Tessa.

Calist looked down the empty road.

* * *

Harlan tried to return to the woods before his arm had been properly treated.

Mara stopped him at the door.

"You are not going anywhere with that in you."

"Take it out."

"That is what I am doing."

"Then do it quickly."

Other hunters gathered while she worked.

Calist stood near the wall.

Nobody asked him to come.

He knew why.

He was not a hunter.

By afternoon Harlan was back on the trail with Garran, Edrin, and several others.

His arm was bound against his chest.

He carried no bow.

The search lasted until dark.

They went again the next morning.

Corvin sent soldiers when word reached the fort.

They found where the fight had happened.

Broken arrows.

Blood.

Trampled ground.

Signs of Bren's stand farther back among the trees.

Then more tracks leading away.

Rain came before the search was finished.

They found no body.

No bow.

No knife.

No piece of clothing.

On the third evening Harlan came back mud-covered and exhausted.

Garran met him before he reached the houses.

Calist watched from the smithy.

Harlan shook his head.

Nothing else was said.

* * *

The next morning Calist opened the smithy.

There were three repairs waiting.

He lit the forge, worked the bellows and set the first piece into the coals.

Alden came in while he was sorting tools.

"You don't have to work today."

Calist looked at the bench.

"The hinge is for Tessa."

Alden glanced at it.

"It can wait."

"It sticks."

Calist picked it up.

"She'll be opening that door all day."

Alden stood there a moment longer.

Then he took his apron from the wall.

"All right."

They worked.

Not much was said.

Around midday Mara brought bread and something warm to drink. Calist ate because she put it in his hand.

Later Joric came by for a repaired buckle.

He stopped in the doorway.

Calist looked up.

"It's done."

Joric nodded.

He did not come closer immediately.

Calist reached beneath the bench, found the buckle and held it out.

Joric took it.

"Thanks."

Calist nodded.

Joric looked as though he wanted to say something.

He did not.

Calist was grateful.

* * *

The village kept searching for another two days.

Not as many people went after the rain.

The tracks were nearly gone.

Harlan still went.

So did Garran.

Bren's brother joined them on the second morning.

They returned before dark.

Nobody asked what they had found.

Their faces answered.

* * *

Tessa left Nessa's chair on the porch.

The blanket was still folded over one arm.

Eryn's place at the table remained where it had always been.

Calist saw it when he brought the repaired hinge.

Tessa opened the door.

He held it up.

"This was catching."

She looked at the hinge.

Then at him.

"You fixed it."

"Yes."

Calist crouched beside the door and changed it without waiting.

The old nails had worked loose in the wood. He filled the worn holes, set the new hinge, drove in new nails, and checked the door twice.

It opened cleanly.

Tessa stood behind him.

"Thank you."

Calist put the tools back into his bag.

His eyes went toward the wall beside the door.

There had usually been a bow there.

Sometimes two.

Nothing hung there now.

He looked away.

"I'll be at the smithy if anything else breaks."

Tessa nodded.

Calist left.

* * *

Harlan came by that evening.

His injured arm was still bound close to his chest.

Alden was inside with Mara.

Calist sat near the forge repairing a small kitchen knife.

Harlan stopped near the entrance.

Calist continued working the edge.

"She went back before I could stop her," Harlan said.

Calist kept his eyes on the knife.

"I know."

"I should've—"

Calist looked up.

Harlan stopped.

Neither of them spoke for a moment.

Then Calist said, "You had Renn."

Harlan's jaw tightened.

"And Kell, who'd barely seen a real fight."

Calist returned to the knife.

"You couldn't leave them."

Harlan looked toward the road.

"No."

His voice was rough.

Calist ran the blade across the stone again.

After a while Harlan said, "Bren knew what he was doing."

Calist nodded.

"Eryn did too."

Calist's hand stopped.

Harlan looked at him.

"She wasn't guessing."

Calist said nothing.

"She knew why Bren stayed. She knew what going back meant."

The stone remained beneath Calist's fingers.

Harlan drew a slow breath.

"I wish she hadn't."

Calist looked down.

"So do I."

Harlan stayed a little longer.

Then left.

* * *

Days passed.

Calist worked.

He ate when food was put in front of him.

He slept badly, but enough.

People came to the smithy and spoke to him about ordinary things.

A broken latch.

A loose wheel band.

