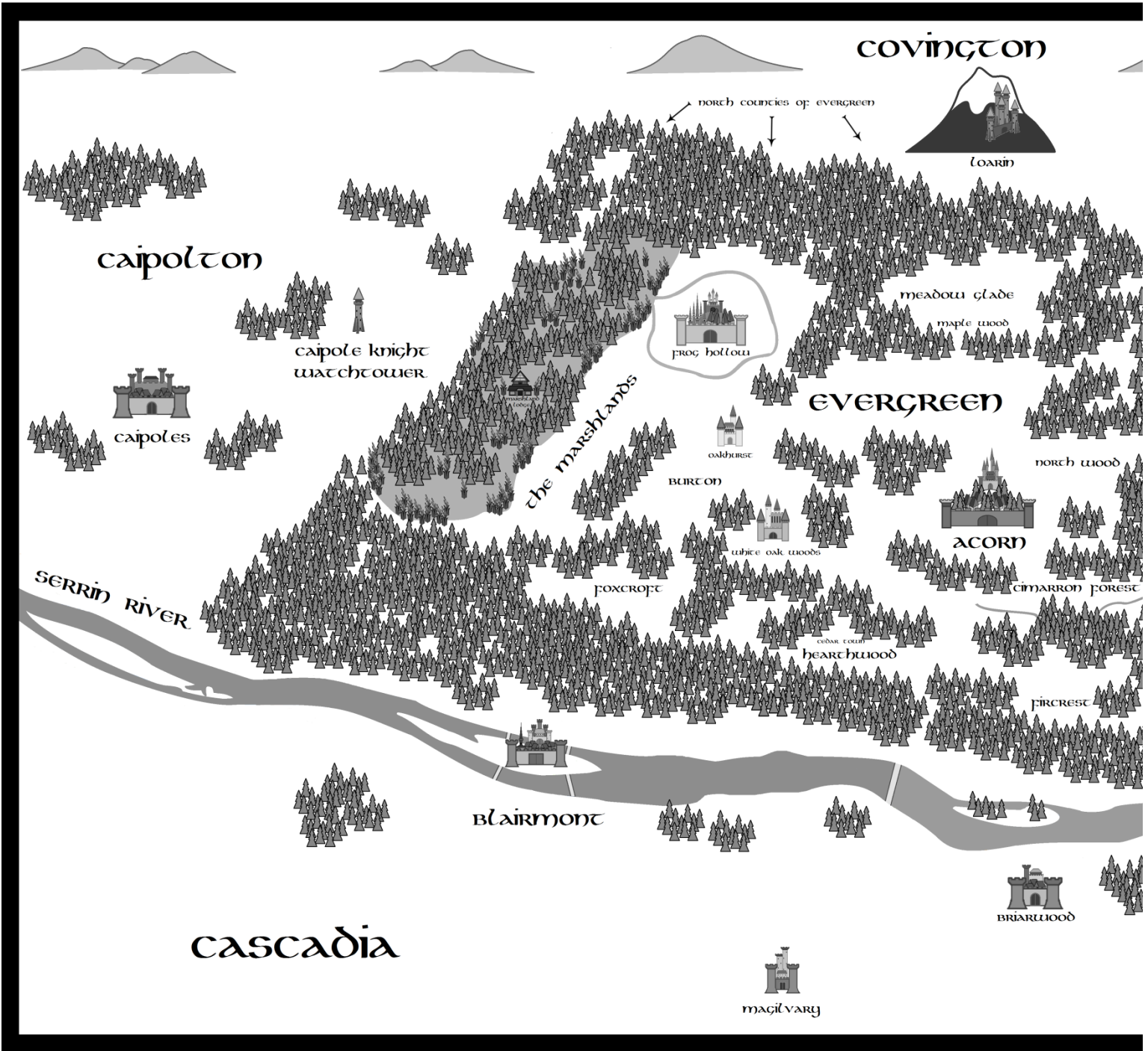
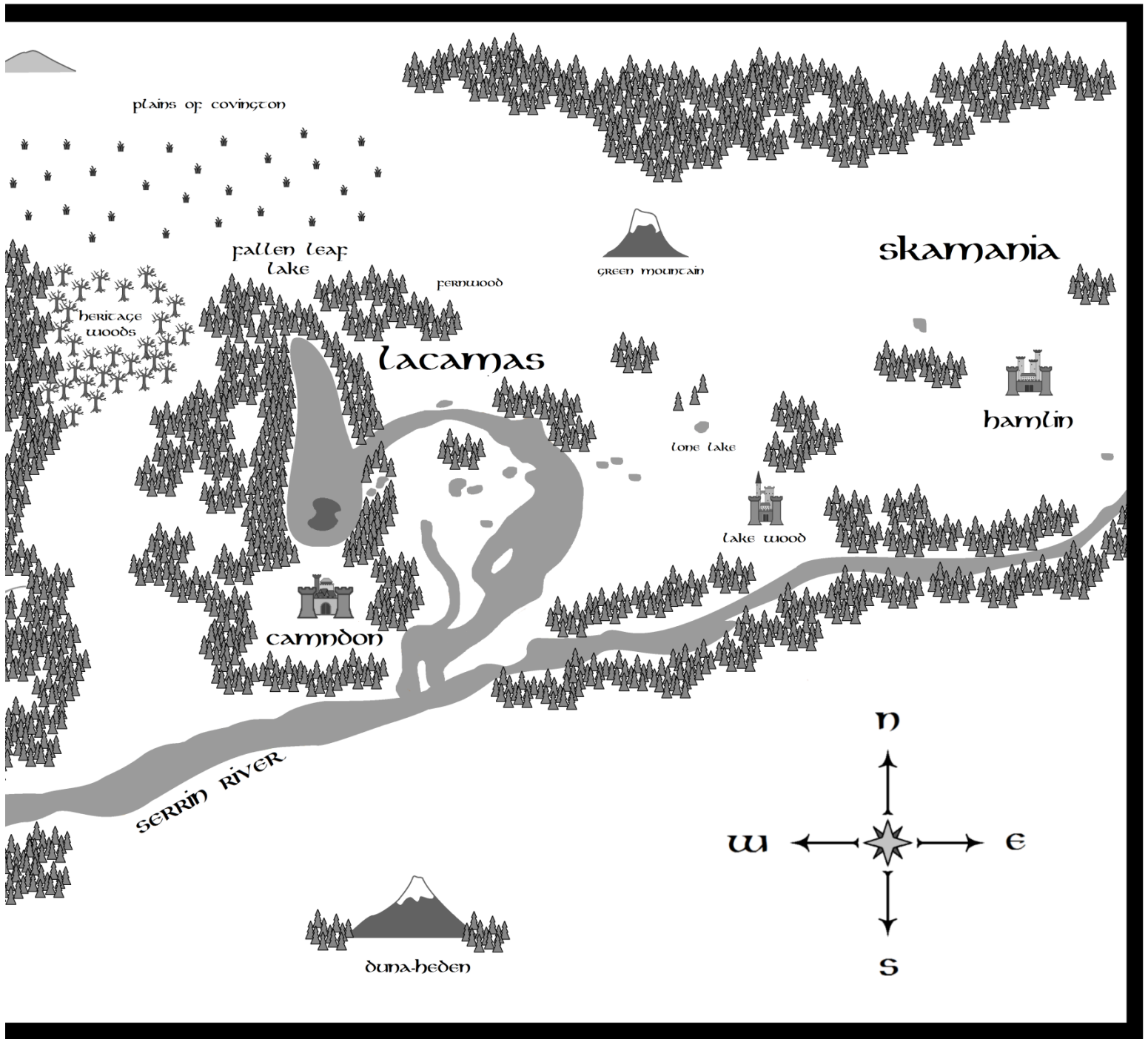


