

THE
DAWNING
OF
POWER

BRIAN RATHBONE

Copyright © 2008 by Brian Rathbone.

White Wolf Press, LLC
Rutherfordton, NC 28139

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recorded, photocopied, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-0-9818714-0-0

BOOK ONE

CALL OF
THE HERALD

CHAPTER 1

Life is the greatest of all mysteries, and though I seek to solve its many riddles, my deepest fear is that I will succeed.

—CiCi Bajur, philosopher



IMMERSED in its primordial glow, a comet soared through space with incredible speed. Three thousand years had passed since it last shed its light upon the tiny blue planet known to its inhabitants as Godslan, and the effects had been cataclysmic. A mighty host of comets followed the same elliptical orbit as the first as they returned from the farthest reaches of the solar system. Their light had already charged the atmosphere of Godslan, and the comets themselves would soon be visible to the naked eye.

The cycle of power would begin anew. Radiant energy, though still faint, raced toward Godslan, bearing the power of change.

As the force angled over the natural harbor where the fishing vessels were moored for the night, it soared beyond them over the Pinook Valley, and nothing barred its path. Beyond a small town, amid foothills dotted with farmsteads, it raced toward a barn where a young woman dutifully swept the floor. A slight tingle and a brief twitch of her eyebrows caused Catrin to stop a moment, just as a chance wind cast the pile of dirt and straw back across the floor. It was not the first thing to go wrong that morning, and she doubted it would be the last.

She was late for school. Again.

Education was not a birthright; it was a privilege—something Master Edling repeatedly made more than clear. Those of station and power attended his lessons to gain refinement and polish, but for those from the countryside, the purpose was only to stave off the epidemic of ignorance.

His sentiments had always rankled, and Catrin wondered if the education was worth the degradation she had to endure. She had already

mastered reading and writing, and she was more adept at mathematics than most, but those were skills taught to the younger students by Master Jarvis, who was a kind, personable teacher. Catrin missed his lessons. Those approaching maturity were subjected to Master Edling's oppressive views and bland historical teachings. It seemed to her that she learned things of far more relevance when she worked on the farm, and the school lessons seemed a waste of time.

Master Edling detested tardiness, and Catrin was in no mood to endure another of his lectures. His anger was only a small part of her worries on that day, though. The day was important, different. Something was going to happen—something big; she could feel it.

The townies, as Catrin and her friends called those who placed themselves above everyone else, seemed to feed on the teacher's disdainful attitude. They adopted his derogatory manner, which often deteriorated into pranks and, lately, violence. Though she was rarely a target, Catrin hated to see her friends treated so poorly. They deserved better.

Peten Ross was the primary source of their problems; it was his lead the others followed. He seemed to take pleasure in creating misery for others, as if their hardships somehow made him more powerful. Perhaps he acted that way to impress Roset and the other pretty girls from town, with their flowing dresses and lace-bound hair. Either way, the friction was intensifying, and Catrin feared it would escalate beyond control.

Anyone from the countryside was a target, but it was her friend Osbourne Macano, son of a pig farmer, who bore the brunt of their abuses. The low regard in which his family profession was held and his unassuming manner made him an easy target. He had never fought back, and still the attacks continued. Chase, Catrin's beloved cousin, felt they should stand up for themselves since passive resistance had proven fruitless. What choice did they have?

Catrin understood his motives, but to her, the problem seemed unsolvable. Surely retaliation would not end the struggle, but neither had inaction, which left her in a quandary. Chase seemed to think they needed only to scare the townies once to make them realize such treatment would not be tolerated. That, he said, was the only way to gain their respect, if not their friendship. She could see his logic, but she also saw other, less appealing possibilities, such as a swift and violent response or even expulsion from the school lessons. Too many things could go wrong.

Chase was determined, though, and she would support him and Osbourne in their fight, if that was their choice. But she did not have to like it.

From bribing a woman who had once worked as Peten's nursemaid, Chase learned that Peten had a terrible fear of snakes—any snake, not just the venomous varieties. Chase planned to catch a snake and sneak it into the hall during lessons, though he admitted he had no plan for getting it near Peten without being seen. Just thinking about it, Catrin began to feel queasy, and she concentrated even more on her work. As she slid the heavy barn door closed to keep out the wind, she was submerged in darkness and had to resweep the floor by the light of her lantern.

Her father and Benjin, his close friend, were returning from the pastures with a pair of weanlings just as she lugged her saddle into Salty's stall. She watched the skittish colt and filly enter the barn wide eyed, but they gave the experienced men little trouble and would soon become accustomed to frequent handling. The lamplight cast a glow on Benjin's dark features. Bits of gray showed in his neatly trimmed beard, and his ebon hair was pulled back in a braid, giving him the look of a wise but formidable man.

Salty, Catrin's six-year-old chestnut gelding, must have sensed she was in a rush, for he chose to make her life even more difficult. He danced away from her as she tossed the saddle over his back, and when she grabbed him by the halter and looked him in the eye, he just snorted and stepped on her toes. After pushing him off her foot, she prepared to tighten the girth, and Salty drew in a deep breath, making himself as big as possible. Catrin knew his tricks and had no desire to find herself in a loose saddle. Kneeing him in the ribs just enough to make him exhale, she cinched the strap to the wear marks. Salty nipped her on the shoulder, letting her know he didn't appreciate her spoiling his joke.

Dawn backlit the mountains, and heavy cloud cover rode in with the wind. A light spray was falling as Catrin walked Salty from the low-ceilinged barn into the barnyard. Salty danced and spun as she mounted, but she got one foot in the stirrup and a hand on the saddle horn, which was enough to pull herself up even as he pranced. His antics were harmless, but Catrin had no time for them, and she drove her heels into his flanks with a chirrup to urge him forward.

In that, at least, he did not disappoint as he leaped to a fast trot. She would have given him his head and let him gallop, but the wagon

trail was growing muddy and slick in the steady rain. Cattleman Gerard appeared in the haze ahead, his oxcart leaving churned mud in its wake. Trees lined the narrow trail, and Catrin had to slow Salty to a walk until they cleared the woods. When they reached a clearing, she passed Gerard at a trot, waving as she rode by, and he gave her a quick wave in return.

Fierce gusts drove stinging rain into her eyes, and she could barely see the Masterhouse huddled against the mountains; in the distance, only its massive outline was visible. Harborton materialized from the deluge, and as she approached, the rain dwindled. The cobbled streets were barely damp, and the townsfolk who milled about were not even wet. In contrast, Catrin was bespattered and soaked, looking as if she had been wallowing in mud, and she received many disapproving looks as she trotted Salty through town.