A knife edge.

A bent nail that someone insisted could still be saved.

Calist fixed them.

Sometimes he heard footsteps outside and looked toward the entrance before remembering.

Sometimes someone laughed on the road and, for half a breath, the sound was close enough.

Then it wasn't.

He went back to work.

* * *

One afternoon Mara found him standing beside the well with an empty bucket.

"You getting water?"

Calist looked down at it.

"Yes."

"You've been standing there a while."

He lowered the bucket.

"I was thinking."

Mara did not ask about what.

She waited until he had filled it, then walked back with him.

* * *

A few evenings later Calist went upstairs to change his shirt.

He opened the chest at the foot of his bed and moved a folded tunic aside.

His hand stopped.

The small cloth pouch lay underneath.

He stared at it.

Then sat down.

For a while he did not touch it.

He knew exactly what was inside.

Calist picked it up.

The knot came loose beneath his fingers.

The cloth opened.

Silver lay against his palm.

The leaf.

The narrow arrow behind it.

The chain he had made one link at a time.

Calist turned it over.

He remembered Bram holding the pendant beneath the workshop light.

Good.

He remembered Eryn at the market years earlier, holding another necklace between her fingers.

He remembered thinking that someday he could make one himself.

He had.

It was here.

Eryn had never seen it.

Calist stared at the pendant.

He had meant to give it to her after supper.

He had forgotten it upstairs.

He had thought about taking it to her the next morning.

There had been work.

Then another hunt.

Then another evening.

There had always been another time.

His fingers tightened around the silver.

There wasn't one now.

Calist tried to breathe.

His chest tightened instead.

He bent forward, pressing his free hand against his mouth.

A sound escaped anyway.

He closed his eyes.

Eryn would never hold it.

She would never turn it over and find the small flaws he had never quite managed to polish away.

She would never tease him about taking so long.

She would never know why he had started learning work like this in the first place.

Calist's shoulders shook.

He tried to draw another breath.

It broke halfway in.

The necklace trembled in his hand.

Footsteps moved quickly through the house.

Alden appeared in the doorway.

Calist looked at him.

Alden's eyes dropped to the silver in his hand.

Then he crossed the room.

He sat beside Calist and pulled him against him.

Calist held on.

The first sob hurt.

The next came before he had recovered from it.

Then another.

He buried his face against Alden's shoulder and cried until breathing became difficult, until his throat hurt, until the hand holding the necklace cramped around it.

Alden said nothing.

One arm stayed around Calist's shoulders.

The other rested against the back of his head.

Calist cried.

Alden held him.

That was all.

CHAPTER 9

The Choice



By the following spring, the forge was busy again.

Alden worked most days beside Calist now. He still tired sooner than he once had, but no longer needed a chair waiting nearby, and Mara had stopped watching him every time he crossed the yard.

She had not stopped watching him entirely.

Calist suspected she never would.

A broken wheel rim occupied most of the morning.

Alden held it steady while Calist worked the damaged section.

"Too much."

Calist stopped.

"What?"

"Heat."

Calist looked at the iron.

"It's fine."

"It was fine three breaths ago."

Calist moved it away from the fire.

Alden smiled.

"Bram would be disappointed."

"Bram would say the heat is innocent."

"And the smith?"

Calist looked at him.

"Apparently guilty."

"Good. You remember."

Calist returned to work.

Outside, Joric was arguing with one of the younger boys about a cart.

"You cannot put the sack there."

"Why?"

"Because it falls off."

"It hasn't."

"You haven't moved yet."

"That proves nothing."

"It proves everything."

Calist smiled without looking up.

A moment later something wooden struck the ground.

Joric swore.

Alden glanced toward the doorway.

"Sounds like education."

"Very advanced education."

They kept working.

* * *

The hunters no longer went out alone.

Harlan had made that rule after his arm healed.

Nobody argued with him.

There were fewer experienced hunters to argue.

Edrin took more of the longer trips now. Harlan still went whenever his shoulder allowed it. The younger hunters who had

once followed mostly to learn began carrying more of the work themselves.

Sometimes Garran went with them.

Sometimes Joric.

Calist went when the forge could spare him, though nobody pretended he had become a hunter.

He could follow instructions.

He could carry.

He could recognize enough tracks not to embarrass himself.

That was useful.

