

3

Alex looked down at Prestel from the top of the hill. She now remembered going here with grandpa about a year ago to sell the harvest. The village of Prestel had grown since she had last visited it with her grandpa. There were about ten two-story buildings now, and thirty smaller houses. What looked like a marketplace was right in the middle of everything. Alex could see little shacks on the outskirts of what seemed to her like a huge town. Alex, Marcus, and Joesove started down the hill.

Alex was almost running to keep up with the fast pace on the hill when she tripped over her own foot. Marcus' arm shot out and caught her a foot from the ground.

"Ya better be careful," he said kindly. "This is Prestel, the last town before we reach Emond City."

"I know," Alex said. "I mean I know it's Prestel, but what is Emond City?"

"It's the city me and Joesove are going to, remember? You're welcome to come along if you'd like."

Should I go with them? What am I gonna do if I don't? I'll just go with them for now, thought Alex.

"Yeah, I'd like that," Alex finally said out loud.

All three of them walked through the marketplace, with Marcus and Alex in the front and Joesove in the rear. There were many interesting people selling different parcels along the road. Alex saw one old lady with grey hair selling toads and frogs for spells. Another young man was selling a wide variety of weapons and armors. Two young boys in ragged clothes were selling what looked to be some kind of book or something.

"Girl ... I mean Alex, you can look around but don't go far. I'm gonna get us a room at the inn," Marcus said, pointing to the largest building. Marcus walked off to the inn, leaving Alex and Joesove alone.

"Uh, I guess I'll go with you. To protect you I mean."

“Ok. Let’s look around.” Alex walked over to a shop window and peered inside. In the display were mannequins wearing leather boots and a jacket. It reminded her that she only had the clothes she was wearing. When she turned to go inside she ran into Joesove, who was standing right behind her. With a quiet apology he followed her into the building.

The inside of the store was surprisingly well lit. Laying on tables around the small room were clothes of every fabric she could think of. Looking in the bag of money the stranger had given her she found an astonishing amount of money. After debating between two coats, she decided on a warm velvet one. After all winter was approaching fast.

Paying the shopkeeper, Alex decided to go to the inn. She hadn’t bathed in days. With Joesove in tow, she headed toward the inn.

After bathing, Alex washed her clothes and went downstairs to the common room. Marcus and Joesove were already in a corner booth talking to each other. She sat with them and ordered a bowl of stew. As she ate, Alex listened to Marcus tell her about the Red Marsh.

“Tomorrow we enter Red Marsh. There are many pitfalls and hazards, so stay close to me.

“There is also the serpent, a foul creature living in the Marsh’s center. Unlike many of the swamp creatures, he hunts in daylight. If you are careful though and don’t get lost, I can protect you. There is no use worrying about it tonight, so just get some sleep.”

But Alex had trouble sleeping that night. When she awoke she let out a spine-tingling shriek. The demon man from her grandparents’ house was standing in the center of the room. His armor was covered in blood and the skulls adorning his armor were on fire. The demon was holding two bloody bodies. Alex couldn’t tell the identities of the blood-covered bodies, but she thought that they were her grandparents.

Alex looked the demon right in his blood red eyes.

The demon was saying in a harsh voice “Escape, for they are after you.”

He kept repeating this until Alex could take no more. She jumped out of bed and ran madly through the halls to find Marcus. She found his door and banged on it.

As it opened she saw Marcus and Joesove laying in a bloody mess on the floor. Running over to Marcus, Alex slipped on the blood-slicked floor. Her head slammed into the footboard of Joesove's bed.

4

When Alex woke up she was surprisingly still on the floor. She thought the demon had got her. She was about to get up when a cold hand touched her shoulder. Preparing to run, she looked up.

Lucky for her, it was only Joesove.

“You fell out of bed. We thought someone had broke into your room, so we came as fast as we could.”

“But the demon I saw...”

“It was just a nightmare. I shouldn’t have told you that story about the serpent.

“Me and Joesove will be downstairs. Breakfast is eggs and toast. After you’ve eaten we’ll start towards Emond City.”

Around midday, with the sun high above them, Alex and her friends crossed the bridge into Red Marsh. The crooked trees closed about Alex until she couldn’t see the sky. After walking for a while, Alex became bored. She asked Marcus why they didn’t have horses, but neither he nor Joesove wanted to talk.

Suddenly she caught a metallic glint out of the corner of her eye. It was a beautiful bone-handled dagger, just sitting in a dead tree. When she got to the dagger, she examined it closely. In fancy script the letters “D” and “J” were carved into the handle. Alex turned to show Marcus her prize. He wasn’t there, but she didn’t have time to wonder why, for under her shifting weight the limb Alex was sitting on snapped and she fell.

As Alex’s eyes adjusted to a dim light, she became aware of two golden eyes staring at her from within a scaled head. A forked tongue flickered out at her.

Alex screamed and backed into a corner of the damp cave. She wielded her dagger, not knowing how she had kept it. The dagger was sufficient to scare away the serpent for now. Alex knew it would be back when it was hungry. She would need more than a dagger to be rid of it then.

The serpent left her alone in the cavern. As far as she could tell there were only two ways in: the small hole in the wall where the serpent had gone, and the missing part of the roof where she must have fallen through.

