

CHAPTER THREE

“Well this is a fine mess you’ve gotten us into,” Olvan whispered.

“Me?” Jedd hissed. “You’re the one who said we should climb up the tree and hide!”

“It was your so-called shortcut that got us here in the first place! How was I supposed to know they were going to make camp here?”

Perched on the branches of an ancient beech, hidden in the foliage, the two friends looked down on the scene below. Six goblins slept around the campfire under the tree. Ashrak tribe, judging from the bright red war paint on their yellow, pointy-nosed faces. They wore dirty rags and mismatched pieces of armor that looked to have been looted from some battlefield, hammered and hacked at to fit their thin, crooked bodies.

“It’s a good shortcut. I don’t know what went wrong.”

“You don’t? Well, then let me tell you. First you got us wet. Do you know how much I hate being wet, Jedd?”

“I—”

“That was a rhetorical question. Just so you know, a ford means a place where you can wade over. If you need to swim, it’s not a ford. Secondly, you lost our horses.”

“I didn’t lose them, they ran away!”

“Oh, I wonder why! Because they smelled goblin, perhaps? Which

brings us to: thirdly, you never said anything about this being goblin territory.”

“I’ve never seen any gobbers here before.”

“And you’ve been here exactly how many times...?”

“A few. Well, a couple.”

Olvan raised his eyebrows.

“All right then, once! But it doesn’t matter. They’re drunk out of their minds. We’ll wait a bit longer, then we climb down and just tip-toe out of here.”

Having passed around a stoneware jug with some foul brew, laughing and gibbering and occasionally bursting out into violent fistfights, the goblins had eventually drunk themselves into a stupor, falling asleep one by one. Even the designated watch snored loudly down by the creek a short distance from the camp, head resting on his hide shield and drool dripping from between his tusks.

“I suppose we could,” Olvan sighed. “Better than falling asleep up here and dropping down on their heads. I just hope we can get past them.”

The problem wasn’t the goblins, really—Olvan was fairly certain he could stop to piss on them without waking them up, and Gods knew his bladder was aching for it—the problem was the boars. Goblins were stupid and cowardly and only dangerous in large numbers. Their mounts, however, were a completely different matter. Large, ill-tempered and with a sense of smell and hearing rivaling that of a

hound, the bristle-spined dire boars were bred for war and far deadlier than their masters. Right now the beasts were corralled in a group of young trees tied together with ropes some distance away, and hopefully sleeping too. But Olvan knew the animals were trained to be light sleepers. If they caught wind of an unfamiliar smell, the makeshift pen wouldn't be enough to stop them from charging down whatever threat they perceived and tearing it to pieces.

“All right. We climb down as quietly as we can,” he whispered. “And then we go in that direction,”—Olvan pointed—“away from the boars, and down to the creek. If we wade downstream for a bit they won't be able to pick up our scent. But be prepared to run.”

“Oh, I can run. If I were you I'd worry more about myself, stubby-legs.”

Olvan glared at his companion. “You know, Jedd, if you spent half as much time thinking about your own actions as you do remarking on my stature, we'd be in situations like this far less often.”

Jedd was about to retort, then shrugged. “All right, all right. Point taken. Let's do this.”

Olvan nodded, acknowledging this was the closest thing to an apology anyone could ever hope to elicit from the big swordsman.

At first, everything went according to plan. They climbed down from the tree—Jedd first, Olvan after—and carefully made their way between the torpid goblins. Their smell was just as vile as their appearance. As they approached the point where the campfire's dying

light didn't reach, Olvan took the lead. His Dvyrni eyes could pierce the darkness where Jedd's couldn't.

Then everything went very wrong, very quickly.

The goblins had leaned their long spears against the trunk of a tree. As the companions were passing it, Jedd suddenly stepped on the hem of Olvan's cloak. Olvan stumbled and went flying. The spears tumbled to the ground with a loud clatter, one of them striking an iron cooking pot that stood to the side of the camp. The pot rang out like a bell in the stillness of the night. Instantly, a choir of agitated snorts and squeals rose from the boar pen.

“Get up!” The warrior grabbed Olvan's arm. “We need to move!”

The cracking of branches behind them signaled that the dire boars had broken out of their compound and were coming. Now the goblins were stirring, yapping confusedly in their guttural tongue as they tried to make sense of what was going on. The sentry had gotten to his feet and his face turned into a comical mask of surprise as he saw the Dvyrni and human come charging towards him. He shouted something and raised his weapon, a hooked sword so filthy and rusty that it would surely add blood poisoning to the list of horrors it could inflict on an enemy.

