

CHAPTER 1

On Their Way

Quasar and Nemo spoke little as they rode. They constantly scanned the sky for any sign of the dragon. Clover sang softly as she rode with Nemo. She too kept her eyes fixed up above. Silas slept.

As they progressed along the mountain ridge the trail became more severe with a steep drop on either side. The entire area was black from dragon breath. They rounded a twist in the trail and, without warning, came headlong into a solid wall of rock. The trail, as such, ended. It made a left-hand ninety-degree turn at the curve, widened, and became more of a ledge than a trail.

“We’re here,” said Clover excitedly, as she jumped from Nemo’s horse.

Quasar and Nemo both stopped their horses.

“Wake up old man,” chided Clover. She squeezed and shook Silas’ leg gently.

He jerked awake saying, “I wasn’t sleeping.” Then, as he looked sleepily around he added, “Oh, we’re here already.”

Quasar and Nemo looked at one another, puzzled.

“Here? Where?” asked Nemo.

“You best walk the horses,” said Clover, as if that answered his question.

Clover took the lead. She made a quick jump from the trail onto the ledge and then began briskly walking away from Quasar, Nemo and Silas. Silas nimbly followed his wife onto the ledge, displaying more energy and agility than Quasar and Nemo thought possible.

Looking back Silas laughed. “You’d better hurry,” he said.

In moments they were far along the ledge and traveling quickly.

Quasar and Nemo dismounted and carefully walked their horses onto the ledge. It was easier than it looked. The ledge was actually wider than the trail had been, and having a solid wall on one side was somehow comforting. It was certainly easier to keep track of one deadly sheer drop rather than two. After a few minutes of walking single file, with Clover waking first and Quasar last, Quasar and Nemo were shocked to find themselves alone on the ledge.

“Where did they go?” asked Nemo, suddenly.

“How should I know?” answered Quasar, impatiently. “All I can see is your horse’s rear end.”

“Well they were there a second ago, then they just vanished. Do you think they have Elfin Cloaks of Hiding?” asked Nemo. Quasar checked to make sure he was still wearing *Eilaanan Tok Häfina* and still casting a shadow. He was.

“Are you telling me you lost both Clover and Silas?” asked Quasar.

“We’re not lost,” came the echoing voice of Silas. “Hurry up. We’re in here.”

Quasar and Nemo continued along the ledge until they unexpectedly came upon a gap in the mountain wall. Through this gap they were amazed to find a round little meadow, green, lush and filled with a rainbow of flowers. Bordering the meadow huge stone walls thrust into the sky. It made Nemo feel as if he were entering a great cathedral that had no roof. At the end farthest from the entrance was a deep pool of clear cold water. It was fed by a waterfall that poured and cascaded out of the stone wall high above. A little rainbow danced above the pool. Silas was lying in the midst of a patch of bright

yellow flowers, gazing at the sky above. Clover was splashing her feet in the pool, shoes and all.

“Now, this is what I call interesting,” said Quasar as he followed Nemo into the meadow.

“Just you wait,” said Clover seriously.



Norrom was the first of the brothers to arrive at the shore. A number of troops and a few women and children were already present, watching the ships arrive. Three tall ships, all flying the Twin Black Hawks on a golden field, were anchored off shore. A longboat from the lead ship, *Fyrmatus*, was slowly making its way through waves and swells, coming ashore.

Norrom left his horse and walked briskly to greet the longboat. A sailor, an officer familiar to Norrom, disembarked and approached Norrom. He stood smartly before speaking.

“Lord Norrom,” said the First Mate politely, “Captain Lewis sends his greetings and awaits your pleasure.”

“It is good to see you again, Mr. Schooper,” replied Norrom. “How is your son?”

“My son, sir?” asked the First Mate.

"If I recall correctly, he suffered a nasty burn aboard the *Fyrmatus*," answered Norrom.

"Yes, sir, he did," replied Mr. Schooper. "Thank you for asking. My son is fine, sir." The First Mate was amazed at Lord Norrom's memory. The man stood ankle deep in the white sea foam that advanced and receded with each wave. Oarsmen secured their oars as the boat was anchored with a stout rope. Several men pulled the longboat up onto the sand. The Lord Norrom and the First Mate walked on shore past the boat. Ram, Herald, and Vine rode up and joined them. The other brothers had been detained in the Great Pavilion.

"We came as soon as we saw your signal fire," said the First Mate. "How can we be of help?"