The aroma of fresh-baked bread wafting from the bakery made her stomach grumble, and the smell of bacon from the Watering Hole was alluring. In her rush, she had forgotten to eat, and she hoped her stomach would not be talkative during the lessons, a sure way to irritate Master Edling.

She passed the watchtower and the large iron ring that served as a fire bell, and she spotted her uncle, Jensen, as he dropped off Chase on his way to the sawmill. He waved and smiled as she approached, and she blew him a kiss. Chase climbed from the wagon, looking impish, and Catrin's appetite fled. She had hoped he would fail in his snake hunt, but his demeanor indicated that he had not, and when the leather bag on his belt moved, any doubts she had left her. How he had concealed the snake from her uncle was a mystery, but that was Chase, the boy who could do what no one else would dare attempt.

His mother and hers had died fifteen years before on the same day and under mysterious circumstances; no one understood what killed them. Since then, Chase seemed determined to prove that he wasn't afraid of anything or anyone.

Catrin pulled Salty up alongside him, and they entered the stables together. Once clear of the gate, she turned to the right, hoping to slip into her usual stall unnoticed, but instead she saw another insult. All the stalls were taken, despite there being plenty for those students who rode. Many of the townies, including Peten, rode to the lessons even though they were within walking distance. In a parade of wealth and arrogance, they flaunted their finely made saddles with gilded trim. It seemed they

now felt they needed pages to attend to their mounts, and they, too, must ride. It was the pages' horses that had caused the shortage of stalls. Catrin stopped Salty and just stared, trying to decide what to do.

"What's going on, Cat?" Chase bellowed. "Have the townies gotten so fat they need two horses to carry each of them?"

"Hush, I don't want any trouble," she said with a pointed glance at his writhing bag. "I'll stable Salty at the Watering Hole."

"Strom may let you stable him there, but certainly not for free. Where does it stop, Cat? How much abuse do they think we'll tolerate?" he asked, sounding more incensed with each word.

"I don't have time for this now. I'll see you at the lesson," she said, turning Salty. Chirruping, she gave him a bit of her heels, trotted him around the block, and slowed only when she neared Baker Hollis, who was busy sweeping the walk. He gave her a sidelong glance and shuffled into the bakery. Inside, Catrin saw his daughter, Trinda, who stared with haunted eyes. She rarely left the bakery, and it was said she spoke even less often. Most thought she was daft, but Catrin suspected something entirely different, something much more sinister.

As she turned into the alley behind the Watering Hole, she whistled for Strom, who emerged from the stable looking tired and irritable.

"Cripes, it's early, Cat. What brings you here?" he asked, rubbing his eyes. He had once attended the lessons and had been friends with Catrin and Chase. After his father died, though, he had gone to work as a stable boy for Miss Mariss to help support his mother. He was shunned by most. His humble circumstances and departure from the lessons marked him as undesirable in the eyes of many, but Catrin enjoyed his company and considered him a good friend.

"I'm sorry to wake you, but I really need to stable Salty here today. The stable at the academy is full, and I'm already late. Please let me keep him here—just for today," she asked with her most appealing look.

"If Miss Mariss finds out, she'll have my hide for a carpet. I can only stable a horse if the owner patronizes the inn and pays a copper for the stall," he said.

Digging into her coin purse, Catrin pulled out a worn silver half she'd been saving for an emergency. She tossed it to Strom. "Buy yourself something to eat and take good care of Salty for me. I have to go," she said as she grabbed her wax pad from her saddlebags.

Strom rolled the coin across his knuckles as she sprinted away. "I

hate to take your money, Cat, but I assure you it won't go to waste!" he shouted.

Catrin raced back to the academy, turning toward the lesson hall at a full run. Master Beron shouted for her to slow down, but she was nearly there. She reached the door and opened it as quietly as she could, but the hinge betrayed her, squeaking loudly. Everyone in the room turned to see who would be the target of Master Edling's ire, and Catrin felt her face flush.

She entered with mumbled apologies and quickly sought a vacant desk. The townies gave her nasty looks and placed their wax tablets on the empty chairs near them, clearly indicating she was not welcome. In her rush to reach the desk next to Chase, her wet boots slipped on the polished floor, leaving her suspended in air for an instant before she hit with a crash. The air rushed from her lungs with a whoosh, and the room erupted in laughter.

As soon as she regained her breath, she immediately held it, seeing Chase take advantage of the distraction. He slinked behind Peten and slid the leather pouch under his chair. The drawstrings were untied and the top lay open, but nothing emerged. Catrin stood and quickly took the seat between Chase and Osbourne, still blushing furiously.

"This isn't going to go well for you, Cat. Edling looks boiled," Osbourne whispered, but Master Edling interrupted in a loud voice.

"Now that Miss Volker has seen fit to join us, perhaps she will allow us to commence. What say you, Miss Volker? Shall we begin, or do you need more leisure time?" he asked, looking down his nose, and several of the townies sniggered, casting her knowing glances. Catrin just mumbled and nodded. She was grateful when Master Edling began his lecture on the holy war; at least he was no longer adding to her embarrassment by making a bigger fool of her.

"When Istra last graced the skies," he began, "the Zjhon and Varic nations waged a holy war that lasted hundreds of years. They fought over conflicting interpretations of religious documents, none of which could be proved or disproved. Meanwhile, the Elsic nation remained neutral, often acting as a mediator during peace talks. Many times peace was made only to be broken again upon the first provocation.

"Then there came a new Elsic leader, Von of the Elsics. He ascended the throne after killing his uncle, King Venes. Von had been clever and murdered his uncle during the harvest festival, when there were hundreds

of people in attendance who might have wanted the king dead. No one could identify the killer, and a veil of suspicion hung over the court. Elaborate conspiracy theories were rampant, and Von encouraged them since they served his purposes well. Those who believed treachery was afoot were much less likely to speak out for fear of being the next mysterious death.”

The teacher droned on. “Von believed his nation’s historical neutrality in the war was folly and that it would be better to conquer both nations while they were weakened by the prolonged war. The Elsics did not condone the use of Istra’s powers, claiming it was blasphemous, and none of their scholars were skilled in arcana. Von had no large army at his disposal either, so he concluded that Istra’s power was the only way he could defeat both nations. He would use the very powers that were flaunted by the Zjhon and the Varics as the agents of their destruction.