Olvan dodged with ease as the sleepy, half-drunk goblin swung at him, and the next moment Jedd's fist shot out and hit the yellow-skinned creature in the face. The goblin fell to the ground, dazed.

The creek was just ahead of them, but Olvan veered off to the side

towards a hawthorn thicket.

“Olvan!” Jedd snarled. “This isn’t the time for detours!”

“My staff. I need it!”

When they’d heard the goblins approaching earlier that night, Olvan had tossed his staff into the bushes, not keen on trying to climb a tree while holding it. Now he bent down to search for it, acutely aware of the bloodthirsty squeals of the boars closing in from behind, and hoping to all Gods that it was the right place.

“You think it’s too late to make them lose our scent?” Jedd commented sardonically, grasping his sword hilt.

“Dire boars don’t like water,” Olvan said. “If we cross the stream we should be safe anyway.” He grunted. “I have it, let’s go!” Grasping the ornate yew staff, Olvan slung it over his shoulder and lodged it between his belt and his back, underneath the cloak.

From their vantage point up in the tree, the creek had looked a lot shallower and more slow-moving than it actually was. As they ran down the sandy bank and plunged into the water, Jedd immediately sank down to his armpits and Olvan disappeared entirely. The Dvyrni popped up again, hissing and spitting, and then they swam for the other side. Scarcely had they reached the middle of the stream when a strong current seized them with cold fingers and quickly swept them away.

The goblins were at the creek now, a few of them mounted and the others running alongside the large, mottle-coated porcines. High-

pitched cries rose in the night as they chased after their disappearing prey. The boars crashed through the undergrowth, snarling and snorting, and their masters struggled to keep up. One of the riders was violently thrown off when his mount passed under a low branch. The boar kept going like nothing happened. A spear flew across the water but went wide of its target, splashing harmlessly into the stream several yards behind Olvan and Jedd.

But as the vegetation grew denser and denser, pursuit was soon made impossible and the cries and squeals fell away behind them. The last they saw of their followers was a lone boar, stubbornly running along the bank. Suddenly it swerved, going off into the forest, and wasn't seen again.

“There!” Olvan shouted. “Grab it!”

A wind-felled tree lay in the water further downstream. As they drifted close to it, Olvan took hold of a thick branch and Jedd launched himself up onto the trunk. But the combined weight of human and Dvyrni was too much for the tree to support. With a crack it broke free of the bank and joined the companions on their journey down the creek.

The pull of the current grew even stronger as the stream narrowed, and up ahead they could hear the soft roar of a rapid. They clung to the tree for dear life. There was nothing else they could do.

As the dawn gloom gave way to a foggy, overcast morning, the companions waded out of the shallows and onto the bank, bruised and wet. There was no telling how far the creek had carried them, for the landscape looked the same in all directions. Oaks and willows lined the banks. Further in, the forest was a jumble of pines and firs interspersed with various hardwoods that rose thin and straight, reaching for the meager daylight. After having wrung their soaking garments and poured out their boots, the two travelers sat down to rest. Olvan suggested making a fire, but his companion dismissed the idea, saying that they wouldn't be staying long. The goblins could still be searching for them.

Olvan missed Rynn. Not for her winning personality, but for the simple reason that things seemed to work out better when all three of them were together. They all had their strengths and weaknesses and they complemented each other. When one was missing, things tended to go wrong. Olvan glowered at the warrior who was busy oiling his heavy broadsword while softly whistling a carefree tune. If it weren't for the dark strands of hair still plastered to his forehead and his linen shirt and wool trousers being damp, one wouldn't have guessed that the man had just climbed out of a creek after having spent most of the night clinging to a tree and going down rapids.

Jedd, in his mid-thirties with an ever-growing amount of silver in his stubble, was the oldest of the trio. He was tall and broad-shouldered, handsome in a rough sort of way, and being around him Olvan

felt insignificant. And not because he was barely two thirds of Jedd's height. The man was like a force of nature, seemingly never tiring, never letting himself be affected by setbacks and discomforts. Maybe Jedd was more brawn than brains, but he had a matter-of-fact lookout on life that Olvan envied.

Returning the sword to its scabbard, Jedd got up. "We need to get going."

"We shouldn't be walking around in this," said Olvan, looking at the blanket of fog surrounding them. "We'll get lost."