One morning they found a goat missing from an outer pen.

The fence had been cut rather than broken.

Harlan crouched beside the opening.

Calist stood behind him.

"Goblins?"

Harlan touched one of the marks in the mud.

"Probably."

"How many?"

"Enough to steal a goat."

Calist looked toward the woods.

Harlan stood.

"We move the animals closer tonight."

That evening, half the village helped.

Nobody called it an emergency.

Pens were checked.

Weak sections of fence were reinforced.

Animals farther from the houses were brought inward.

Children carried rope and complained about being given the light things.

Joric told them they could carry the heavy things when they stopped dropping the light ones.

One of them immediately dropped a coil of rope.

Calist laughed.

The boy glared at him.

"You dropped things when you were little."

"Constantly."

Joric pointed at Calist.

"He once fell into clean straw while fighting it."

"That was different."

"It defeated him."

The children forgot their annoyance and demanded the story.

Calist looked at Joric.

"Don't."

Joric was already telling it.

By the time the last animals were moved, half the younger children believed Calist had lost a heroic battle against an entire barn.

Calist decided this was how Nessa must have felt whenever someone remembered a story incorrectly.

The thought came without warning.

It hurt.

Not as sharply as it once had.

It still hurt.

Calist tied the final section of rope and went home.

* * *

Eryn's absence had become part of the village.

Not smaller.

Just woven into things.

Nobody sat in Nessa's chair.

Tessa eventually folded the blanket and took it inside.

Garran kept working.

Some days he spoke easily.

Others he did not.

Harlan still paused whenever talk turned to the place of the ambush.

Bren's name came up whenever one of the younger hunters did something he had taught them.

People laughed at stories about both of them.

Sometimes Calist did too.

The first time that happened, he felt guilty afterward.

Then angry at himself for feeling guilty.

Eryn had laughed more than anyone he knew.

It would have been a poor way to remember her by never doing it again.

So he stopped punishing himself for that.

Mostly.

The necklace remained in his chest.

He had wrapped it again after the day Alden held him.

He had not opened the pouch since.

* * *

Corvin came less often.

When he did, there were usually fewer soldiers with him than Calist remembered from childhood.

One afternoon he arrived with Merek and a young soldier Calist did not know.

Oren was elsewhere.

Transferred, Corvin said.

"East?"

"Yes."

Calist took the reins while Corvin dismounted.

"How many are left at the fort?"

Corvin looked at him.

"Enough."

Calist smiled faintly.

"You've been saying that for years."

"It remains a useful number."

Alden came from the forge.

"Which means?"

Corvin handed him a damaged sword belt.

"It means I need this fixed before tomorrow."

Alden took it.

"That bad?"

"The belt?"

"Corvin."

Corvin sighed.

"Thin."

That was all.

Alden nodded.

Calist led the horses toward water.

* * *

The soldiers stayed for supper.

Mara fed them until the young soldier looked slightly frightened by the amount still appearing on the table.

Calist recognized the expression.

"You can say no."

The soldier looked at Mara.

Then at Calist.

"Can I?"

"No."

Mara put another piece of bread beside him.

Corvin laughed.

Conversation moved between the fort, the road and the village.

A supply wagon had been delayed again.

Another patrol had been reassigned east.

Two farms nearer the border had reported missing animals.

A merchant claimed to have seen an orc near the northern road.

Corvin did not know whether the merchant had actually seen one.

"He described it as eight feet tall."

Joric, who had somehow ended up at supper despite not living there, looked interested.

"Could be."

Corvin looked at him.

"It was also breathing fire."

Joric considered that.

"Probably not."

"Thank you."

Mara shook her head.

Calist listened.

Years earlier he would have asked about the orc.

Now he asked, "How often are you patrolling north?"

Corvin looked at him.

"Not often enough."

"Because of the war with Morcant?"

"Yes."

"Can't they send anyone back?"

"If they had anyone to send back, I would have them."

Corvin tore a piece of bread.

"They still need those soldiers against Morcant, even if we'd like more here."

Calist nodded.

He understood.

That had stopped making it easier a long time ago.

* * *

The next morning Corvin stood beside his horse while Calist tightened the repaired belt.

"Pull."

Corvin did.

The buckle held.

"Again."

Corvin pulled harder.

Still held.

Calist nodded.

"That'll do."

Corvin looked down at the work.