Norrom gestured toward all the wagons waiting near the beach. "We have a great number of wagons and machines of war that need to be shipped to Luminus. We must load as much as possible on two ships. The third ship will be used to transport our women and children to the island."

The First Mate turned a knowledgeable glance toward the wagons. He knew immediately that some wagons would be left behind. Then he looked up and down the beach.

"I see no dock or pier," observed Mr. Schooper. "Have you any thoughts as to the best way to load the wagons onto the ships?" he asked delicately.

"The river is deep at the mouth," replied Norrom. "I was hoping the ships could sail into the calm waters of the river."

"I have built some ramps," announced Ram. "They are sturdy and long. Perhaps they can be adapted for use with the ships."

"I will order soundings to be made of the river," said Mr. Shoop. "If it's deep enough, we will make your ramps work." The First Mate smiled reassuringly. In his heart, he had no idea how he would be able to fulfill his promise. "In the meantime," he continued. "We can ferry the women and children by longboat to the *Fyrmatus*." He pointed to the ship. "She is standing by, and can take them on as soon as they are ready to embark. The *Fyrmatus* will give them safe and speedy passage to the island."

"Order the longboats ashore," said Vine. "The women and children are ready to go."

Upon hearing this, Herald stepped away from his brothers and motioned to one of his

signalmen nearby. They spoke quietly for a moment.

Vine quickly mounted his horse and turned it toward where the woman and children were encamped. Looking over his shoulder he said, "Please remind the Captain that the wives of Lord's Falcon, Tulmar and Shank will be aboard, as well as Lord Falcon's children."

"Yes sir," answered Mr. Schooper.

Vine rode off quickly toward the camp where the women and children were assembled. His father had entrusted them to him. He did not intend to disappoint the Lord Hiram.

Herald rejoined his brothers, bringing the signalman with him. He stepped forward and said, "Perhaps I can help." Motioning to the man he said, "This man can signal your boat. Just tell him your message."

"Thank you so much, Lord Herald," replied Mr. Schooper. As he spoke, the First Mate discreetly slipped his own signal mirror back into his pocket. Looking at the signalman Schooper said, "Please tell them this: 'Launch the boats. Prepare for passengers. We sail upon the tide.'"

Using a shiny round mirror, the man quickly signaled the *Fyrmatus*. The ship replied almost

immediately. Longboats were launched within minutes. Nodding at the signalman, Mr. Schooper said "Thank you." Then he added, "If you don't mind, please signal the *Advocate* and the *Eilaanani*. Ask them to launch their longboats, too. He watched as the signalman contacted the other two ships.

"With enough boats," said Schooper, more to himself than anyone else, "we will be able to load them all quickly. With any luck, the women and children will sleep on the island, tonight." As the boats began their way to shore, a line of women and children could be seen coming from camp. Vine was walking his horse at the front of the line. Norrom took Mr. Schooper aside and asked, "Do you have someone who can take soundings of the river, Mr. Shooper?"

The First Mate smiled and answered, "Yes, sir."

"If you would be good enough to launch your longboat, he could make his measurements," said Norrom dryly.

Mr. Schooper beckoned to one of his sailors and ordered him to take depth measurements at the mouth of the river.

“While they are proceeding,” suggested Lord Norrom, “why don’t you join my brother Ram and me at the riverbank? We need to see how we can make the ramps work.”

“It would be a pleasure, Lord Norrom,” answered Mr. Schooper. The three walked briskly to the place at the river where the wagons had been landed just hours before. The ground was rutted and scarred. Ram surveyed the riverbank and suggested a spot with a slight rise. “If the ships can come this far up river,” he said, “we can use the ramps here, just like a pier.”

It was clear from his expression that failure was not even a remote possibility. Mr. Schooper silently watched as the man in the longboat took measurements. He dropped a weighted rope into the water. It was tied in knots at regular intervals. As it sank he let it out until it hit bottom. Then, drawing it back in, he counted the knots to determine the depth. The boat slowly made its way up the river to where Ram, Norrom and Mr. Schooper were standing. The sailor landed the boat and joined the men on shore.

“It will be close,” said the sailor, “but the river is just deep enough. The ships can sail up to here.”

“The question is, sailor, if, when fully loaded, can they sail out again,” said Norrom.

The sailor looked squarely at Lord Norrom. “Meaning no disrespect, my Lord,” he replied, “but we are at low tide. Even if the ships sit low in the water, heavy with cargo, they will be able to sail out again at high tide.”