“He staged clandestine raids against each nation, disguising his men as soldiers from the opposing nation. His instructions were clear: he wanted people captured, not killed, because he wanted slaves. Those captured were transported in secret to the Knell Downs, which we believe to be high in the Pinook Mountains. Camps were built, and the slaves were forced to experiment with creating powerful weapons using Istra’s power.

“There were many failures, as most of those captured had no experience in such things, but after countless attempts, a slave named Imeteri made a deadly discovery. Weakened from working in stuffy quarters, he convinced his captors to let him work outside whenever the sun shone. His efforts were fruitless for many weeks, and many of his experiments lay about in disarray, unfinished or forgotten completely, except for the details in his copious notes. Most of them consisted of various compounds of elements he placed in clay mugs, which he sealed with mud. One day, while working on his experiments, an explosion knocked him off his feet, and he knew one of his concoctions had worked. It took many more efforts for him to duplicate his success.

“One major problem was that his explosive needed to charge in the light of both Istra and Vestra before it would detonate. As it became saturated with energy, it would begin to glow, gradually getting brighter and brighter until it would eventually explode.

“Von was pleased by Imeteri’s discovery, and after several refinements and small-scale demonstrations, he declared it the success he had

been looking for. Imeteri was raised to the highest status of slave, barely less than a free man. Von ordered the other slaves to build enormous statues in the likeness of Istra and Vestra sharing a loving embrace. These great behemoths became known as the Statues of Terhilian, and packed with the new explosive, they were sent to the various Zjhon and Varic cities. Appearing to be tokens of peace, they were readily accepted and revered. The wars had drained the Zjhon and Varic nations, and lacking the resources to fight, they were relieved to receive the gifts.

“It was an abominable tactic and one I hope is never eclipsed. Drawn to the statues like moths to a flame, the faithful and war-weary congregated in enormous numbers around the likenesses of their gods. All but a few of the statues detonated, resulting in cataclysmic explosions that leveled entire cities, killing countless souls. The toxic aftermath debilitated those not killed by the initial blasts, and most died soon thereafter. And so began mankind’s darkest age, a time known as the Purge,” Master Edling continued, his unvarying cadence threatening to put Catrin, and most of the other students, into a deep sleep.

The snake, which Catrin now saw was an olive-green tree snake, was lured from Chase’s pouch by the stillness, its slender head and neck poked from the pouch, looking like a bean pod with eyes. Catrin held her breath as it slithered forward and coiled itself around the chair leg. Peten noticed Catrin’s sideways glances and gave her a snide look, tossing his long, blond hair over his shoulders.

With his muscular build, strong jaw, and piercing blue eyes, he cast a striking figure, but his attitude and ego made him the least attractive person Catrin had ever met. She felt little pity for him as the snake continued to follow its instinct, which was to climb. Peten was oblivious to its presence and continued to look bored, casting his own glances to get the attention of Roset Gildsmith.

The snake slithered up the slats on the back of his chair; it brushed against his curls, and still he remained unaware. He shifted in his seat, as if sensing the stares of Catrin, Chase, and Osbourne, and turned his head to glare at them. As he did, his eyes met those of the snake, and he shrieked. His high-pitched scream and sudden movement alarmed the snake, and it struck, biting him on his nose. Catrin knew the snake was not venomous, but Peten obviously knew nothing of the sort.

He leaped from his chair, sending his desk and the snake flying. Charging from the hall, he knocked Roset and another girl from their

chairs. He showed no concern for anyone in the hall, and it was obvious his only care was for his own safety.

Master Edling stormed to the back of the hall, fuming, and snatched the agitated snake from the ruins of Peten's chair. After releasing it at the base of a tree in the courtyard, he returned, pushing Peten before him, forcing the shaken young man to return the desks to order.

Chase's eyes danced with glee, and Osbourne let a giggle slip. The townies and Master Edling glared at them with eyes like daggers. Catrin sat quietly, hoping the situation would somehow improve, but instead it worsened.

"Peten Ross, you are a coward and a boor," Roset said with a haughty look. "Do not aspire to speak to me again." She turned smugly away, her jaw stuck out in defiance.

Chase seemed to think things were going very well, but Catrin could see Peten's fury rising, his embarrassment fueling his desire for retribution. How Chase could not see mounting danger was a mystery to Catrin. Perhaps he was simply caught up in his own thirst for revenge.

Master Edling concluded his lecture and dismissed the class curtly. Catrin was just glad to have the lesson over and tried to flow out with the rest of the crowd, but Master Edling barred her path.

"Miss Volker, I would have a word with you," he said, and he clearly did not wish to compliment her.

"Yes sir, Master Edling, sir," Catrin replied softly. "I'm sorry I was late, sir."

"I'll have no excuses from you. It is your responsibility to arrive before the appointed time. If you cannot do so, then I recommend you do not attend at all. Since you wasted my time at the beginning of class, it is only fair I waste your time now. Be seated," he said, and Catrin slumped into the chair nearest the door, anxiously waiting for her punishment to be concluded.



OUTSIDE the lesson hall, Chase ducked into a darkened recess and waited for Osbourne. Roset came first, and she cast him a haughty glance, but he was grateful that she said nothing. Using the darkness for cover, he held his breath as Peten stormed by, followed by a mob of agitated townies. Minda and Celise walked by, and Osbourne seemed to be trying to hide behind them. Hoping no one noticed, Chase grabbed Osbourne by the

shirt and dragged him into the alcove. Osbourne let out a small yelp before he realized it was Chase who had grabbed him, and he looked over his shoulder more than once.

“Looks like Edling held Catrin after class,” Chase said.

“I told you he looked boiled,” Osbourne said, but there was a tremble in his voice, and he looked nervously over his shoulder. “Are you going to wait around for Cat?”

“I can’t. I promised my dad I’d help with the afternoon deliveries.”

“I can’t either,” Osbourne said. “I’ve chores to do, and I should probably study for the test we have coming up.”

“Bah, who needs to study?” Chase asked with a grin. “Just remember everything Edling says; that’s all.”

Osbourne shook his head. “That may work for you, but my father’ll tan my hide if I bring home bad marks. I’d better get Patches saddled and get going, or I’m going to run out of light.”

Chase peeked around the corner before walking back into the light, half expecting to find Peten and the rest of the townies waiting for him, but the stables were eerily quiet. Only Patches remained in her stall, and Chase stayed with Osbourne while he got her saddled.

“Never seen everyone clear out so quickly,” Chase said.

“I’m starting to think the snake was a bad idea,” Osbourne said as he tightened the girth. “Feels like I’ve got squirrels in my guts. You don’t think they’ll do anything to Cat, do you?”