"Your father?"

"Me."

Corvin looked at Alden.

Alden was sweeping near the forge.

"He did it."

Corvin gave Calist the belt back.

"Then I'll try not to break it until the next visit."

"You'll break something else."

"Probably."

Calist handed it to him.

Corvin buckled it on.

For a moment Calist looked at the plain military coat.

The sword.

The worn boots.

The same kind of equipment that had fascinated him when he was eight.

It looked different now.

Not less interesting.

Just familiar enough that he knew what each piece cost in work.

Corvin noticed him looking.

"What?"

Calist shook his head.

"Nothing."

Corvin raised an eyebrow.

Calist smiled.

"I learned that from Eryn."

Corvin's expression softened.

"Yes."

He mounted.

The soldiers left toward the fort.

Calist watched them go until Alden called from the smithy.

"Wheel rim."

Calist turned back.

* * *

Summer brought more work than the village had hands for.

It always did.

Calist spent mornings at the forge and afternoons wherever something else needed doing.

He helped Joric repair a drainage channel.

Helped Nalia lift timber into place for a shed.

Carried herbs for Mara.

Went with Harlan and two younger hunters to check old traps farther east.

Helped Tessa replace a warped section of porch rail.

One evening he sat with Tarin outside the Griffith house while both of them cleaned roots Mara had brought back.

Tarin held up one.

"You cut this too short."

"It's a root."

"It's the useful part."

"There's more."

"That doesn't make wasting this one better."

Calist stared at him.

"You sound exactly like Mara."

Tarin smiled.

"I know."

"That should worry you."

"It doesn't."

Children were playing near the road.

One carried a wooden sword.

Another had a stick that had somehow become a spear.

A third had declared herself a dragon and refused to explain why the dragon needed a cooking pot on her head.

Calist watched them chase each other around the well.

One of the younger boys stumbled.

He got up immediately and continued running.

Tarin followed Calist's gaze.

"You all right?"

"Yes."

Calist meant it.

A moment later the dragon struck the swordsman with the wooden spoon she had apparently added to her arsenal.

The swordsman complained this was against the rules.

Nobody knew what the rules were.

Calist smiled.

* * *

At harvest, with Calist nearing nineteen, the village filled the open space with tables again.

There was less food than the feasts Calist remembered from childhood.

There was still enough.

Nalia had made several wooden bowls that people were actually using.

She watched every person who touched one.

Calist noticed.

"You're doing the hook thing."

Nalia looked at him.

"What hook thing?"

"Checking whether they work after you already know they work."

She looked at one of her bowls.

"That's different."

"It isn't."

"They can drop it."

"That would not be the bowl's fault."

Nalia narrowed her eyes.

"Bram has ruined you."

Calist laughed.

Joric passed carrying an entire bench alone.

"Move."

"You could ask for help."

"I could."

He kept walking.

Tarin was with Mara, correcting a younger boy who had brought the wrong herb for one of the pots.

Tessa sat with several other adults near the fire.

Garran was repairing a leather strap while talking to Harlan.

Children ran everywhere.

Somebody shouted because a cup had been knocked over.

Someone else laughed.

A dog escaped with a piece of meat and immediately became the most important thing in the village.

Calist stood in the middle of it.

The noise.

The smoke.

The smell of food.

People arguing over things that did not matter.

People working without being asked.

Children being corrected by adults who were not their parents.

The old road beside them.

The smithy beyond the tables.

The fields.

The houses.

Home.

Calist looked toward the road leading to the fort.

Then back at the village.

* * *

Alden found him in the smithy after the feast.

Most of the fires outside had burned low.

Calist was putting tools away.

Alden leaned against the doorway.

"You've been thinking."

Calist hung a pair of tongs on the wall.

"Yes."

"That sounds dangerous."

Calist smiled.

He put another tool away.

Then stopped.

"I'm going to enlist."

Alden did not move.

For several seconds the only sound was the low crackle from the forge.

"When?"

"After winter. Early spring, once the roads are good enough."

Alden nodded.

"Have you told Mara?"

"No."

"Coward."

Calist laughed once.

Then neither of them did.

Alden came farther inside.

"You're not doing this because of Eryn."

Calist looked at him.

"No."

Alden waited.

Calist rested both hands against the edge of the workbench.

"I miss her."

"I know."