Norrom smiled and nodded his head. “Ram,” he said, turning to his brother. “Get those ramps up. We’ll need two so we can load both ships at the same time.”

“Right away,” replied Ram.

“I’ll line up the wagons by priority.” said Norrom. “We’ll load them in order of importance.”

Ram ran toward the wagons that contained his ramps, yelling orders as he went.

“Mr. Schooper,” said Norrom, “keep track of each ship, please. Watch how low they sit in the water. When they’re full, they’re full. I don’t want these ships to get stuck in the river or flounder at sea.”

“Yes sir,” replied Schooper. “If you don’t mind, Lord Norrom,” risked Schooper, “I have a suggestion.”

“What is it?” asked Norrom.

“When we are done boarding the women and children, we should load the longboats with as much as they can carry,” said the First Mate.

He looked carefully at Norrom to catch any sense of displeasure. None. “Then,” he continued, “once they have cleared the mouth of the river, we can finish loading them at sea. It could be the difference between scraping bottom and making it out safely.”

“Excellent suggestion, Mr. Schooper,” replied Norrom. “Please see to it.”

“Aye, sir,” replied the First Mate.



“I am so sorry to disturb you, Gannon,” said Master Brohmer when he saw Gannon leave the Great Pavilion.

“I got your message,” replied Gannon. “What is so important that I should leave a meeting with my father?”

“I have made an important discovery,” said Brohmer.

“A discovery?” replied Gannon. He had no idea how he would explain this to his father.

“Two, actually,” said Brohmer. “They change everything.”

“What discoveries?” asked Gannon. He wanted nothing more than to get back to his father, Falcon, Reed, and the others.

“Poison, of course,” answered Brohmer. “What do you think we are talking about?”

“I have no idea,” said Gannon, respectfully. “Why don’t you start at the beginning?”

A few minutes later Gannon walked through the great veil of shields into the chamber where his father and most of his brothers were meeting.

“Forgive the interruption, Father,” said Gannon as he entered the round chamber. Rather than take his place at the table, he stood near the veil with a flustered Master Brohmer next to him.

“Master Brohmer has made an important discovery,” announced Gannon.

“Two,” corrected Brohmer sheepishly.

“Two discoveries,” said Gannon.

The Lord Hiram said nothing, but merely nodded to Gannon.

“Go ahead, Master Brohmer,” said Gannon, “Tell them what you told me.”

Brohmer blinked, and then began nervously, "The birds, the prisoners, the poison, the traitor...it's us," he stammered.

Falcon, Reed, Tulmar, Kyler and Shank looked at one another and did everything they could not to laugh out loud. The Lord Hiram smiled kindly at Brohmer, and then shifted his eyes to Gannon for an explanation.

"That wasn't as clear as I hoped it would be," said Master Brohmer, trying to regain his composure.

"You see," he began again. "I returned to where we found the dead birds; Just taking a stroll, at first. Then I discovered the pods."

"Pods?" ask Hiram.

"Yes," replied Brohmer, "from the trees." Brohmer looked around the table and was met with blank stares.

Oh dear, he said to himself. "The birdcages had been placed under some trees, to protect them from the sun or the rain I assume."

This much everyone could follow.

"The trees, you see," said Brohmer, "dropped small rice-like pods into the cages. The birds ate them and died."

“Are you saying the pods were poisonous?” asked Hiram.

“Not exactly,” replied Brohmer, “but they killed the birds nonetheless. “Allow me” said Brohmer, as he dumped a handful of pods onto the round table. They made a small pile.

“May I have some water?” asked Brohmer

The Lord Hiram blinked for a moment in wonder, and then clapped once. Guards and servants appeared immediately. “Please bring Master Brohmer a drink of water,” he ordered.

One of the guards handed the Lord Hiram a message, which he read immediately and smiled. In an instant a servant approached Brohmer carrying a mug of water.

“Oh goodness,” said Brohmer, “not for me, for the pods.”

Tulmar stifled a laugh. Brohmer took the mug and carefully poured a few drops of water onto the pile of pods. The pods expanded as they absorbed the water. Slowly Brohmer added more and more water. As he did, the pods expanded more and more.

“You see,” said Master Brohmer, “the water makes the pods expand. If I added enough water,

this little pile would grow one hundred times its original size.”