The Legends of Evergreen





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INTRODUCTION

When I was a kid growing up in Vancouver Washington, I was constantly daydreaming of being in places other than where I actually was. It's not to say that where I lived was either boring or dangerous, I just had a vast imagination. The cul-de-sac I lived on, the park just a short walk from my house, even the entire neighborhood of Oakbrook itself eventually became like some sort of a medieval kingdom in my young, imaginative mind. The neighborhood drainage pond and marshes it connected to, Burnt Bridge Creek which runs through the very center of the neighborhood, the park containing extraordinary Oregon White Oaks and other brilliant colored deciduous trees surrounding over nearly three hundred yards of landscaped lawns, even Royal Oaks Country Club adjacent to the west side of the neighborhood created this whole world in my mind filled with knights, royalty, peasants, wizards and sorceresses. Yet I never considered myself part of this world I was ceaselessly creating in my head, but rather an observer of what was happening around me. Sebastian, The Frog King, would have to be the character I would closely relate myself to if I were ever asked. He is the sole character in the entire book that I did not create based off of anyone. What he is to me is a character mirrored after what was my alter-ego as a child through young adulthood. A tall, brawny captain/leader of men who not only seems to have it all together for himself, but is not afraid to go to extreme-lengths to roughly and without apologies lift others up to learn and become a better, more advanced person through painful and uncomfortable processes of gaining a greater understanding and perspective about themselves and of the world itself.