"And I'm angry."

"I know."

Calist looked toward the open doorway.

The last of the feast was being cleared away outside. Someone dragged a bench across the ground. Joric's voice carried from somewhere near the tables.

"But that isn't why."

Alden said nothing.

Calist searched for the words.

"I want this to still be here."

Alden followed his gaze.

"The village?"

"All of it."

Calist gestured vaguely toward the doorway.

"The fields. The houses. People complaining about work. Joric being an idiot."

"I heard that!" came faintly from outside.

Calist closed his eyes.

Alden's mouth twitched.

Calist continued.

"Mara feeding everyone who comes through the door."

"Against their will."

"The forge."

He looked down at his hands.

"Nalia making things. Tarin knowing everything before anyone else does. Children fighting with sticks and getting in everyone's way."

Alden listened.

"I don't want people here learning to live like every trip into the woods might be the one someone doesn't come back from."

His voice became quieter.

"I don't want moving the animals closer to the houses to become normal because nobody thinks they're safe farther out."

Alden watched him.

"Corvin can't cover everything with the men he has."

"No."

"Harlan can't be everywhere."

"No."

Calist rubbed one thumb against the edge of the bench.

"I can't fix the war with Morcant. I know that."

Alden nodded.

"And joining the army doesn't mean they'll put you here."

"I know."

"They could send you somewhere else."

"I know."

"You could spend months guarding a storehouse and never see this road."

"I know."

Calist looked at him.

"But somebody has to do those things too."

Alden was quiet for a long time.

Then he nodded.

"All right."

Calist blinked.

"That's it?"

"No."

Alden's eyes stayed on him.

"But I understand."

Calist looked away.

Some tightness he had not noticed until then eased from his shoulders.

Alden crossed his arms.

"You'll still tell your mother."

Calist sighed.

"I know."

"I will not do it for you."

"I know."

"Good."

Alden turned toward the house.

Then stopped.

"Calist."

"What?"

"I was taken."

Calist knew what he meant.

"The conscription."

"Yes."

Alden looked toward the road.

"I spent years wishing someone had given me the choice you have now."

Calist said nothing.

Alden looked back at him.

"That means I'm not going to take the choice away from you because I'm afraid of the answer."

Then he went inside.

Calist remained beside the workbench for a while.

Eventually Mara called that supper was getting cold.

He went in.

* * *

Mara knew before Calist finished the first sentence.

He could tell by her face.

She put down the cloth she had been folding.

"You're enlisting."

Calist sat across from her.

"Yes."

Mara looked toward Alden.

Alden stayed very interested in the cup in his hands.

"You knew."

"For almost half an hour."

"And you made him tell me."

"Yes."

Mara stared at him.

Alden drank.

Calist almost smiled.

It did not seem wise.

Mara looked back at him.

"When?"

"After winter."

"How soon?"

"Early spring, once the roads are good enough. If Corvin is heading to Caerbreyn then, I'll go with him."

"You've decided."

"Yes."

She lowered her eyes to her hands.

Calist waited.

"I don't want you to."

"I know."

"I want you here."

"I know."

"I want you to take over the forge and complain about your back when you're older than your father."

Alden looked offended.

"My back is fine."

Neither of them acknowledged him.

Mara continued.

"I want you to finish with Bram."

"So do I."

"Then why?"

Calist looked toward the window.

He could see a piece of the road in the darkness outside.

"Because I want to come back to those things."

Mara looked at him.

"And I want everyone else to be able to keep doing them while I'm gone."

She was silent.

Calist did not try to fill it.

Eventually Mara stood.

She came around the table and put both arms around him.

Calist held her.

Her grip tightened.

"I still don't like it."

"I know."

"You keep saying that."

"I don't know what else to say."

"Good."

Mara pulled back just enough to look at him.

"Then don't invent something."

Calist nodded.

She touched his cheek once.

Then returned to the table.

Alden looked at Calist.

Calist looked back.

Neither smiled until Mara turned away.

* * *

Corvin returned nine days later.

He had five soldiers with him.

Calist was shoeing a horse when they arrived.

Corvin dismounted and watched him finish setting the last nail.

"You busy?"

"Yes."

"Good. I hate interrupting lazy people."

Calist set the hoof down.

"I need to talk to you."

Corvin's expression changed.

Alden came from behind the forge.