Time passed, but Alex did not know how long. She wondered if Marcus and Joesove had discovered that she was missing. They must have, but she wondered if they even cared. It was not like she was related to either of them.

Then the snake slithered into the cavern. She tried to stab it with her knife, but it was knocked out of her hand. The serpent reared back to strike her. Its poison would kill her in minutes. Alex stood paralyzed waiting for that fatal blow.

It never came. Joesove, entering behind Marcus, had stepped on the end of the serpent's tail.

"Joesove!" cried out Marcus as the serpent turned. He swung his sword, but it was deflected by the serpent's hard scales.

Marcus deftly dodged as the serpent struck. He waited for the creature's next move, and when it opened its jaws, sunk his sword into the roof of its mouth. The serpent collapsed, acid blood gushing from its head.

"Thank you! You saved my life," said Alex. "I didn't think you would come."

"I told you to stay close to me. What did you stray from the path for anyway?"

"Oh ... this," she said, holding up the dagger. "It was just sitting in a tree. It was easy to reach, too."

"Well, it wasn't important enough to risk your life for. We can leave the way me and Joesove came in." He pointed to an opening she hadn't seen before. It led through a tunnel out into the marsh several hundred yards away.

Marcus decided it was too dangerous to travel at night, even with the serpent dead. They spent the night just inside the entrance to the tunnel. After an unsatisfying meal of snake, which Marcus seemed to enjoy, Alex spent the time until she fell asleep thinking about her dagger. She wondered who it used to belong to. Even more so, she wondered how it got into the tree. Maybe its previous owner had climbed the tree to escape the serpent.

Alex got up early the next morning before Marcus and Joesove. She decided to go for a walk. After about a quarter of an hour, Alex came upon a stream and a small waterfall. Taking advantage of the situation, she washed leisurely in the cool, clear water.

After dressing, Alex walked back to camp. The march did not scare her nearly as much as yesterday. But when Alex arrived, she found Marcus and Joesove gone. She was not worried. They might just have gone hunting. However, when they did not return after an hour Alex panicked. Without them she was just a child lost in the forest.

Alex sat on the ground alone by the camp. *Where are they*, she thought. *What if they got killed or something? What if they left me all by myself?*

She got up and started pacing around their camp, deciding whether or not to go look for them. Just then, behind her in the lush marsh, she heard the crackling sounds of movement. Alex dove to the ground and hid under one of the blankets. The noises in the woods kept on getting louder; with that, Alex's fears rose also. The crackling movement became a smashing rump. Alex thought it was either a very large animal, or a very clumsy one.

The noise was getting very close. She could hear each footstep the beast took. Alex could see an outline moving in the dense marsh. She hid under the blanket so it didn't see her. Alex could hear the beast break through the line of trees that surrounded their camp. It thrashed through the short underbrush that was just inside the clearing.

Alex could hear the beast right above her. She felt the blanket being lifted off her, and she let out a terrifying scream.

Alex saw, when she stopped screaming, two silhouettes of men looking down at her. She realized it was Joesove and Marcus, and let out a sigh of relief. Marcus stood looking quite mad, and not so relieved. That's when he started yelling.

"Where were you! What were you thinking? You could have been killed!"

Marcus continued screaming like that for about ten minutes. Alex just stood there, almost in tears. She felt so bad about leaving, but she couldn't say anything. Joesove just stood there the whole time like he was staring into space.

"I'm sorry!" Alex finally spurted out. Marcus just stared at her as Joesove was doing.

"Ok. But stay with us from now on! We don't need you getting lost again. Remember, we took you in and I'm now responsible for you," Marcus said as he started taking down camp. "It's almost midday. We'll have to travel hard if we want to be out of the marsh by dark."

Alex packed her blanket and walked over to Joesove.

“I’m really sorry. I didn’t know that I would upset him. I just wanted to look around.”

“That’s okay. Marcus gets angry a lot over nothing. Next time just think before you act.”

Alex noticed Marcus getting anxious later that day. She thought maybe he was lost. Then the trees stopped. A small river flowed for as far as she could see to the left and right.

Marcus cursed. Alex didn’t know why. The river looked easy enough to swim.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “That river isn’t very wide.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Marcus growled. “It’s deep and the current will pull you under fast.”

“Oh, then we need a boat.”

“That’s easy to say, but do you see any boats just laying around? Or would you like to walk back to Prestel and get one? If you do, we’ll wait for you here.”

“All right,” Alex sighed. “I was just thinking out loud. We should at least be able to build a raft. How hard can it be?”

Alex found out how hard it was. First they had to go into the forest and find logs for the raft. Alex would get a log back to the river, then find out that it was rotten and no good. By the time they had enough good logs, her arms felt like they were going to fall off.

Next they had to tie the logs together. Alex barely understood how to do this and the rope kept falling off the logs. After another hour and a few rope burns, the raft was ready. It looked like it was going to sink.

Somehow Marcus got them across, after almost falling in the water himself. Of course, after walking to the edge of the woods, Alex saw a boat pass by on its way to Prestel.

After walking for a few more hours the trees faded into plains. Silhouetted against the setting sun were the Dwarf Mountains. Emond City was on the other side of the plains.