“You worry too much,” Chase said, but he secretly wondered if Osbourne was right. It seemed strange that Peten and the others had left so quickly, and letting Osbourne and Catrin travel home alone suddenly seemed like a very bad idea. There was nothing he could do about it, though, no way to take back what was already done, and he tried to drive the worry from his mind. “I’m sure everything will be fine.”

“I hope you’re right,” Osbourne said as he mounted. Patches, who was a well-mannered mare, must have sensed Osbourne’s nervousness, for she danced around the stable, her ears twitching as she spun. Osbourne soothed her with a hand on her neck, and she trotted away with her tail tucked. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” Osbourne said with a wave.

“Be careful,” Chase said, betraying his own fears, and Osbourne rode away looking more nervous than ever.

Checking around every corner as he went, Chase made his way to the mill. At each turn he expected to find the townies waiting, and their

absence only increased his anxiety. "I wish they would just get on with it," he mumbled to himself as he passed the market.

When he saw his father waiting with the wagon already loaded, though, he forgot his fears. They had enough work to keep them until nightfall, and he would have time to think of little else.



AFTER sitting far longer than needed to make up the time she had missed, Catrin began to wonder if Master Edling had forgotten she was there. He was completely engrossed in his text, and she was hesitant to interrupt. She tried to be patient, but she desperately wanted to talk to Chase, and she shifted in her seat constantly.

"You are dismissed," he said suddenly without looking up.

"Thank you, Master Edling; it won't happen again, sir," Catrin said as she rose to leave.

"It had better not. And do not think for a moment that I'm unaware of your involvement in today's disruption; you can pass that along to your cousin as well," he said, and Catrin did not bother to deny it, knowing it would do no good.

She walked quickly to the Watering Hole, arriving to find Strom busy with the mounts of two nobles. She waited in the shadows, not wanting the nobles to complain about riffraff hanging around the stables; it had happened before, and she didn't want to impose on Strom. Once the nobles made their instructions abundantly clear, they strolled into the Watering Hole, and Catrin emerged from her hiding place.

"Thanks for keeping out of sight," Strom said. "Salty's in the last stall. You can saddle him yourself, can't you?" he asked with a smirk.

"I think I can manage, though the task is beneath me," Catrin replied, and her sarcasm brought a chuckle from Strom. Her tack had been cleaned and hung neatly outside the stall; he had treated her horse and gear as if they were his own, and she appreciated the gesture. Salty gave her no trouble, being aware he was on his way home, where his feed bucket waited. Strom was still attending to the nobles' horses and tack when she mounted.

"Thank you, Strom. I appreciate your help," she said, waving as she left.

"Don't mention it, Cat; just try not to make a habit of it," he replied with a wink and returned to his work.

Salty needed little prompting, and he broke into a trot as soon as they left town. Catrin turned him onto the wagon trail that meandered toward her home, hoping Chase would meet her there. She had expected to find him waiting at the Watering Hole, and his absence concerned her. She was tempted to push Salty to a gallop but resisted the urge. The trail was muddy and slick, and speed would only put her and Salty at risk. Her father and Benjin had warned her about such behavior, and she heeded their advice.

Engrossed in her thoughts, she let Salty cover the familiar distance without her input, but as she approached the woods, she heard someone cry out. Urging Salty forward, she scanned the trees for signs of trouble. Through the foliage, she saw flashes of movement in a clearing, and harsh laughter echoed around her. When she saw Patches, Osbourne's mare, wandering through the trees, still saddled and bridled, she nearly panicked. Osbourne would never leave his horse in such a state, and she knew he was in trouble.

After jumping from the saddle, she tied Salty to a nearby tree and approached Patches, who recognized her and cooperated as Catrin tied her to another tree. Meanwhile, she heard more muffled cries. Running as fast as she could toward the nearby sound, she burst into the clearing. Osbourne was near the center on his hands and knees. Blood flowed freely from his nose and mouth, and he clutched his side. Peten Ross, Carter Bessin, and Chad Macub were on horseback and appeared to have been taking turns riding past Osbourne, beating him with their wooden staves.

"Stop this madness!" Catrin shouted as she ran to Osbourne's side. She crouched over his body, hoping to protect him yet knowing she could not; she was overmatched. He whimpered beneath her, spitting blood through his ruptured lips.

"Out of the way, farm girl, or you'll share this one's fate. He needs a lesson in showing respect to his betters," Peten said as he spurred his horse. As he swept past, he swung his staff in a powerful arc, landing a solid blow on Catrin's shoulder. She barely had time to recover from his attack before Carter approached. His mount was blowing hard from the workout, sweat frothing around saddle and bridle alike.

His staff swung wide, striking her on her hip, but she barely felt the pain. As Peten wheeled his horse and dug in his heels, his eyes were those of a madman. He seemed intent on killing her and Osbourne, and Catrin

became convinced her death approached. Peten was a well-muscled athlete who had trained in the jousts for as long as he could ride. He would not miss his target again, and her defiance clearly enraged him, leaving little chance of mercy.

Time slowed, and as she cried out in fear, her voice sounded hollow and strange in her ears. Still Peten came, aiming his mount so close that she feared they would be trampled. He did not run them down, though; instead he brought his horse just close enough to provide a clear shot at Catrin. She watched in horror as his staff swung directly at her head, and she saw her own terrified reflection in its highly polished surface as it blocked out the rest of the world. Intense sadness overwhelmed her as she prepared to die. Though she hoped Osbourne would survive the encounter, it seemed unlikely.

In the next instant, Catrin's world was forever changed. Her body shuddered, and a sound louder than thunder ripped through the clearing. She tried to make sense of what she saw as the world seemed to fly away from her. Everything took on a yellowish tint, which faded to blackness as she crumbled to the ground.



NAT Dersinger turned his nose to the wind and inhaled deeply. The wind carried the smell of misfortune, and he had learned better than to ignore his instincts. Despite the fact that he'd caught no fish, he pulled in his nets. Looking out at the clear skies, broken by only fluffy white clouds that seemed frozen in time, he wondered if he was just being silly, but the ill feeling persisted and grew more intense with every passing moment.

With a sense of urgency, he raised his sails and guided his small craft back to the harbor. Along the way he passed other fishing vessels, but no one waved or shouted out in greeting, as they did with other fishermen. Most just cast Nat suspicious glances, others glared at him until they were lost from sight. Nat tried not to let any of it bother him, but he soon realized he was grinding his teeth and his hands were clenched into fists. Too many times he'd been treated as an outcast, as if he were not even human. With a long sigh, he released his frustration and concentrated on avoiding the scores of hidden rock formations that flanked the harbor entrance.