“It was an accident,” said Gannon. “The birds ate the pods and died by accident.” He looked around the table. Everyone was listening now.

“Go ahead,” said Brohmer waving his hand slightly at Gannon. “Tell them about the other.” He dipped a handkerchief into the mug and wiped his forehead.

“There was no traitor with the birds and none with the prisoners either,” declared Gannon confidently. “Each of the prisoners wore the same ring, crested with the Black Tree and Serpent.”

Gannon nodded to Master Brohmer who reached into a pocket and produced three identical rings. He laid two of them on the table.

“Master Brohmer discovered that when the crest is twisted, it opens to reveal a hidden compartment.” As Gannon spoke, Master Brohmer twisted the top of the ring he held. It opened to reveal a small round compartment. “I’ve tested the residue from these compartments,” said Brohmer. “They all contained a powerful poison. These men planned to kill themselves if ever they were captured. Again, there was no traitor.”

The Lord Hiram slammed his hand down hard onto the table. "Excellent!" he shouted. "Well done Master Brohmer. This answers many of my questions." He smiled broadly. "I will make sure Herald hears this news. He must avoid those trees in the future."

Brohmer stood quietly looking around the chamber.

"If you will excuse us now, Master Brohmer," continued Hiram, "I have a few more things to say to my sons."

"Yes, yes, of course," replied Brohmer. He picked up the rings and began cleaning the pods from the table.

"The servants will take care of that," said Hiram, kindly.

"Oh yes, yes, of course," replied Brohmer as Gannon escorted him from the Pavilion.

"I have one more thing to tell you," said Hiram, looking around the table, "but I will wait for Gannon to return."

He took out the message he had read earlier and reread it.

As they were waiting, Tulmar started snickering. The thought of Master Brohmer was too much for him. Kyler and Shank tried hard to

suppress their laughter. Falcon and Reed whispered a little joke between themselves.

Gannon quickly returned and took his seat at the table.

“Before he left,” said Hiram, “I asked Herald to send messages to your frontline troops. To see if there are any problems.”

Suddenly, all was quiet around the table.

“I have just received the reply.” Hiram looked around the table at his sons.

“The troops are safely camped in the woods near the King’s Highway. They never heard any rumors about my death or any trouble between the sons of the Lord Hiram.” Looking again around the table he added, “I think it wise if we keep it that way.”

The Lord Hiram stood. His sons followed. “Falcon, Reed and Shank, you are to leave immediately. Take some Reds, some Greens, and some Yellows. Form a perimeter on both sides of the highway. You will be joined by the others soon. We march to Luminus.”



“The unfortunate thing,” said Brandon, “is that these wagons are so heavy they are leaving deep wagon wheel ruts behind us.”

Brandon had stopped the wagons when he noticed their tracks. They now sat out in the open, in the middle of the King’s Highway, a short way outside the village. Brandon, Gwen, Raymond, Agnes, and Winston all looked down the stretch of road that they had just traveled. Fresh wagon wheel tracks were clearly visible. They went all the way back into the village.

“What do you think we should do?” asked Raymond. “We will be too easy to follow this way.”

Ward and Megg, who were tied up in the last wagon, jeered as they listened to the others talk. “When Gustoban finds you he will kill you all,” sneered Ward. His head still ached and he felt miserable. “But first he will make you hurt, real bad and real long,” added Megg.

Agnes grabbed an iron skillet from the back of her wagon. “This will shut ‘em up,” she said, menacingly raising the pan above her head.

“There’s an easier way,” cried Gwen, stepping between Agnes and the two kitchen helpers. “Their hands and feet are tied. Let’s just tie up their mouths, too,” she suggested. After saying

this, Gwen shoved rags into their mouths and secured them with cloth strips tied around their heads. When they struggled she told them: "You have two options. I can tie this gag around your mouth, or she can whack you on the head. Which shall it be?" She spoke so sweetly, you would have thought she was offering them a choice of two different teacakes. They quickly stopped struggling.

"I have an idea," said Winston. "Drive the wagons down the highway until you get to the big stand of trees.

"I know the one you mean," said Brandon.

"I'll meet you there," continued Winston.

As he ran into the woods he shouted, "Try to keep the wagons in one track. That way, no one can tell how many we have."

"Where are you going?" shouted Agnes. Winston didn't answer. Agnes looked back and forth between the others, annoyed at Winston.