Adults who I knew that were the fathers of some of my closest friends around the neighborhood I would imagine as Kings or lords of the land. I imagined at times my friends as warriors, archers or knights while we played in the park. Others I would view as wise-cracking side-kicks, there's always a few. Adding to this, every character in this book who is not royalty or an elder such as Godfrey, Chuck the Inventor, or the wizard, Farridan, has been based off of kids from the neighborhood I grew up with. Each character being a mish-mash of *all* of their personality traits. With the exception of the characters Sophie, Jill, Captain Michael, and King Keen (all of whom I based off of fellow students/faculty I had the pleasure of knowing while in high school) every other character has been based off of those I knew in Oakbrook. I want to mention too that I have never revealed anything of what I imagined to anyone until now.


Continuing to build on my childhood daydreaming later on, I came up with a concept while attending my first year in college. I thought it would be interesting to create a story based around rivalry. The rivalry I was very familiar with at the time was high school sports around where I lived, particularly football. Rivalry, invasion, war, all soon developed into an important aspect of the story, gradually becoming one of the biggest problems the story's main protagonist faces throughout his journey.

It is important to keep in mind as one experiences *The Legends of Evergreen* (just as J.R.R. Tolkien once said about his own works) is that it is *not* at all analytical or topical. This is a story formulated from my own observations as an imaginative, and at times bored, child viewing the little world (neighborhood) I lived in with an imaginative-eye. It is also through my fascination with medieval history since my days in college, particularly the Hundred Years War between France and England, that I placed in the story similarities of armor used, walled cities, revolutionary weaponry used at that time, as well as some aspects of the battles fought during that particular war in the early to mid-1400's. Not only did this story come into fruition from the imaginative kingdom I created as a child, later adding storyline to it in my mind while in college, and finally putting the manuscript together and on paper in the last few years, but I must mention that I cannot take all of the credit for the book's creation. As many authors and script-writers have said about their work, I too feel that I had been guided throughout the creative process through some divine intervention. I must stress however that in no way am I saying that I believe this story is in any way 'holy' or 'divine'. Rather I believe I had a certain amount of spiritual influence creating this book which I received through my intuition and imagination. It was by something I cannot explain but can say with all certainty that it was a spiritual experience, containing strong, positive feelings of guidance and love. For that, I am very grateful.


Finally, I wanted to mention that at the end of the book, I have added a few sketches I made of some of my favorite characters from the book. As I was writing the story down, I wanted to create visuals of what these characters would possibly look like. They are by no means professional sketches, at all, but I feel they do provide a very close resemblance of how they looked while I was developing these characters in my notes.

Thank you to my family and friends who have been so supportive throughout the years of my ambitions and goals as a writer. For my mom, I think of you always and continue to feel your love. Thank you for always being there for me and becoming one of my closest friends. May you be at peace on the otherside.

I want to especially thank Nona Slover, who helped to make this story possible, and Rob Ryan for the many years of great conversations about the creative process. To my wife Theresa, thank you always for your patience, support, and your love. You have not only helped to instill the confidence I have in myself, but also the achievements I have earned today and hope to earn in the future.



Chapter One
A Squire's Quest



From out of the low-laying fog, a lone knight rides his charger across a green meadow surrounded by a golden-leaved oak wood. Passing through the familiar countryside, a faint smile formed across his lips. A tall-gable thatched chalet stood before a forest of evergreen-firs with a band of White Oaks along the forest's edge. The knight rode up to the dwelling, gazing upon it as fond memories from his past flooded his mind.

His attention then turned to the grand White Oak tree. 'Ever has this Oak been in my thoughts since my last visit here,' thought the knight. Its brown and rust-colored leaves fell gracefully around him as he passed under it. Beside him flowed a babbling creek that wound deep into the forest. 'These lands and this homestead look as if they have been untouched by time, as if I had never left at all.'

Dismounting from his faithful steed, which began grazing along the creek, the knight placed his iron-shaped shield next to the leather saddle. The shield's rain-beaded face displayed the knight's golden oak tree and leaf coat-of-arms centered upon a field of deep moss green. He left his steed to drink the creek's transparent water and approached the chalet's thick oak door. A large three-dimensional star-shaped lantern crafted from iron and amber glass hung above the door, giving off a brilliant glow against the late afternoon's darkening overcast sky.

The knight knocked upon the door, hearing his knocks echo inside the large stone and wood-planked home. After a brief moment, the door grumbled open. An old man stood in the doorway. His head was bald except for a curtain of stringy hair growing along the sides and back. The old man's long grey beard reached his chest that was covered with a loose-fitting tan shirt. His grey-blue eyes looked curiously back at the knight as he spoke. "How can I help you, Sir Knight?"