"Unless you know something I don't, we already are. If you want to sit on a tree stump and starve to death that's your choice, but I'm going to keep moving. The sooner I'll find food or shelter, or both."

Olvan rose stiffly. As miserable as he felt, he was thankful that it was still summer. Despite the fog the air was cool rather than chilly and he knew it'd get warmer later in the day. Had this happened just a month later, they would both have succumbed to exposure by now.

"You'll be the death of me one day," Olvan grumbled, staring at the back of Jedd's wolf-pelt cloak as he trailed after the big man into the forest.

"Quit your griping. Our luck will turn soon, I know it."

Less than an hour later they came upon a morass. The fog made it impossible to ascertain its size, but judging from the choir of frogs and the calling of wading birds far in the distance, it was more than just a patch of marshy ground.

“You were saying something about luck, Jedd. Care to refresh my memory?”

Jedd just grunted and swatted a mosquito.

“We need to go around it.”

“No. We need to go across. It’s when you start going around things that you end up walking in circles. If you head in a straight line you’re bound to find something sooner or later. A road. A settlement.”

“A boat, maybe? For we could certainly use one!”

“Don’t be silly. It’s not as bad as it looks. Use your staff to find firm footing and you’ll be fine.”

“I don’t want to get wet again, Jedd.”

“Then I reckon this is goodbye.”

The warrior stepped out into the water, prodding at the bottom with his scabbarded sword. Again Olvan saw no other recourse but to follow, and disgruntledly he did.

It took them two hours to cross the quagmire. At one point the soggy bottom gave way under Olvan’s feet and Jedd had to grab the sputtering Dvyrni by the collar and drag him to safety. When trees appeared again out of the fog ahead of them, Olvan felt like a man lost at sea who finally sights land. They sloshed through the reeds and onto solid ground, dripping wet and every exposed inch of skin covered in mosquito bites. Olvan laid down on his back, exhausted.

“I hate being wet!” he yelled at the pale sky.

The sky didn't seem to care, and neither did Jedd. For the second time that day the warrior was stripping his clothes off and wringing them out. "You should get the water out of those robes too, or you'll start molding like an old piece of bread," he remarked.

Muttering, Olvan unclasped his cloak and started taking his robe off.

When they were done they pressed on. Some time later they walked into a clearing that looked like it might have been a garden in days long past. At its center stood an apple tree, its branches drooping under the weight of the small, red fruits. The apples were hard and tart, but tasted better than anything Olvan had eaten in a long time.

"Hey, look," Jedd said, chewing. He crouched down and pointed at a muddy patch of ground close to the tree.

"Hoofprints. So what?"

"From shod horses." Jedd looked up at his friend and grinned.

"That could mean anything. Maybe riders passed by here days ago."

"No. The prints are too shallow for that. These horses didn't carry any riders. Besides, this is fresh. No more than a day, I'd wager."

"Well I'm sorry, master ranger Jedd of Oakenvale, but I'm having a bit of a hard time trusting you on this given your, shall we say, spotty judgment lately."

Jedd snorted. "Look, I know you think the only thing I'm good at is killing people—"

“Actually no, you’re really good at drinking, too.”

“Shut up. What I’m saying is, I’m not some city boy like you. My father was a hunter and I was tracking deer with him when I was barely out of diapers. I know what I’m talking about.”

“How come this is the first time I hear about it, then?”

“Because Rynn is much better at it, so I’m happy to let her do it. Same reason I leave the whining and the panicking to you.”

“You big oaf! Why don’t you—“

“Oh, lighten up! It was a joke, all right? Are we going to stand here all day bickering, or are we going to follow those tracks and see if it might be our horses?”

It wasn’t long before the woods opened up before them and the outlines of buildings could be glimpsed through the fog. It was a large village, maybe even a small town.

At last! Olvan thought, his mind immediately conjuring up images of a roaring fire, a hot meal and a steaming cup of mulled wine.

As they got closer though, his heart sank. No smoke rose from the chimneys, no lanterns or torches were lit, and the wooden houses were all in varying states of disrepair. Some were weathered but more or less intact, others were just burnt-out husks. The crumbling remains of carts, barrels and crates were strewn across the main street, overgrown with weeds. A young birch had shot up right through the

floorboards of a front porch and on through the rotting roof above.

Jedd rose after having inspected the ground. “No tracks here. If the horses came this way, they didn’t go straight through.”

“Then neither should we. Let’s go.”