"He's going to get his family," said Gwen, kindly. Agnes nodded and forced a smile. Everyone got into the wagons and began making their way down the King's Highway. Brandon drove the big honey wagon first. The others were careful to keep their wheels in the rut made by his wagon. In less than an hour they arrived at the stand of trees.

Brandon stopped on the highway before pulling over into the trees. He looked behind them. The tracks were still very easy to see.

“What if we drive further down the road, then pull off?” suggested Raymond. “We can cut back into the trees once we’re off the highway. It might make it harder to follow.”

“I have a better idea,” said Agnes. “Go ahead and drive into those trees,” she ordered. “I’ll take care of everything.” She reached into the back of her wagon and took out a broom and a rake. “Gwen?” she asked. “Be a dear and drive my wagon for me, would you?”

Gwen glanced at Brandon who shrugged his shoulders as if to say, “Why not?” She got out of the honey wagon and walked back to where Agnes had stopped. “Alright, Agnes,” answered Gwen, “But, what are you going to do?”

“You just watch,” replied Agnes.

As the wagons made their way toward the thick stand of trees, Agnes ran a long way back down the highway and began using the rake and the broom to erase their tracks. She worked faster than anyone would have thought possible. Agnes had strong hands and arms from years of kneading bread dough. It showed as she moved back and

forth along the highway. By the time she got into the stand of trees there was no trace of any of the wagons. She had swept the road clean.

“Great idea,” said Brandon.

“Wonderful,” said Gwen.

“Nicely done, dear,” added Raymond.

Ward began to say something, but choked on his gag. Agnes glared at him and then touched the handle of the skillet sitting nearby. Ward closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

“You know,” said Agnes. “I think it best if these two, didn’t know where we were going.”

Without waiting for anyone to comment, she took two empty flour bags from the back of her wagon and pulled them over Ward and Megg’s heads.

“There,” she said mockingly. “That should make it easier for you to sleep.”

Brandon was just about to move the wagons deeper into the forest when Gwen said suddenly, “Hush everyone, somebody’s coming.”

Everyone stopped moving. Even the horses seemed to listen; their ears twitched left and right. In the silence of the forest Gwen was amazed at all she could hear. A squirrel, somewhere, was cracking a nut. Flies were buzzing around the

honey wagon. Birds were singing, and in the distance cowbells could be heard.

"They're getting closer," whispered Gwen, as the sound of the cows got closer and closer.

"There's Winston," Agnes shouted suddenly.

Coming up the highway, right over the section that Agnes had swept, were Winston, Nehsa, Raychel and Dav. Raychel was walking next to a little cart pulled by a goat. It was packed full and had a tarp strapped over the top. Nehsa and Dav were driving a small herd of cows, four to be exact. They each wore a bell around their necks. At the rear came Winston with a yoke of oxen dragging a heavy log. The log was really part of a freshly cut tree, branches and all. Using the cows, oxen and the log, Winston had erased the wagon tracks from the highway, all the way back to where he had left them to get his family.

"Looks like Winston had the same idea as you did, dear," said Raymond.

"Humph," answered Agnes. "Well at least this way I won't bother my aching back anymore."

"Yes, dear," replied Raymond.

As Winston got near the trees, Brandon stepped out of hiding. "Great idea," he said.

“Thanks,” replied Winston. Without stopping he added, “We best be moving on.”

“Hello, Nehsa,” said Gwen sweetly. “So glad to see you.”

“Gwenie...there you are,” replied Nehsa excitedly. “We have so much to talk about.”

She looked around the little group, smiling. She nodded to the men, and then looked toward Agnes.

“Agnes,” said Nehsa, nodding politely.

“Nehsa,” replied Agnes, curtly.

“Time to go,” declared Brandon. “Follow me up to the ravine. When we get there, we’ll all have some honey.”

“And fresh bread to go with it,” added Raymond.

“Yummy,” shouted Raychel.

Everyone laughed, even Agnes, and they began the long trek to the ravine.



“This is like a garden in the middle of an ash heap,” said Nemo. He gazed at the colorful flowers, the green grass, the high mountain walls and the

waterfall. "It's like a little Silverglade," he added longingly.

"What is this place?" asked Quasar quietly. There was something special here that made him feel he shouldn't speak too loudly.

"Well, it's the front door," answered Clover.

"The front door to what?" asked Nemo.

"Not really the front door," corrected Silas. "The door is behind the waterfall," he continued. "It's more like the porch."