The knight removed his helmet and gave a slight nod. "Good evening, sir. I am Audric of White Oak Woods. I have travelled far these past few weeks and was hoping you would be so kind as to allow me to rest here for a short while."

"Well of course, good Sir!" replied the old man. "I am Godfrey. It would be an honor to provide shelter and comfort for a knight of the kingdom."

A look of astonishment gleamed in Audric's eyes. "So, you *are* Godfrey then?"

The old man nodded. "Once a renowned and successful merchant, I travelled all across the continent most of the year. Yet my age has recently made me retire from such work. My memory and haggling skills are no longer as sharp as they once were." His gaze turned to the rainclouds crossing the horizon. "The air grows cold this hour. Please, come inside."

Thanking the man, the knight followed him inside. Godfrey escorted him into the main room of the high-vaulted ceiling chalet. A grand stone fireplace warmed the great room with a crackling fire burning bright upon the hearth. Lying across the center of the stone floor was a dark-furred bear rug and along the walls, thick black-iron candlestick holders and candelabras held glowing white candles, providing the home with ambient illumination.

“Would you like to remove your armor, Sir?” said Godfrey.

The knight nodded. “I find no reason to continue wearing it at this time.” Piece by piece, Audric removed his plate armor. First his *gauntlets, then his breast and back plates. His broad shoulder armor came off next, followed by his long forest-green cloak and hood, then his *greaves, leg armor and boots, his *tasset and *fauld, his golden spurs, the leather gloves he bore, as well as his belt that held his leather *scabbard with the knight’s sword sheathed within it. Finally, he removed his *chainmail hood, leather cap, and *mail-shirt. All were neatly placed by Godfrey upon a large dining table near a winding wrought-iron stairway; leading up to the dwelling’s darkened second level.

Audric combed through his shoulder-length dark brown hair, feeling relief after donning his mail hood and helmet all day. He rubbed his callused hands over his emerald-green cotton *surcoat trimmed with a gold oak-leaf boarder, making it flat once again upon his sides and chest. The old man had disappeared for a moment after setting the knight’s armor aside. He then returned with two steaming cups.

“Would you care for some tea?” said Godfrey.

“Thank you,” replied the knight. “Your fire is inviting after being in the rains and growing chill of these autumn days.”

The old man gestured to a chair beside the stone hearth. “Well then, please have a seat beside it,” he said, a look of relief flashed in his eyes as if pressure of the knight accepting his home had lifted from his mind.

The two men sat across from each other in the high-backed chairs beside the roaring fire and began sipping their tea. “I am curious to know,” began Godfrey, “why a knight of the kingdom decides to come here to rest and not, perhaps, a castle of a fellow nobleman in the county.” The old man suddenly gave a horrified look. “Not that I mind your coming here, good sir.”

Audric smiled faintly and held up his hand. “No, no, I understand. It does seem rather unorthodox. You see, I was born and raised in this countryside outside the capital. The woods, the meadows, the ponds, the creeks, the marshes, I know all of them. And the *people* I once knew, I still remember and think of fondly.”

Godfrey gazed at him curiously. “Again, my memory unfortunately does not serve me well. I have lived in this chalet my great grandfather had built my whole life. Never have I heard of you before now.”

The knight nodded. “Perhaps my story may help you remember, for I know *you*. When you told me your name, I could not believe my ears at first. Yet as I look upon you now, I see that your eyes still retain the same look of kindness, of generosity they had when last we spoke.”

The old man smiled. “Well, I would be pleased if you would share your story, perhaps even returning that which has been lost from my memory of who you are in my life.”

“Very well,” said Audric. “My story begins twenty-five years ago, under the great oak tree that stands before this very chalet. It was beneath that very tree where I first met Carina.”

Audric rode his horse swiftly across the kingdom of Evergreen’s countryside, feeling the gentle caress of the summer breeze against his face. The young boy finally brought his thirsty

horse to a halt beside a deep creek. He dismounted and led it to the clear, cool water where the horse quickly lowered his head and drank from the refreshing water. "Drink up, Flash," said Audric, petting the horse's mane and neck as he gazed at the looming evergreen firs across the creek. "Our next ride will be through the forest." He unsheathed his wooden sword, slicing it through the air just as he was taught by his father. As the wooden practice sword cut through the air, he sliced through the tall stems of white-petaled daisies growing near the banks of the creek, lobbing off their blooms with each swipe he made. Suddenly he stopped, hearing distant sounds of singing.