At the docks, he received more strange looks—partly because he was back long before most of the other fishermen would return, and partly

because he brought no fish to the cleaning tables, but mostly it was because he was Nat Dersinger, son of a madman. Most would rather see him dead or exiled; others simply tolerated him. There were few people he trusted and fewer still who trusted him. It was a lonely and unforgiving existence, but he had to believe it was all for a purpose, some grand design beyond his ability to perceive or understand. He let his mind be consumed by the possibilities, and he entered an almost dreamlike state; nothing around him seemed real, as if he walked in a place somewhere between this life and the great unknowable that lay beyond.

Unaware of where he was going, he let his feet follow a path of their own choosing, permitting his unconscious mind—rather than his conscious mind—to guide the way. It was one of the few lessons his father had taught him: sometimes the spirit knows things the mind cannot; never ignore the urgings of your spirit.

When he reached the woods outside of town, he barely recalled the walk. His feet continued to carry him into the countryside, and he wondered—as he often did—if he was simply fooling himself, assigning himself otherworldly powers rather than admitting he shared his father’s illness. In truth, that was the crux of his life. Most seek answers to a myriad of questions, but Nat was consumed by one question alone: Had his father been a true prophet or a madman? As he found himself suddenly climbing over a hedge of bramble, he was inclined to believe the latter, but then the ground trembled and the air was split by a mighty thunderclap. Leaping over the hedge, Nat moved with confidence and purpose, suddenly trusting his instincts more than his senses. For the first time in a very long time, he believed not only in his father, but also in himself.



As the sun was sinking behind the mountains, casting long shadows across the land, Catrin woke. She sat up slowly, dizzy and disoriented, and put one hand out toward the ground to steady herself; it found Osbourne’s chest. He was unconscious, his breathing shallow, but at least he looked no worse than he had when she’d arrived. She hoped he was not seriously injured. Her body ached as she moved, and she closed her eyes. Drawing a deep breath, she tried to calm herself.

Moans broke the eerie silence, and Catrin heard someone behind her gasp. She turned to see who it was, and only then did she behold the devastation that surrounded her. The clearing was a good bit larger

than when she'd entered it; every blade of grass, bush, and tree within a hundred paces had been leveled. She stood, unsteadily, at the center of a nearly perfect circle of destruction. All the debris pointed away from her, as if she had felled it with a giant sickle.

Turning around slowly, she took in the awful details. Supple stalks of grass had been so violently struck that they were broken cleanly in half. In all her seventeen summers, Catrin had never witnessed such a terrifying sight. Behind her stood Nat Dersinger, a local fisherman who was thought to be mentally unstable. He leaned on his ever-present staff, his jaw slack, and made no move. The staff was taller than he was, half its length shod in iron, which formed a sharp point. His wild, graying hair stuck out in all directions, and his eyes were wide, making him look every bit the madman some thought him to be. Though he was of an age with Catrin's father, the lines on his face made him appear much older.

Peten's horse lay, unmoving, in a tangle of downed trees. Horrified, Catrin saw Peten's boots sticking out from under the animal, and she feared him dead, but she could not make herself move.

"Help, my leg is broken!" she heard Carter shout, and she turned to see him struggling to get out from under his own dead horse. Chad wandered aimlessly, followed by his faithful mount, which limped badly.

"Gods have mercy. I bear witness to the coming of the Herald. The prophecy has been fulfilled, and Istra shall return to the world of men." The words poured out of Nat and struck fear into those who heard them.

Townfolk and farmers had begun to arrive, having heard the blast and been guided by the shouting. They tended the wounded, and word was sent to the Masters as well as the parents of the students involved. People scrambled to help Peten and the others, and many cast frightened glances at Catrin as they passed. Osbourne regained consciousness, and a kindly old man helped him to the edge of the clearing to await the Masters.

Few folk had the courage to speak to Catrin, but those who did all asked the same question: "What happened?"

"I don't know," was the only honest answer Catrin could give, but no one seemed to believe her. When her father arrived, he ran to where she stood, tears filling his eyes. Overwhelmed, she collapsed into his embrace. He hugged her and tried to comfort her, but he seemed unable to find

the right words. Instead, he tied Salty to his saddle and pulled Catrin atop his roan mare, and they rode home in cautious silence.



A pool of molten wax and a dwindling wick were all that remained of Wendel Volker's candle, and he let it burn. His eyes, swollen with tears, were focused beyond the blank wall he faced. Raising Catrin alone had never been in his plans. He had done the best he could without Elsa, but in Wendel's mind it never seemed enough. If not for Benjin, he wasn't sure they would have survived. All along, they had struggled, but now they faced a danger far too great. The chill of fear crept up his neck—fear, not for himself, but for his beloved daughter.

Remembering the damage in the clearing, Wendel felt goose bumps rise on his skin. More disturbing than the damage was the look in Catrin's eyes. She felt responsible and guilty; that much was clear. Wendel tried to figure out what might have happened, but he found no answers. Instead, he accepted the fact that he might never know. What mattered was that people would be angry, confused, and afraid; all of which put Catrin in danger. Stronger and deeper than his greatest personal desire was the need to protect his daughter. So powerful was this urge that he went to where she slept and stood over her, watching her breathe.

"Help me be strong for her, my dearest Elsa," he said under his breath. He wept quietly. "If ever you've heard me, hear me now. I can't do this alone. I need you. Catrin needs you." Then he stiffened his jaw and firmed his resolve. "Watch over her, my love, and keep her safe."



As darkness claimed the sky, Nat Dersinger stood at the center of the clearing. All the others had long since gone to their homes and were probably discussing the day's events over their evening meals, but Nat tried to push that vision from his mind. Such thoughts brought him only pain and misery, and this was not a time he needed to be reminded of his loss. What he needed was guidance on what to do next. The prophecies warned of disastrous events, but they gave no indication of anything that could be done to prevent the foretold dangers. There must be something he could do, Nat thought, but he came to the same realization he had come to in the past: It would take more than just him. Somehow, he would have to convince those who had enough power to make a

difference. Given his past failures, he found it difficult to be optimistic. Bending down, he pulled a blade of grass from the ground and marveled at how cleanly it had been broken. He let his mind wander for a time until something tugged at his awareness and demanded his attention. A familiar yet indefinable smell drifted on the breeze, and Nat's eyes were drawn to the heavens. As a sailor, he knew the stars as friends and followed their guidance, but on this night, they seemed almost insignificant, as if their power were about to be usurped, their beauty eclipsed. Nat had nothing more than his feelings to guide him, and his thoughts ran in a familiar pattern. So many times his instincts and gut feelings had caused him nothing but trouble. He would spill his heart to save those who showed him only hostility. "Why?" he asked himself for what seemed the thousandth time. But then his familiar pattern changed, irrevocably, as he looked at the blade of grass and the tangled mass of downed trees that lined the clearing. It was proof. No one could argue it or claim that it was a creation of his deranged mind. This was real and undeniable. For the first time in more than a decade, he did not question himself.