“I’ve heard of towns like this,” the swordsman said, rubbing his chin. “When the gold in the mines ran out, people would just up and leave.”

“Gold mines? What are you talking about, we’re in the middle of a forest! The only things you could mine around here are earthworms and badger shit.”

Jedd wasn’t listening. He went over to one of the carts, which had collapsed under the weight of a chest loaded onto it. The wheels lay at its sides like jagged stars, spokes splintered. Opening the chest, the lid came straight off and fell apart as it dropped to the ground. Jedd lifted up a moldy bundle of bed linens, then let it fall back into the chest with a grunt, wiping his hand on his trousers.

In the meantime Olvan was inspecting what looked like a pile of moss-covered sticks that lay in the street. He probed at it with the tip of his staff. The moss came off to reveal the white lattice of a ribcage.

“Jedd,” he said, his mouth suddenly dry. “Look.”

“It’s a dead person. I’m sure you’ve seen one before.”

“It’s not *a* dead person, Jedd! Look around you!”

The warrior grunted again as he made the same observation as Olvan. The village was littered with piles of bones, some still retaining vaguely human forms under the fuzzy, green layers of moss.

“This is a plague town. You know what that means. We should get out of here right now.”

“Not so fast. I want to have a look around.”

“Jedd!”

“What? These people have been dead for years. You worry too much.”

“It’s not the dead that I’m worried about.”

“Stop being an old woman. Come on.”

Olvan glanced over his shoulder, into the murk between the surrounding trees, then apprehensively fell into step behind Jedd.

A cracked wooden sign lay in the dirt outside a larger building. Jedd picked it up and wiped his hand across the mud that covered it, revealing letters. He handed the sign to Olvan. “What’s it say?”

“*The Swan*. An inn, probably.”

“An inn,” the warrior nodded. “I like inns. Let’s have a look inside.”

“This is a bad idea, Jedd.”

“Why?”

“You know damn well why!” Olvan threw the sign to the ground. “And I don’t understand what you’re hoping to find. This town has

been deserted for a decade or more. It's bound to have been picked as clean as those bones over there by now, if there was even anything of value here to begin with."

Jedd shrugged. "You never know. It's an out of the way kind of place."

The insides of the inn were a mess, just like the street outside, and daylight peeked in through holes in the roof. The house reeked of damp, rot and vermin droppings. Jedd went behind the counter and rummaged through the debris.

"Ah-hah!" Triumphantlly he produced a leather purse that clinked when he shook it. He upended it and five green coins fell onto his palm.

"That's wonderful, Jedd," Olvan sighed, "you're risking our lives for a handful of coppers."

"If they left that they might've left more." Jedd pocketed the coins and kept searching.

"No, that's enough!" Olvan was losing his patience. "We need to find our horses and continue on our way. Rynn is probably in Aryns-bridge already, and you know she's not a patient wo—" he broke off. "Wait. Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

Beckoning Jedd to be quiet, Olvan moved to the window, taking care not to step on the shards of broken pottery cluttering the floor. He swore.

Three humanoid shapes shambled out of the fog and into the dead village. White-skinned with tattered clothes hanging from their emaciated bodies, they moved across the main street's detritus, heads turning this way and that, nostrils flaring. They were blind, having only scarred pits where their eyes once were, and their motions were jerky and erratic. All the while a haunting murmur emanated from their gaping mouths, rising and falling like the wind on the moors. Their carrion stink could be felt even from ten paces away where Olvan was peering out through the inn's rotting shutters.

"Howlers?" Jedd whispered.

"Yes. Three of them. Go see if there's a back door. Be quick about it, and don't make a sound."

Jedd nodded and disappeared. Moments later he returned, shaking his head.

"It's blocked. I could break it down, but not quietly. There's an open window in the back, though."

"That will have to do." Olvan returned his gaze to the window. A crow cawed from a rooftop across the street and instantly the howlers spun around, turning their eyeless faces towards the sound. The murmur rose to a thin wail that made Olvan's skin crawl.

"They're distracted," he said quietly. "Let's go!"

They went to the back of the house, careful not to disturb any of the rotting furniture that leaned at odd angles, ready to collapse at any moment. A board creaked under Olvan's boot and they froze mid-

step, but the wailing from outside did not intensify or come any closer. Reaching the window in the kitchen, Jedd helped Olvan up on the windowsill and then turned his back to keep watch while his friend climbed out.