The boy's attention turned to a grand White Oak tree standing a short distance where the singing was coming from. "Come on, Flash," said Audric, pulling on the horse's reins. "Let's see what's over by that tree." The horse jerked his head back down to the water and continued to drink from the creek. "Come on, the creek flows by the tree as well! You can have as much as you like down there." The horse remained unmoved. Finally, Audric came up with a plan. He took out an apple from his knapsack and bit into it. The sound of him chewing on the crisp, juicy fruit made Flash turn his head away from the water and stare at Audric.

"That's it, you want this apple?" said Audric, stepping backwards to make his way towards the tree. "You have to come with me this way then." Flash turned away from the creek and began following him towards the tree, his big brown eyes fixed on the apple in Audric's extended hand.

Nearing the tree which stood along the opposite side of the creek, the boy handed the apple to his horse's mouth. Flash quickly took it from him and chomped happily on it. Audric gazed at the tree across the creek. At first he saw no one, but then he suddenly saw her. A young girl his age sitting among a bed of tiny, white-petaled flowers beside the oak's wide ash-colored bark trunk. Her long, smooth honey-gold hair reflected the summer's late afternoon light as she continued to sing. The boy stared at her a moment, holding his wooden sword loosely at his side. He could not move nor speak, only gaze in awe at her.

Finally, Audric summoned enough courage to begin taking steps forward towards the creek. By the time he reached the water's edge, he felt confident enough to cross the creek to approach her. As he did, Flash nudged him to move so that he could take a drink. Audric suddenly stumbled and fell into the water; the splashing sounds he made quickly gained the singing girl's attention. She turned and looked at him as Audric stood abruptly and began treading up the sloped creek bank. "Hello," she said in a friendly tone.

Audric smiled. "Hello," he replied in a bewildered and dazed way.

"I'm Carina," said the girl, looking back at him with both confusion and concern in her light-blue eyes.

Finally, the boy spoke. "I'm Audric. I was over there, near the edge of the forest across the creek. I heard you singing."

"Oh, was I loud?" said Carina.

"No! No...no not at all," replied Audric excitedly. "I just heard you is all. Your singing, I like it."

A look of relief washed over Carina's fair-skinned face. "Really? Thank you! I only sing when I'm alone, I get nervous if people are around."

Audric suddenly gave a stern look. "I don't think you should feel nervous about that."

Carina smiled awkwardly. "Um...okay." She turned her attention to the wooden sword in his hand. "You have a wooden sword?"

“Yes,” replied Audric and held it up proudly. “My father is a knight of the kingdom, and I’m his squire. He gave me this to train with before I am able to have a real sword.”

“I see,” said Carina. “Well you heard my singing, let’s see your sword skills.”

Audric stared nervously at her a moment, then finally nodded. “Okay,” he said, twirling the wooden sword at his side. He proceeded to show her moves he had recently learned from his father, defensive positions and offensive strikes when suddenly, he lost his grip on the sword’s *hilt. The wood sword flew into the air then pointed downward as it dived to the ground. The sword touched down, piercing into the soft grass before Carina’s feet.

“Oh!” said Carina, taking a quick step backwards. Audric gave a horrified look and ran to her.

“Are you all right?” asked Audric concernedly.

Carina began to laugh. Audric remained rooted where he stood before his sword stuck in the ground. His face turned red with embarrassment. “Oh, it’s okay, Audric,” she said looking at him with assurance gleaming in her eyes. She pulled the wooden sword from the soft grass and handed it to him. “You’re very good.”

“Thank you,” said Audric, staring down at the sword lying across his open palms.

“Just remember,” said Carina with a warm smile. “The most important thing when using a sword is to hold onto it.” Audric looked up at her, seeing her smiling brightly back and they both began to laugh. “Would you like to sit with me? The sun is warm today, but the shade from the tree feels nice.”

Audric nodded and she led him over to where she had sat among the flowers beneath the bows of the grand oak.

“From that day on, Carina and I would meet each other at that oak every afternoon to play and spend time together,” said Audric, gazing out the chalet’s angled-windowed wall at the grand White Oak tree. “When we reached late adolescence, a stronger bond formed between us. An unbending, unconditional love.” He stopped, his eyes drifting to the fire burning brightly beside him in the fireplace.

“My lord?” said Godfrey. “What is it? What happened next?”

Audric forced a faint smile, turning his attention back to the old man. “Then an event took place one day, one that would change our lives forever.”