When he looked back to the sky, he believed completely. His father had been right all along. There was little consolation in this knowledge, for it foretold a difficult and perilous future for all, but it was vindicating for Nat nonetheless. As his thoughts wandered, he felt himself drifting into a different state of awareness, his eyes fixed on the sky yet focused on nothing. He felt himself being drawn upward, lifted to the heavens. His eyes felt as if they would be pulled from their sockets, so strongly did the sky seem to reach for them, longingly and insistent. The vision began more as a feeling than images in his mind; he felt small and afraid in the face of a coming storm. Lightning flashed across his consciousness, and thunder rattled his soul. From the skies came a rain of fire and blood, and the land was rent beneath his feet. A single, silhouetted figure stood between him and the approaching inferno. Nat reached out, his hands clawing toward salvation, but his only hope faded along with the vision.

Lying faceup at the center of the grove, just as Catrin had found herself, Nat drew a ragged breath. Sweat ran into his eyes, and his heart beat so fast and hard that he thought it might burst. He realized then that it might be better if he were truly mad.

CHAPTER 2

If peace cannot be made, then peace shall be seized.

—Von of the Elsics



As daylight streamed in through the open window, Catrin woke from a restless sleep, and she struggled to bring herself fully awake. Nightmarish visions plagued her slumber. Twisted dreams were so vivid that she had trouble distinguishing which events were real and which were nightmares. She pulled herself from her sweat-soaked linens, hoping the attack on Osbourne had been nothing but a dream. Sleep still filled her eyes and muddled her thoughts as she padded into the small common room she shared with her father.

He had left water in the washbasin for her, but that had been some time ago, and the water was no longer warm. Catrin tried to wash away the sweat from her fevered dreams, wishing that she could scrub away the horrors she felt closing around her, waiting to strike. The cold water helped clear the haze from her mind, allowing her to separate fantasy from reality. Her aching body brought her to a chilling realization.

It was real. The attack, the explosion, the strange way she was treated were all real!

On shaking legs, she dressed in her leathers and homespun, tears welling in her eyes as she imagined the consequences. Her life would be forever changed, and depression overwhelmed her. In an effort to feel normal, she got ready to do her chores. She donned her heavy boots and worn leather jacket, which had been left by the fire to dry. The jacket was covered in creosote stains and had a host of minor rips and tears, but she insisted on wearing it until it fell apart completely. Like a cherished companion, it had been with her on many an adventure, and she was loath to abandon it.

After she strapped on her belt knife, she gathered her laundry, a washboard, and some bits of soap. If she wished to have something

comfortable to sleep in, she would need to get her things hung to dry. Not even raising her head as she stepped from the cottage into the barnyard, she let her feet carry her across the familiar distance. It was a short walk to the river, and she had a well-worn path to follow.

Turbulent thoughts rattled her mind, and when she reached the river's edge, she did not recall most of the walk. Kneeling on the shore, she dipped her nightclothes into the clear, frigid water, which numbed her fingers. She applied a bit of soap to the garments and scrubbed them vigorously on the washboard, but then she heard shouts coming from the barn. Throwing her garments into the dirt, she sprinted to the barn, fearing someone was hurt. The sound of several voices shouting carried across the distance, which alarmed her even more since her father and Benjin were normally the only ones about.

She stopped short when a familiar-looking man backed out of the barn, waving his arms in front of him, and he came close to falling over backward. Two more men followed, both in similar states of retreat, and Catrin was shocked to the core of her being when her father charged out next, looking like a man in a murderous rage. Benjin swarmed out at his side, his pitchfork leveled at the retreating men.

"You expect us to live with that abomination in our midst?" one man shouted as he backpedaled. "That hussy damn near killed m'boy. He might die yet from what she did to 'im."

"You've no proof of that, Petram, nor do you, Burl, nor you, Rolph. You'll take yourselves off my property this instant, or so help me . . ." he said through clenched teeth; then he actually growled at them. A threatening step forward sent the other men scrambling back. Benjin had not said a word, but the look in his eyes made it clear he would not hesitate to stick them with his pitchfork if they persisted, and it appeared as though the men might leave before any blood was shed.

Massive waves of fear, embarrassment, and guilt washed over Catrin, freezing her in place. She wanted to flee or scream but could do neither. Instead she stood still as a stone and watched the events unfold, hoping to remain unseen, but it was not to be. The men spotted her and glared.

"What are you staring at, you boiling little witch?" one man shouted, and Catrin recognized him as Peten's father, Petram. She also recognized the fathers of the other boys. As they scowled at her, she quailed; the hatred in their eyes made her feel small and dirty.

"You will burn for this, Catrin Volker!" Burl shouted over his shoulder,

but his speech was cut short when Benjin swung the pitchfork handle at his head, and the three men fled.

“The council will hear of this!” Petram shouted.

Then they were gone, leaving Catrin to consider their words. Her father turned to her, and the look on his face softened. She stood silent, tears streaming down her cheeks, unchecked, and her lip quivered as she struggled to maintain her composure.

“Ah, Cat. I wish none of this were happening. You’ve certainly done nothing to deserve what those sons of jackals just said. Don’t take their words into your heart, dear one. They are just scared, confused, and looking for someone to blame. I’ll take care of them; don’t you worry. Come along now. We’ve horses to tend, and I need to make a trip to the cold caves this afternoon,” he said as he guided her into the barn.

Catrin’s father had inherited the cold caves from his father, Marix. A popular barroom tale said her grandfather had won the caves in a wager with Headmaster Edem. They said Edem had been drinking with Marix at the Watering Hole after the Summer Games. Edem’s son had won the cross-country horse race, and he celebrated with Marix, who had trained the horse, and they both got too far into their drink. Edem bet Marix he could not get the innkeeper, Miss Olsa, to show them her wares. Miss Olsa was an older woman at the time, though not unattractive, and she had a reputation for being a shrewd businesswoman.