Olvan carefully lifted his staff out the window and leaned it against the outside wall, then hoisted his legs over the edge to drop down. At the last moment his cloak caught on a nail and he lost his balance, landing clumsily on all fours with a silent curse.

That damn cloak again!

Then he froze as a nauseating stench filled his nostrils.

A fourth howler was behind the house. This one a woman—or once a woman—with clumps of lichen-like hair hanging from its scalp and the white, sagging pouches of its breasts visible underneath the tatters it wore. Its head twitched from side to side and the mouth opened up wide to reveal blackened teeth. Then it howled.

“Jedd!” Olvan cried out and scrambled backwards, but his heels found no grip on the fog-slick weeds and grass under him. He reached for his staff as the howler began to advance.

The next moment a rusty iron skillet came flying out the window. It hit the howler in the side of the head with a sickening thud. The creature fell to the ground, still thrashing, still making its horrific racket, but not getting up again.

“Nice throw,” Olvan commented as Jedd vaulted over the windowsill.

“Thanks. Now get up, the others are coming.” He drew his sword and buried its point in the felled creature’s neck. The howl became a whimper, then silence.

Moments later the three remaining howlers rounded the inn’s corner at a lumbering, half-upright run that was terrible to behold.

“Don’t let ’em get too close,” Jedd warned, flourishing the blade to limber his wrist.

“I know, I know!” Olvan’s instincts were screaming at him to run, but he knew that would mean certain death. These things, these surviving victims of the Weeping Plague, could outrun even a long-legged human like Jedd with ease. They had no choice but to fight them. One howler went for Olvan, the other two for Jedd.

Olvan jumped out of the way as it lunged at him, jabbing his staff in between its legs. The creature tumbled to the ground, but before he had a chance to deliver a crippling blow it was back on its feet and coming at him. A door was standing open in the adjacent building, Olvan noticed, and this gave him an idea.

Using his staff as a ram, Olvan charged at the howling horror, pushing it in through the doorway. As he had hoped the creature tripped and fell backwards. Seizing the opportunity he slammed the door shut, the grating sound of the hinges almost as loud as the howlers’ wails. Olvan lodged his staff between it and the ground, creating a brace. The creature was trapped, but it wouldn’t last. The door was in no better condition than the rest of the town and white fingers

were already poking out between the boards, tearing off chunks of rotting wood. The door groaned and shuddered as the howler flung itself at it, and the staff moved an inch. Cursing, Olvan planted his boot firmly against the staff and turned his head to see how Jedd was doing.

The swordsman kicked one howler square in the chest, sending it sprawling on its back. While the creature scrambled to its feet again the other came at him, arms flailing and brown, claw-like nails slicing the air. Jedd's broadsword flashed and the howler's hands went flying, black blood spurting from the stumps. The howl changed character ever so slightly—pain, or rage, or both?—but the thing didn't as much as slow down.

“Use the flash spell!” Jedd cried.

“Howlers are blind, Jedd! What good is a flash of light going to do?”

“I don't know! Just do something! *Anything!*”

Olvan tried to think. They couldn't run. Not only were howlers fast—unlike the both of them, they did not tire. Neither could the companions take refuge inside a house and barricade themselves. As long as the creatures could smell them they would remain outside, and before long their incessant howling would attract even more of their kind. To make matters worse, Olvan and Jedd hadn't eaten anything but a few apples since yesterday noon, nor had they slept. They were cold, hungry and exhausted and not in shape for a fight. As if

having heard Olvan's thoughts, Jedd stumbled with a curse, his face locked in a mask of desperate concentration.

Another violent thump turned Olvan's attention back to the howler behind the door.

Stupid thing, he thought. *It doesn't understand that the front door of the house is wide open.*

Olvan's eyes widened. "I have an idea," he exclaimed.

"Excellent," Jedd hissed through clenched teeth. "I'm all ears!"

Olvan explained his plan as quickly and clearly as he could.

"That might work"—Jedd paused to kick at a howler's legs—"but we're going to need a head start. Anything you can do?"

"There is. Give me a moment."

"We don't have a moment!"

It was a simple spell, really. Olvan had known it for a long time. But the words... those Gods-cursed words! Why was it that he could never remember them when he needed them the most?

Just a fine wizard you are, master Enderbite. It was Elder Balan's voice, speaking from the depths of Olvan's memory. He could almost see the man, staring disapprovingly down his nose at his Dvyrni apprentice, bushy eyebrow raised.

Then, suddenly, as if in defiance of Olvan's former mentor, the words came to him. He spoke them and felt the familiar tingling as the Source surged through his mind and his body like a wave of light.