On a clear and sunny afternoon in the middle of summer, Audric and Carina sat together beneath the grand oak tree. Audric sat against the base of the thick, ash-colored bark tree trunk holding gently onto his beloved’s hands to help her sit down. Carina sat against his lap and chest, leaning back as she laid her head gently against his shoulder. The fragrant scents of rose petals and honey from her long, silky-smooth hair was intoxicating to Audric as he wrapped his arms around her slender waist, holding her close against him. They gazed peacefully at the slow-flowing water of the creek beside them. Golden rays of the late afternoon sunlight pierced

through the oak's thick green-leafed canopy, shining warm and comforting beams of light upon them.

"Do you believe it will always be like this?" said Carina.

Audric smiled faintly, gently combing his fingers through her long golden locks, then caressing them against her warm, fair-skinned cheek. "I pray that it does."

Carina sighed lazily and smiled. "And I as well." She took his hands in hers, squeezing them tenderly. "I just fear the future sometimes."

"What is it that you fear?" said Audric.

"It's just, well, soon you will no longer be a squire, but a knight," said Carina. "For years now you have worked so hard and have served your father well as his squire, and I am so proud of you for it. But once you are knighted, who knows what the future may bring and what may happen to you. What if the kingdom goes to war? What if..."

Audric kissed her, interrupting her thoughts. "No matter what may happen to me, whether it be any quest, battle or war I may have to face, in the end I shall always return to you." Carina gazed up at him, her light-blue eyes still holding a look of concern. "Evergreen has endured many conflicts and wars throughout its long history. Our country may face more in the future, but this I know, our army is strong. Every soldier and Chivalrous Knight protect each other with the ferocity of a falcon guarding its fledglings. I shall be in good hands."

Carina smiled thoughtfully at him, turning herself around to face him. "And they shall be well-protected with you among them as well." As they leaned towards each other to embrace in a tender kiss, the ground began to slightly shake. The two quickly turned their attention to across the creek towards the meadow. A small battalion of knights on horseback were heading towards them. At the head of the company was a captain who began to charge ahead of his men towards the creek.

The captain and his men leaped their steeds over the creek and encircled Audric and Carina. Audric immediately noticed the blue, white, and green colors of the soldier's banners and shields. Upon the banners and shields was a heraldic emerald-jeweled crown coat-of-arms; the royal coat-of-arms of the kingdom of Cascadia. The knight leading the company carried with him a long banner displaying upon a blue and white-square field a large griffin heraldic coat-of-arms. He was donned in full plate armor, a blue and white cloak and hood, and armed with a broad sword stowed in its scabbard at his side.

The captain handed his banner to one of his accompanying knights and dismounted from his steed. He lifted his helmet's visor up, revealing his face. His grayish-blue eyes stared menacingly at the two. Audric and Carina quickly stood as Audric shielded himself in front of his beloved.

"You see, men," said the captain looking past Audric at Carina. "I told you she was the fairest in these lands."

"Who are you?" demanded Audric, unsheathing his steel-sword his father presented to him when Audric entered adolescence. "What business do men from Cascadia have here?"

The captain looked irritated back at him and drew his sword. "I am Baron Vinn of Magilvary. I have come here to claim my future wife."

"Future *wife*?" said Audric.

Vinn gave a crooked smile, glancing back at Carina. "For some time now, I have ridden north across our borders to watch this fair maiden tread and ride her palfrey around her homestead. Now, I have come to claim her."

Carina glared at him. "You have no one to claim here."

Vinn took a couple steps towards them. “And *you* shall learn to not speak so boldly to me.”

“You *will not* take her!” said Audric sternly, pointing his sword at him.

“Humph!” expelled the Baron. “A *squire* of Evergreen is to stop me from taking what I wish? I think not.” As swift as a lion pouncing upon its prey, Vinn crossed swords with Audric, making him lose his grip on the sword’s hilt. The blade dropped from Audric’s hand, landing upon the soft grass. The Baron punched him with his thick gauntlet-covered fist in the face, making Audric drop to the ground.

“*Audric!*” cried Carina. Vinn gestured to his men and they quickly seized her by the arms and waist. The Baron loomed over Audric, who rolled upon his back. “Pathetic and foolish,” he said, pinning the squirming squire to the ground as he pressed hard against Audric’s shoulders with his hands. “Yet not surprising coming from a squire of Evergreen.” At the same time, the Baron pressured Audric’s legs down with his armored knees. Vinn leaned towards his face. “Whatever you are to this maiden, you are no more. She belongs to me now. And if we meet again, know that the last thing you see shall be your reflection upon my sword.” Audric stared sharply up at him, his eyes not leaving the Baron’s as an uncontrollable fury ignited deep inside him.

“Let go of me!” said Carina, struggling to free herself from the knights’ rough grasps.