Marix called her to his table and whispered into her ear for a long time. When he pulled his cupped hand away, Miss Olsa turned to the drunken headmaster, pulled up her blouse, and boldly revealed herself. Then she ran into the kitchen, giggling like a young girl. No one knew what Marix said, but the locals swore no one ever duplicated the feat, which made her grandfather a bit of a town hero. Catrin suspected he said something regarding the free cold cave storage still enjoyed by Olsa’s daughter, Miss Mariss, long after Olsa’s passing.

Benjin had followed the men off the property to make sure they caused no more trouble, and he returned just as Catrin entered the barn.

“Don’t let those fools bother you, li’l miss. They haven’t got the sense the gods gave ’em,” he said, hefting his pitchfork in mock combat. On his way back to the stall he’d been cleaning, he stopped and patted Catrin on the shoulder with his over-large, calloused hand. His simple act of kindness shattered Catrin’s fragile composure, and with each step, more tears flowed down her cheeks. Sobs wracked her, and she stood

before her father, trembling, her shoulders hunched forward. She could not bring herself to look him in the eye, and she stared at the ground instead.

Her father never let the tribulations of the day disturb his routine, which gave Catrin comfort. He brought Charger, his roan mare, from her stall and put her on cross-ties. He ran a currycomb over her muddy coat with one hand and smoothed the freshly brushed coat with his other. Charger was accustomed to his ministrations and promptly fell asleep, letting the cross-ties hold up her head.

“What happened in the woods yesterday?” her father asked without looking up from his task.

“Peten was angry at Chase and Osbourne for playing a trick on him, and the townies attacked Osbourne on his way home. I tried to protect him, and they attacked me. I thought I was going to die, but right before Peten hit me, the world exploded. It’s hard to explain; it was so strange and so very horrible,” she said, and she tried to continue, but her sobs would not be suppressed.

She hugged herself in an effort to maintain control while her father deftly unhooked the cross-ties and returned Charger to her stall. After closing the stall gate, he went to Catrin and awkwardly put his arms around her. It was a rare gesture, which neither of them was truly comfortable with, but it meant a lot to her nonetheless.

“You certainly have your mother’s knack for turning the world on its side, my little Cat. It’d be easier if she were here; I’m sure she would know what to do, but we’ll get through this together, you and I. Don’t you worry yourself sick. It’s not so bad as it seems,” he said with a forced laugh as he tousled her hair. “Now you run along and take the rest of the day for yourself. You’ve more than earned it with all of the hard work and long days you put in this winter,” he continued. Catrin tried to argue, but he insisted. “Benjin and I can handle things around here.”

“Off you go now, li’l miss. Maybe you could catch us some nice bass for dinner, eh?” Benjin said with a wink, and her father shot him a good-natured scowl.

“I give my daughter the day off, and you want her to catch your dinner?” Wendel said, shaking his head.

Laughter released some of Catrin’s anxiety, and she left to fetch the laundry she had abandoned by the river. After she finished the washing, she took it to the cottage to hang it up to dry. When she was done, she

took a piece of waxed cheese, some dried fruit, and a few strips of smoked beef for her breakfast. On her way back out of the cottage, she grabbed her bow, two fishing arrows, and her fishing pole. There was more than one way to catch a fish, and she was determined to bring back dinner.

Following the path back down to the riverbank, she turned north onto the trail that ran alongside the river, feeling as if every step took her farther from society and away from the source of her fears. She climbed past the shoals and falls, where the path was often steep and rocky. Along the way, she turned over rocks and collected the bloodworms that had been hiding in the darkness. By the time she reached the lake at the top of the falls, she had an ample supply of bait. Along the shores the water was shallow and slow, and the fishing was generally quite good. When she reached one of her favorite places, she laid out her gear.

Dark red blood oozed over her delicate fingers as she slid a bloodworm onto her hook, and she wiped it on her jacket, adding yet another stain. Her fishing line was far too coarse for her liking, but good fishing wire was expensive; she would have to make do with what she had. After checking the knot that held her lightwood bobber in place, she cast her line near a downed tree, which was partially submerged in the dark water, forming a perfect hiding place for the fish.

A towering elm gave her shade, and its moss-covered trunk provided a comfortable seat. She leaned against the tree and waited for the fish to bite. The stillness of the lake stood out in stark contrast to the maelstrom of thoughts that cluttered her mind. She attempted to review the events of the previous day, but she could not focus; when she tried to concentrate on one thought, another would demand her attention then another and another. Frustrated, she tried to put it all from her mind.

Her pole jerked in her hands, and the lightwood bobber jumped back to the surface. With a hurried yank, she set the hook and pulled the fish in, relieved it had not gotten away with her bait. The large-mouth bass put up a good fight, and when it emerged from the water, she was pleased to see it was longer than her forearm—not enough to feed three but a good start.

After baiting her hook again, she cast it near where she'd caught the first fish, but she got no more bites for the rest of the afternoon. The dark shadows of large fish moved below the surface, taunting her, and as the sun began to sink, she decided to try her luck with the bow. Normally, fishing arrows were used only when the carp were spawning since they

made easy targets as they congregated in the shallows. Bass would be much harder to hit, but she had been practicing her archery skills, and she hoped the effort would pay off.

After securing her long string to the fishing arrow, she tied the other end off on an elm branch. Not wanting to lose her arrow, she double-checked her knots. Confident they were secure, she located a likely target and took aim. Ripples in the lake surface distorted her depth perception, and her first few shots missed their marks. Determined, she did her best to compensate for the distortion, and her next shot was true, catching another bass in the tail and pinning it to the bottom.

“Nice shot,” Chase shouted from behind her, and she nearly leaped from her skin.

“Don’t you know it’s not nice to sneak up on people?” she said, truly glad to see him. He just grinned in response. She gave a tug on her string, but her arrow was firmly wedged, and she removed her boots, preparing to go in after it.

“Let me get that for you,” Chase offered.

“I can get it; I’m not crippled,” she retorted angrily and instantly regretted it. She had no reason to be angry with Chase, but she felt helpless—a feeling she despised—and she needed to lash out at someone. Chase took it in stride, though, and simply sat on the shore while she waded out to the flailing fish. She freed the arrow quickly and grabbed the fish by the tail; it was slightly smaller than the first, but it would be enough.

The bruises on her hip and shoulder ached as she climbed from the water, her muscles stiff from the time spent sitting beneath the tree. Chase grabbed the other fish and Catrin’s bow while she retrieved her pole and her other fishing arrow. She was grateful for his help; without it, she would have had a difficult time carrying it all home. Chase was quiet for the first part of their walk, and Catrin allowed the silence to hang between them.