"To both of us."

Corvin looked from one to the other.

"All right."

They waited until the horse was settled.

Alden spoke first.

"Calist is going to enlist."

Corvin looked at Calist.

"When?"

"Early spring. I'm staying through winter."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Corvin studied him for a few moments.

"Why?"

Calist looked toward the village.

Corvin followed the glance.

That seemed to answer enough.

He nodded.

"When the roads open in spring, come with us to Caerbreyn. The military office there handles volunteers from this part of Breynach. I can recommend you."

Calist nodded.

"All right."

"Good," Corvin said. "You've got a winter to finish here first."

Corvin looked at Alden.

His tone changed slightly.

"I don't choose where they post him."

"I know."

"I can't promise he stays at my fort."

"I know."

"I can't keep him out of danger."

Alden's jaw tightened.

"I know."

Corvin waited.

Alden looked at him.

"But if he does end up with you—"

Corvin nodded before he finished.

"I'll look after him."

Calist opened his mouth.

Corvin pointed at him.

"That does not mean you get special treatment."

"I wasn't going to ask."

"Good."

He looked back at Alden.

"I'll teach him what I can. I'll correct him when he needs it. If he does something stupid, I'll tell you."

Alden nodded.

"That's all I'm asking."

Corvin smiled faintly.

"You realize he'll be an adult soldier, not the boy who followed me around with a broom."

Alden looked at Calist.

"I'm aware."

Corvin looked at him too.

"I'm still deciding."

Calist sighed.

* * *

That evening Calist opened the chest at the foot of his bed.

The pouch was where he had left it.

He carried it to the forge.

Alden was inside finishing a set of nails.

He looked at the cloth in Calist's hand.

Then went back to his work.

Calist appreciated that.

He lit another lamp.

Opened the pouch.

The necklace lay inside.

For a while he only looked at it.

Then he took out the tools Bram had given him.

Not gifts.

Tools an apprentice should already possess.

Calist almost smiled.

He unclasped the chain.

Opened the first link.

Then another.

He worked slowly.

The pendant remained intact in his palm.

Leaf.

Arrow.

He did not want to melt it.

He did not want to make another necklace either.

Calist turned it over.

The back was broad enough for what he had in mind.

He found a narrow piece of silver he had kept from another job and began shaping it.

Alden's hammer stopped for a moment.

Calist continued.

The backing had to sit flat.

The pin had to move freely.

The catch had to hold without opening when cloth pulled against it.

He measured.

Filed.

Adjusted.

Tried again.

The first pin sat too high.

Calist removed it.

The second was better.

He prepared both surfaces carefully before heating them.

Clean.

Flat.

No gap he expected the heat to forgive.

Bram's voice returned from years earlier.

Heat is usually innocent.

Calist soldered the backing into place.

Waited.

Cleaned it.

Checked the join.

The leaf and arrow remained on the front.

Smaller now without the chain around them.

The piece no longer looked like something meant to hang against Eryn's chest.

Calist fitted the pin behind it.

Closed the catch.

Opened it.

Closed it again.

Alden came beside him.

Calist handed it over.

His father turned the clasp beneath the lamplight.

Checked the back first.

Calist smiled faintly.

"Bram does that too."

"Bram has sense."

Alden tested the catch.

"It'll hold."

"Yes."

He gave it back.

Calist ran his thumb once over the silver leaf.

There had been so many times he could have given it to her.

He had believed every one of them would be followed by another.

Calist fastened the clasp to the edge of his cloak.

It held.

Alden said nothing.

Neither did Calist.

* * *

The next evening Alden brought the wooden chest into the main room.

Calist recognized it immediately.

He had seen it opened throughout his childhood.

Alden knelt and lifted the lid.

The chainmail lay beneath folded cloth.

Dark metal.

Plain rings.

Leather at the collar and edges, replaced where age had demanded it.

Alden lifted it out.

The mail settled heavily in his hands.

"Put it on."

Calist stared at him.

"What?"

"You plan to join soldiers. You may as well discover whether this fits before one of them is laughing at you."

Calist took it.

The weight surprised him despite knowing how much mail weighed.

He pulled it over his head.

The rings settled across his shoulders and chest.

Alden walked around him.

"Move."

Calist raised his arms.

Turned.

Bent.

The shirt was a little loose in one place and tighter than ideal in another.