"You're right," laughed Clover, taking her feet out of the pool and standing quickly. "It's the porch." She danced around a bit, twirling and singing. Nemo marveled that one so old could move so gracefully.

"There's a door?" asked Quasar. "Where does it lead?"

Clover stopped dancing and singing. She suddenly became terribly serious. "I can tell you where it used to lead," answered Clover. "Where it leads now, I can only guess."

"Where did it lead?" asked Nemo, quietly.

"It once was the door to the farthest northern part of the Kingdom of Elves; the People of Light."

“There’s a doorway behind the waterfall?” asked Quasar. He was remembering another doorway behind another waterfall.

“I see you’ve been to the southern door,” observed Clover. “That is good.”

“Where does it lead now?” asked Nemo.

Clover turned away at the question and looked at the waterfall. It was as if she were seeing through the water to another time. Finally, Silas answered for her.

“There is a cave, high in the mountains. It was like a window looking into our place from that place. Elves stopped there often on their way between our land and theirs,” he said, sadly. “One day, the dragon came and settled in the cave.”

Clover turned toward Quasar and Nemo and continued the sad tale. “There are pathways all through the mountain. Some lead up to the cave; some do not. But the cave is critical. It is the border between our land and yours. Many elves were sent to dislodge her. They came with arrow and spear and sword.” As Clover spoke, her voice caught in her throat.

“The dragon burned them all,” she said simply.

“With great sorrow, King Glendeux ordered the northern passages closed,” continued Clover, turning toward the waterfall. “This door leads to the cave, the dragon’s lair. It is filled with her stolen treasure and the burned bones of a thousand elves.”

A fire came into Clover’s eyes as she looked at Quasar and Nemo. “Now, it is up to us,” she said with hardened steel in her voice. “We shall kill the dragon, or die trying.”

“We?” asked Quasar.

“You didn’t think you’d have all the fun, did you?” said Silas, his voice likewise edged in steel. The old man walked over to his wife and lovingly put his arm around her. “Our children were in the passage on the Day of Fire,” he said. “We had two sons. They never came home.”

Quasar and Nemo looked at each other with cheerless wonder in their eyes. Nemo nodded at Quasar’s unspoken question. “Our families were also killed by this worm,” said Quasar, bitterness seeping into his words. “She burned our parents and everyone else unfortunate enough to be home that night.”

“We alone survived,” added Nemo sadly.

Quasar and Nemo moved close to the old couple. They all wrapped their arms around one

another, grieving silently. They remained in this manner until, at length, the music of the waterfall called them back from their woe. Looking up through the surrounding mountain peaks, Clover could see a patch of rose-tinted sky. "She'll be hunting from now 'till sundown," she said with a grin, and added, "Let's see what we can find."

Looking at Nemo she said, "What have you brought?

"Well," said Nemo. "There is the box, which the King gave to both of us, and our cloaks."

"As yes," said Clover, *Eilaanan Tok Häfina*. "They will be helpful, but not against fire."

"The King also gave me a coil of rope and a bow with this quiver of ten arrows" said Nemo. He laid the rope, the bow and arrows on the grass near Clover.

Clover fingered the rope for a moment. It was thin and glistened like silver. "This will come in handy," she said. "It will be as long as we need it to be."

She then drew an arrow from the quiver. She looked carefully at its golden tip and ran a finger along the red feather. "This will always hit the mark," she said, "but I do not know if it will damage

the beast. To hit is one thing, to kill is another. Her armored scales are strong.”

“Those are my gifts,” said Nemo.

“I was given this,” said Quasar, taking a soft leather pouch from within his cloak. He handed it to Clover.

“Ah, we shall eat well,” she said, passing it back to Quasar. Looking intently into Quasar’s eyes she asked, “Anything else?”

“Only this,” he replied.

As he spoke, Quasar threw back his cloak and drew his sword. It made a high-pitched ringing sound and flashed brightly as he sliced the air.

“Illuminatus,” shouted Clover and Silas.

“The King thinks highly of you,” said Silas. He had a new appreciation for his two young friends.

“I’m beginning to think,” said Clover, cheerfully, “that we might actually live to see the sunrise.”

Clover picked up the coil of rope and said, “Unsaddle the horses and follow me.” She made her way nimbly around the pool to a small outcropping of stone next to where the water splashed into the pool.

“Silas, dear,” she said, “when they’re done with the horses, show them the way to the door, would you?”