Thorny brambles sprouted from the ground like snakes, coiling

around the howlers and trapping them. The creatures squirmed and yawled but the vines did not break, and the thorns dug into their pale flesh, drawing blood.

“Now, Jedd!” Olvan yelled. “It will only last a short while, so run! This way!”

The two companions ran. When they reached the edge of the forest moments later, there was crash of splintering wood behind them as the trapped howler broke through the door. The others were free of the brambles now, and soon their howling grew stronger as they gave chase.

Olvan and Jedd dashed through the woods. Branches whipped at their faces and tore at their clothes and skin, but they hardly noticed. Soon after they halted briefly.

Before them lay the morass they had traversed earlier the same day. But this time the fog was clearing and they could see where they were going. Like children skipping from stone to stone to cross a stream they leapt between the floating mats of vegetation, some of them sinking almost immediately underfoot while others were so buoyant that they were hosts to little trees. A hundred yards into the quagmire they stopped, when they reached a small island where the ground was comparatively dry and a a cluster of rowans grew in the center. The branches were laden with orange berries, heralding the coming of autumn. Jedd dropped to his knees, spent.

“Better hope this works,” he panted. “I’m too tired to run any

more.”

“It’ll work. Look.”

Olvan didn’t know whether howlers were alive or dead or something in-between, but what he did know was that their capacity for thought and self-preservation was very limited. They tended to scramble across obstacles rather than going around them, they barely defended themselves when attacked, and having caught scent of something they would beeline towards it with no regard for what lay between them and their prey. And this, Olvan hoped, would be their undoing.

At the forest’s edge the three howlers appeared between the trees. And then another two that the companions hadn’t seen before.

”They have company,” said Jedd.

“Good. The more the merrier.” Olvan raised his voice. “Hey! Over here, you ugly bastards!”

Jedd stared at him. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t think they can smell us out here. We need to lure them further out.”

The howling, which had subdued as the creatures lost track of their quarry, rose again. One by one they started wading out into the water.

And one by one they sank. Two went under almost immediately, their arms waving momentarily above the black surface like some horrific aquatic plants, then they were gone. The howler that Jedd had dismembered disappeared shortly afterwards, stepping into a deeper

part of the pond it was crossing. The morass swallowed it in a heartbeat, leaving only bubbles and ripples. The final two lasted longer. One of them got stuck in the sucking mud and sank slowly to its demise, the howl turning into a ghastly gurgle as its head went under. The last one came almost too close for comfort, clambering onto a floating mat just a few paces from where the two friends were watching. Jedd got to his feet, ready to draw his sword, but the next moment the mat keeled over, depositing the howler into the murky waters.

The waves from the creature's thrashing lapped against the island's shore and then died down. The forest was silent again. The frogs resumed their chorale.

"Well I'll be damned!" Jedd laughed and gave Olvan a painful slap on the shoulder. "Good work, my friend! I owe you a drink."

"I only did what had to be done." Outwards he remained stoic, but inside Olvan beamed at the warrior's approval. Jedd wasn't one to shower people with praise. In fact, he hardly said anything positive about other people at all.

Rainwater had gathered in a small hollow in the grassy turf. They quenched their thirst, ignoring their growling stomachs best as they could, then sat down and leaned against the trees to rest for a bit.

"You lost your staff back there," Jedd said.

Olvan shrugged. "It was just a piece of wood. Could have been worse."

“I thought you needed it for your magic?”

“Kind of, but not really. It’s a Fulcrum. It helps, but only a little, and I can always get a new one.”

“Oh.” With that, Jedd pulled his fur cloak about him, stretched out on the ground and closed his eyes. Before long he was snoring and Olvan felt himself drifting off as well.

Some hours later the Dvyrni wizard woke to a familiar sound. He rubbed his eyes, stiff and sore, wondering what had wakened him. Then he heard it again. It was the snorting of a horse.

“Jedd! Wake up!”

“Wha’?” The big swordsman propped himself up on his elbow and squinted sleepily at his friend. “More howlers?”

“No. Look.” Olvan pointed.

Fifty yards away stood Olvan’s white pony, munching from the lush grass at the quagmire’s edge, and just behind it was Jedd’s dapple gray warhorse, busy scratching its hind parts against the bark of a tree. Their equipment and provisions were still strapped to the animals’ backs.

“See?” Jedd yawned, then grinned. “I told you our luck would turn.”