Vinn turned to his men. “We ride south for home. Go now, I shall catch up with you in a moment.” The knights mounted their chargers with Carina and rode off across the creek.

“*Audric!*” cried out Carina.

Before Audric could respond, Vinn spoke as he continued pinning him down upon the grass. “And just in case you’re foolish enough to follow me...” he quickly punched Audric hard in the face, knocking him unconscious.

“Hey...hey there, Audric,” came a voice from out of the dark. Audric slowly opened his eyes, the sun’s rays immediately hitting them as he did. His head throbbed profusely from the punch he took from the Cascadian Baron. He slowly sat up, feeling the hands of someone helping him up. Looking behind, Audric discovered Carina’s father, Godfrey, staring at him concernedly.

“Mr. Godfrey, sir,” said Audric, feeling the pain along the side of his head throb even harder as he spoke. The merchant helped Audric to his feet and took a handkerchief out of his pocket.

“Here,” he said, dabbing it onto Audric’s forehead to wipe off a small trickle of blood. “What happened here, Audric? Where is Carina?”

“*Audric!*” the old man said excitedly. “Audric! The young boy I knew when you and my daughter were but small children! The brave squire wielding a wooden sword, eager to defend Evergreen from dragons and invading armies, now has become a renowned Chivalrous Knight of the kingdom!” Audric gave a slight nod and a faint, bashful smile. “Please, my lord, go on! I

must know what happened next. I recall my daughter being kidnapped, yet have long forgotten events that led afterwards.”

“Well,” began Audric, “I still remember the overwhelming anger boiling within me over Baron Vinn and his men. That day, I swore to you that I would find Carina and bring her back safe, no matter what dangers laid in my path. Little did I know just how grand those dangers would be, as well as the multitude of obstacles I would be challenged with along the way.”

A few miles south of Godfrey and Carina’s home across the meadow, Audric rode his charger swiftly to his father’s castle in White Oak Woods. A vast evergreen forest created a bowl around the oak woods that surrounded the four *conical-towered castle.

“*Father!*” exclaimed Audric, riding across the castle’s drawbridge spanning over moat encircling the outer-walls of the castle. “Father, *where* are you!” He entered the keep and stormed into the great hall.

“I’m here, Audric,” replied his father, Sir Bruce of White Oak Woods, stepping inside the hall from outside. “What is it, what has happened?”

“*Carina has been taken,*” said Audric, the words racing out of his mouth. “Baron Vinn of Magilvary has taken her to Cascadia to force her into marrying him! Please, father, I must be knighted so that I may assemble a battalion of soldiers to accompany me to rescue her.”

His father gazed at him concernedly. “Originally, you were to be knighted in two weeks’ time. Yet recent events have changed my plans for you.”

“What do you mean?” replied Audric, suddenly realizing his father was armed with his sword. “Father, why are you donning your armor?”

Bruce stepped towards him, placing his gauntlet-covered hand upon his son’s shoulder. “I have just returned from the capital after attending a meeting with King Geoffroi and the lords of Burton County. We are at war, Audric. King Reynard of Cascadia declared it this morning. His lust and ever-growing desire for our realm has finally pushed him to wage a war for it. He had told King Geoffroi long ago that he deserves one third of Evergreen due to his marriage to our good King’s sister, now Queen Angelique of Cascadia. Geoffroi refused to give any gift of land, expressing that the vast amount of gold granted to Reynard was more than enough as a wedding present, as well as a token of friendship and peace between our two countries. King Reynard clearly disagrees with this.”

“If we are at war, then we must act quickly,” said Audric hastily.

“No, Audric,” replied Bruce calmly. “You have learned much as my squire, yet there are skills you still lack in becoming a Chivalrous Knight of the kingdom.”

“Father,” began Audric, but Bruce quickly interrupted and continued.

“This will be the greatest war Evergreen has ever faced. It will test the strength and endurance of both armies. I need for you to be fully ready for it.”

“But father, I must save Carina!” said Audric. “You must understand...”

“I *do* understand, Audric,” interrupted Bruce. “But you rushing into war unprepared will not save your beloved, *that* I promise you. I shall do all in my power to find this Baron Vinn of Magilvary and return Carina back to you. But you must not rush to Cascadia, not yet.”

“Father, *please!* You must let me fight!”

Bruce shook his head in sorrow. “Audric, I am sending you to Evergreen’s closest ally, the kingdom of Lacamas. There you will help train King Keen’s army and help raise it to become strong enough to fight in the coming war against Cascadia.” He paused, placing his hands upon his son’s shoulders. “Know that you are still a squire of our kingdom, a future Chivalrous Knight of Evergreen.”