“Anything for you, my love,” answered the old man. Somehow, he seemed years younger than before.

“Make sure you bring all the gifts,” she said as she ducked behind the falling water. From behind the waterfall they heard her say, “And hurry. I’ll be waiting.”

Quasar and Nemo quickly took care of their horses. The animals made their way to the pool and began to drink.

“They won’t go far from here,” promised Silas. “There’s plenty to eat and the water is the best you’ll find anywhere.”

Quasar and Nemo piled the saddles and blankets behind a large rock, picked up the King’s gifts and followed Silas through the waterfall. The other side of the waterfall was damp and a bit cramped for the three of them. They stood in a little grotto with sunlight filtering through the waterfall. The water cast colorful shadows that danced against the stone walls. They followed Silas deeper into the mountain, away from the water. The further in they walked, the darker it became. The

waterfall was like a small window of dim light behind them. Instinctively, Nemo placed his hand on Quasar's shoulder. Quasar did the same on Silas. They moved slowly in the darkness of the chamber. Finally, Silas stopped moving.

"Clover," he whispered, "Where are you?" His voiced echoed around what sounded like a huge cavern.

The question was answered by a flash of dazzling light that pulsed brighter and brighter. As their eyes adjusted, the three saw Clover standing on a large flat rock. She held her hand aloft, like an old statue in a park. In her hand she held a short silver baton, with a diamond at the top. The light was coming from the diamond.

"I, too, have a gift," she said, merrily waving the light stick. "Hurry now," she urged, "and no more noise. We don't want any hot surprises."

Clover led them to a short column of rock, a stalagmite some call it, around which she had tied the rope. "We don't want to get lost," she said, clearly expressing everyone's thought. "The rope will take us as far as we need to go," she reminded them, "and it will always bring us back here."

"From here," added Silas, "we can still see the waterfall, except at night."

Quasar and Nemo looked back the way they had come. The light from the waterfall looked like the small round lens in a kaleidoscope. Without comment, Clover began walking, holding the rope in one hand and the light in the other. As she went, she uncoiled the rope. Quasar and Nemo followed, each letting the rope gently slip through their hands as they walked. Silas came last. He seemed to be enjoying this adventure way too much. He hummed, or sang or whistled as they went along. Each time he started a new tune, Clover firmly hushed him.

They walked in this fashion for quite a while. The sense of time left them completely. On occasion, Clover would stop to regain her bearings. If necessary, she would brighten her light to an almost painful level, and then look around at the cavernous path. Once satisfied, she would dim her light and move on. As they went, the path became steeper and steeper. The walls narrowed and the rock ceiling lowered so that Quasar and Nemo had to bend forward to walk. The walls and ceiling were charred black.

Suddenly, Clover dimmed her light completely. Ahead of them, on the ground, something shimmered in a ray of natural daylight.

“Now, be silent, as if your life depended on it,” warned Clover. “For it does,” she added. She walked forward and picked up a shiny golden coin. “This is the beginning of her treasure,” said Clover in a whisper so low Silas could hardly understand her. She gently put the coin back where she found it. “Touch nothing,” she warned. “Dragons know every piece of their golden hoard.”

Slowly, silently, the little party made its way up the path. Ahead they could see daylight. On the path before them were scattered gold coins, jeweled goblets, necklaces, golden chains, strings of pearls, and minor crowns. The closer they got to the light, the more treasure they encountered. They could see that up ahead the path crested into a cave.

Finally, they could walk no more without jingling and jangling the treasure. It was mounded up and over the path. Clover handed her stick to Silas who put it carefully into his pocket.

“You’ll have to wait here,” whispered Clover. They read her lips, more than heard her voice. “We cannot risk her hearing us.”

Quasar and Nemo were amazed to see Clover tiptoe over the treasure, never making a sound. She looked like someone cleverly stepping from stone to stone across a stream without getting

wet. Before they knew it, she crept over the crest of the path and disappeared into the backside of the dragon's cave. Moments later they heard her voice echoing down their tunnel.

"Hurry, hurry," cried Clover. "See what I found!"



"Well done, Mr. Schooper," said Norrom as the *Advocate* and the *Eilaanani* slowly made their way toward the mouth of the river. "You were able to load much more than I thought possible," he continued. He was not one for careless compliments. "Be assured, Mr. Schooper, said Norrom, brushing his abundant blond hair from his face, "Captain Lewis shall hear of your success."