“I visited the infirmary this morning,” he said after a while, and when Catrin made no reply, he continued. “Osbourne is doing much better and should recover quickly. He has a broken nose, a couple of badly bruised ribs, and a score of bumps and bruises, but he was awake this morning. He told everyone that you saved his life.” Catrin grunted but said nothing.

“Carter has a broken leg, but otherwise he’s fine. Chad has a head

wound and can't remember much of anything; heck, he didn't even know who I was. The Masters said his memory should return in a few days, but his mother is hysterical. She just keeps shouting that her baby has been mortally wounded. Peten's hurt bad. The Masters won't say if he will live or die, but he did wake up for a while this morning. I think he'll recover myself; he didn't look nearly as bad as most were making him out to be." He stopped, and Catrin turned to look him in the eye. Her lip quivered, but otherwise she maintained her composure.

"I didn't do anything, Chase. I don't know what happened," she said, and Chase remained silent. "The last thing I remember was Peten bearing down on us and swinging his staff at my head. I saw my reflection in his staff, Chase. It was coming right at my face. How could I not have a mark on my head?" she asked, not anticipating a response. "At the very moment I expected his staff to crush my skull, there was a loud bang—like thunder but without the lightning. Just before I passed out, it looked like the world was flying away from me, and when I woke, it was like being in a nightmare."

"I believe you, Cat. Besides, even if it was something you did, you were just saving Osbourne from those boiling townies," he said.

She didn't like the insinuation that it could have been something she did, but she couldn't blame him. What evidence was there to prove otherwise? She began to doubt herself, but for the moment, she clung to what she knew to be true.

"They were going to kill poor Osbourne; I just know it. They probably would've gotten away with it too. I'm sure they would have just made up some story about him trying to rob them or some other rubbish, and that is just the kind of thing the Masters would believe of us farm folk," she said.

"They'll believe worse than that. The main reason I came was to warn you: rumors are spreading. Some say you are a witch or monster, and others have even claimed you are a Sleepless One. There have been some who have spoken up for you, but several suffered beatings as a result. I don't think it's safe for you to go into town right now; too many people have lost their senses, and they are starting to believe some of the crazy things people are making up," he said sadly.

Catrin sniffed and wiped her eyes but made no other sound.

"I'm truly sorry, Cat. I feel like this is my fault; if I hadn't brought

that snake in, none of this would've happened. I'll do anything I can to help you, and I'll always stand up for you—”

“No,” Catrin interrupted. “I don't want you getting hurt because of me. Keep your thoughts private. You'll be more help to me if you just listen and let me know what people are saying. Perhaps you could bring me my lessons,” she said, but her voice cracked, and she could not get the rest out.

“Don't worry. I'll bring your lessons to you, and I won't do anything stupid, but I'm not going to let them get away with telling lies about you either.”

“Thank you,” was all she could manage to say without sobbing, and they walked back to the farm in silence.

As they approached, her father and Benjin waved, and they held up the bass in silent greeting. Benjin let out a whoop of glee on seeing the fish, and her father just shook his head. Benjin met them halfway.

“Nice catch ya got there, li'l miss. Here, let me take those. I'll get started on the cleaning,” he said with a smile. Catrin started to object, but Benjin grabbed the fish and looked quite happy carrying them off to be cleaned and filleted.

“You go get washed up for dinner!” he shouted over his shoulder, and Catrin was happy to oblige; she was wet, dirty, and in need of a good scrubbing. After she and Chase washed up, they joined Benjin and her father in the cottage and were greeted by the smell of vegetable stew.

“I knew you wouldn't come home empty handed, li'l miss. I'll just boil the fish and add it to the stew; we'll eat like kings,” Benjin said as he stoked the fire.



CHASE pulled the rough but warm blanket around his shoulders as he curled up in front of the fire. Everyone else slept, but he could not. His thoughts would not allow it. He had been ready to face the repercussions of his actions, but he had not been prepared for Osbourne and Catrin to pay the price in his stead. He decided he didn't like the taste of guilt and remorse.

Catrin was gentle and fragile, and he was supposed to protect her. He had promised Uncle Wendel that he would always look after her, but when she and Osbourne had needed him most, he had failed them. Running his thumb over the locket that hung around his neck, he vowed

to do better. Somehow he would shield her from the harshness of this world.



WENDEL sat upright as he woke with a start. Darkness covered the land, and the wind made the rafters creak. But he was accustomed to hearing those noises; something else had disturbed his sleep, but he no idea what. Straining his hearing, he listened for anything out of the ordinary but heard nothing distinct, only brief hints that someone was moving outside the cottage. Creeping through the darkness, with the precision of intimate familiarity, he dressed and reached beneath his bed to retrieve Elsa's sword. Touching it normally brought tears to his eyes, but this was the first time in more than a decade that he unsheathed it with the intent of using it, and he moved with purpose.

Using skills he had long since abandoned, Wendel crept without a sound to where Catrin slept. Her chest rose and fell, and her eyelids twitched as they do only when one dreams. Seeing her safe relieved much of his anxiety, but Wendel was not yet satisfied. Perhaps the noises he'd heard were made solely by the wind, but he knew he would never be able to sleep without checking.

The predawn air carried a chill, and dense fog hovered above the ground. As Wendel emerged, the air grew still, as if he had somehow intruded on the wind and chased it away. The world seemed more like the place of dreams, and Wendel wondered if he could still be asleep. The snap of a branch in the distance startled him, but he could see nothing from where the noise had come. Could it have been a deer?

After checking around the cottage, he checked the barns, careful not to let the horses hear him, lest they give him away. Shadows shifted and moved, and the fog constantly changed the landscape, but Wendel found no signs of anyone about. Still his anxiety persisted, and he waited for what seemed an eternity for the coming of the false dawn. Across the barnyard, a shadow moved, and Wendel froze. Shifting himself from a sitting position to a more aggressive stance, he watched and waited. Again he saw movement, and he moved in to intercept. Out of the night came a blade to match his own, but before the blades met, he knew whom he faced. "Was that you I heard sneaking around the cottage?" he asked.

"You woke me while you were out here stomping around," Benjin said with a lopsided smile.

“We’re getting old,” Wendel said.

“I may be fat, lazy, and out of practice,” Benjin said, “but watch who you’re calling old.”

“Catrin will be up soon. I don’t want her to know we were both out here like a couple of worried hens.”

“She won’t hear it from me,” Benjin said, and with a wave over his shoulder, he wandered back to his cabin.

Catrin was still asleep when Wendel returned to his bed, but it seemed only moments later that she began to stir.