Alden tugged at the side.

"You're broader than I was."

Calist looked at him.

"You said I was thin."

"You can be both."

Mara stood in the doorway.

Calist had not heard her enter.

Her eyes stayed on the mail for a moment.

Then Alden reached into the chest again.

The sword came next.

Plain scabbard.

Plain grip.

Nothing on it that would make anyone look twice.

Alden drew it a few inches.

Checked the edge.

Sheathed it again.

He had done the same thing for as long as Calist could remember.

Calist looked at him.

"You kept it all this time."

Alden frowned.

"Of course."

"You haven't needed it."

"That doesn't mean I should neglect it."

Calist smiled.

Alden held the sword out.

The smile faded.

Calist took it.

The weapon felt different from every sword he had handled while helping soldiers at the forge.

Not because it was better.

It was simply his father's.

The sword Alden had carried because someone had ordered him to war.

Now he was giving it to a son choosing to go.

Calist looked down at it.

Alden adjusted one of the mail straps.

"This needs replacing."

"Now?"

"Yes, now."

"It still holds."

Alden looked at him.

Calist sighed.

"Right."

Alden removed the old strap.

Calist sat beside him.

Together they replaced it.

* * *

The chainmail returned to the chest afterward.

The sword rested beside it.

Not because Calist had changed his mind.

He had work in the morning.

Corvin would pass through again in several days. Calist would not leave with him.

There was still a whole winter before Calist planned to go.

Until then, the forge, the stores, the animals, and the ordinary work of the village still needed his hands.

Calist fastened the silver clasp to his cloak and left it there.

At supper, Joric arrived carrying a loaf of bread.

Mara looked at him.

"Why are you here?"

"My mother said to bring this."

"That explains the bread."

Joric sat down.

Mara stared.

"What?"

Calist laughed.

Tarin came through the door a few minutes later because Mara had asked him to bring dried leaves from her workroom.

He also stayed.

Alden complained that nobody remembered which house they belonged to.

Mara served them anyway.

Outside, evening settled over the village.

Someone closed a pen.

A child shouted from farther down the road.

The forge was quiet for the night.

Calist sat at the table between the people who had filled most of his life.

Mara put another bowl in front of Joric before he could ask.

Joric immediately began arguing that he had not been about to ask.

Tarin told him nobody believed him.

Alden reached for the bread.

Calist smiled and ate with them.

Afterword

Telanas has been with me for a very long time.

What eventually became this world began more than twenty years ago as something much smaller: a background story for one of my characters in Ultima Online. At the time, it was simply a way to give that character a past, a place in the world, and reasons for who he was.

But the idea never really disappeared.

Over the years, pieces of it stayed with me. Characters changed, places grew, old ideas were replaced by new ones, and what had once been a simple character background gradually became something much larger. For more than twenty years, the concept of Telanas remained somewhere in the back of my mind until I finally decided that it was time to give the world and its stories a proper form.

A large part of that beginning belongs to Ultima Online. I want to thank the people who created it, as well as the remarkable communities that formed around it. Those worlds, shards, characters, stories, and the people behind them helped ignite my passion for role-playing and showed me how much a shared imaginary world could become when people were given the freedom to live stories within it.

I also owe a great deal to the authors who shaped my love of fantasy long before Telanas became a book.

J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings was the work that made me discover my passion for the fantasy genre in the first place. Its world, history, journeys, and sense that there was always something beyond the next hill left an impression on me that has never really gone away.

I also want to thank Bernhard Hennen. Die Elfen, Drachenelfen, and his other works showed me another kind of vast fantasy world—one filled with history, peoples, relationships, loss, and stories that could stretch across generations. They became another important part of my love for the genre.

And finally, I want to thank the people closest to me.

To my best friend and my girlfriend: thank you for your support, your patience, and for being there while an idea that had existed mostly in my head for more than two decades finally became something real.

Volume 1 — Home is the first proper step into Telanas, but the book is only one way to explore the world.

The official Telanas website includes an integrated Reader, the complete illustrated edition, and a spoiler-aware Lexicon that reveals information as you progress through the story. It is also where I will share updates about Telanas and future volumes as the project continues to grow.

Visit the official Telanas website:

The Library - Telanas

There is still much more of this world to discover.

Thank you for taking that first step with me.

— K2040