Norrom smiled broadly. He had a smile so warm it could melt ice. His teeth were perfectly white, set off all the more in contrast with his darkly tanned skin. His blue eyes could be kind, but they could also pierce one's very soul.

"Thank you, Lord Norrom," said Mr. Schooper. Having always felt that Lord Norrom did not like him, Mr. Schooper was greatly pleased at his success.

“What about my ramps?” asked Ram, who had supervised the loading of his great wagons. His ramps had served as docks.

“I am afraid, brother,” said Norrom, kindly, “they have served their purpose. They must be left where they are.”

Ram nodded in agreement, but was disappointed nonetheless. They watched as a long boat entered the mouth of the river and took depth measurements. It was not yet high tide.

So engrossed in the ships were they that Ram and Norrom neither heard nor saw anything else. If sheer concentration and will power could do it, those ships would make it safely to the sea.

Suddenly, Norrom saw Mr. Schooper snap to attention, the color draining from his face. Turning around, Norrom was surprised to see his father approach with a squad from the Service of Light.

“Father,” he cried out in honest pleasure, “you’re just in time to see the ships take sail.”

The Lord Hiram smiled, looked at the two ships in the river, and then turned to face the sea.

“What of the *Fyrmatus*,” he asked.

“She is fully loaded with our women and children,” answered Norrom. “We wait only for the *Advocate* and the *Eilaanani* to leave the river.”

As he said this he turned to the First Mate. "Mr. Schooper, signal the *Advocate* to begin her run."

"Aye, sir," answered the First Mate.

He nodded respectfully to the Lord Hiram, turned and walked up the ramp to a signalman.

Norrom faced his father again. "When the ships pass through the mouth of the river, we will unload the final cargo from the longboats and haul it aboard. All three ships will then be ready to sail."

The Lord Hiram could see a whole armada of longboats bobbing in the ocean, waiting for the ships to join them. He turned and surveyed the place that had held all of Ram's wagons.

"You too have done well, Ram," said Hiram. "It looks like all your machines made it on board."

"Except for the ramps," said Ram.

"They have served a useful purpose," replied his father.

A cheer arose from the men at the river as the *Advocate* made its way through the mouth of the river to the sea.

"Order the *Eilaanani* to follow," shouted Norrom.

"Aye, sir," answered Mr. Schooper.

“And now,” said the Lord Hiram, motioning to one of his guards, “before it is too late.”

The guard brought a silver tray with three glasses and a small crystal decanter. He filled each glass with a thick red liquid.

“Let us toast our Enemy’s Blood,” said the Lord Hiram.

The three took their glasses and toasted one another.

“*Saine Tourkue*,” said the Lord Hiram, in the old tongue.

“*Saine Tourkue*,” repeated Norrom and Ram.

They then downed their drinks in one elegant motion.

A cheer arose again from the river as the *Eilaanani* took to the sea.

“Ram,” said the Lord Hiram. Go with the *Advocate*. Your machines must be in place within three days.”

Ram nodded. He started to leave, stopped and faced the Lord Hiram.

“I’m glad you’re all right, Father,” he said choking on the emotion he felt suddenly. Ram and the Lord Hiram embraced warmly.

“I’ll see you in three days,” said Hiram.

Ram nodded again, smiled at Norrom, and turned to the sea. In an explosion of energy, he ran full speed to the waiting longboat.

The Lord Hiram began walking with Norrom toward another waiting boat.

"I want you to go with the *Fyrmatus* to the island," said Hiram. It was no surprise to Norrom. "Make sure the women and children are safe," continued Hiram. Then, handing him a small scroll he added, "I have written orders for Major Stylor, the officer in charge of the island."

Norrom nodded and placed the scroll within his vest.

"I am afraid we will need all our troops and all our ships," said Hiram. "Meet us within three days."

"We will be there," promised Norrom.

"Just so you know," said Hiram suddenly. "I have sent Falcon and Reed to join the frontline troops. I hope the journey has helped them sort things out."

Hiram paused, as if lost in thought. Then he continued. "By now the Reds and the Greens and some of the Yellows are already on their way down the King's Highway. Tulmar, Shank, Vine and

Kyler are following fast behind them. The troops know nothing of my supposed death.”

Norrom nodded.

The Lord Hiram looked steadily at his son. “Once I see you off, Herald, Gannon and the Service of Light will leave here, double-time. When we are together again, it will be in battle.”