Audric looked back at his father sharply. “And if I refuse to go to Lacamas?” At that moment, his arms were seized by Bruce’s soldiers from behind.

“You have no choice, Audric,” said Bruce. “Go to Lacamas. Help raise King Keen’s army and lead them to the warfront. You have my word. I shall do all that I can to find Carina in your stead.”

Audric struggled to free himself from the soldiers’ grasps. “*Father no!* You must let me go to battle with you!” Bruce then turned and left the hall, leaving Audric with his escorts.

“Come, Master Audric,” said the first soldier. “Sir Bruce wishes for you to arrive in the Lake Kingdom in two days’ time.”

Meanwhile, Baron Vinn of Magilvary and his company crossed back over the border into Cascadia with Carina. With her hands and feet tightly bound, Carina sat cautiously upon Vinn’s steed as the company rode across the Cascadian frontier. To the east loomed Duna-Heden, ‘The Hooded Mountain’, over the wide Serrin River and woodlands. The company approached the River which flowed between the distant hills and through the frontier. To her right, Carina caught sight of the river city of Blairmount, the Cascadian kingdom’s capital. The stone-walled city was built upon a large island in the middle of the River. Stone bridges spanned across the waters on each side of the river, connecting the grand city to the shores. Waving sluggishly in the winds blowing from the east above Blairmount’s castle’s towers were its blue, white, and green banners.

The company crossed a small, narrower stone bridge miles east of the capital and rode swiftly across the river. As night soon fell upon the lands, they finally reached the city of Magilvary. Guards posted at the city’s stone walls and gate quickly opened the large, arched wooden doors allowing the company’s passage into the city. The men rode through the city streets lined with tall, high-gabled shops and homes as they made for Vinn’s castle near the southeastern side of the city. Onlookers along the streets looked curiously at Carina as the company raced by them.

Reaching the castle and stabling their tired steeds, Vinn grabbed Carina roughly and escorted her up to the top of the tallest of the castle’s three towers. There, he shoved her inside an unoccupied bedchamber. “Until tomorrow, fair maiden,” said Vinn, turning on his heel to leave and bolt the door behind him.


“Wait,” said Carina. It was the first time she had heard him speak since they captured her. The Baron reluctantly stopped. He turned and faced her once more as he stared blankly back. “Why are you doing this?”

Vinn removed his helmet, shaking out his long ash-blond hair. He looked upon her with both admiration and regret held in his eyes. “Because if my King is to have me marry a daughter of Evergreen, then I choose you. As I said, I have watched you at your homestead for months now. Your beauty is unmatched among all the maidens of your country. That is why you are to be mine, my lady.”


“Please,” said Carina, wanting to gain more information from the Baron as he began to leave again. She approached him, staring at him with kind eyes. “Why is it important for your King’s advance to claim the throne of Evergreen that you marry me?”

Vinn smiled faintly as his thick eyebrows furrowed. “All shall soon be revealed. Find some rest tonight. We shall meet again in the morning.” He closed the door behind him, locking her inside the chamber.

Carina treaded sadly towards the chamber’s arched window. The night shrouded her surroundings in darkness, with the exception of flickering torch and lamplights of the city spanning far below her. The stars were veiled behind thick clouds blanketing the black and violet sky. ‘Where are you, Audric?’ she thought as tears began forming in her eyes.



Chapter Two
Lacamas



After journeying for two days through the kingdom’s vast, dense forests, Audric and his escorts neared the realm of Lacamas. Approaching the edge of the forest and the border between the allied kingdoms, Audric suddenly reared his horse around. Looks of surprise showed on the soldiers’ faces as he rode swiftly around his father’s men and took off back into the forest.

“Master Audric, stop!” commanded the first soldier, but Audric disappeared into the looming fir forest. Riding hard along the forest’s path, he could faintly hear the soldiers chasing after him not far behind. He eluded them through the trees and thicket, disappearing deep into the forest.

‘I’m coming, Carina,’ thought Audric. His mind raced with thoughts of what horrible and torturous affairs his beloved may be enduring in the Cascadian kingdom. He entered a long stretch of glade where a thin, winding river cut through a soggy green grass marsh. Audric began to ride across a thick stone bridge, intricately-carved with detailed oak leaves and vines along its sides. Suddenly he halted his steed, spotting someone standing in the entrance back into the forest along the other side of the bridge. It was an old man with long grey hair and a thick beard. He wore a long, dark green robe matching the color of the surrounding oak-leaves. Tiny silver compass-stars intertwined in a vine pattern stitched along the robe’s moss-green borders. A cap of the same dark green color sat atop his head; its pointed end hung limp to the side.

“Audric of Burton,” said the old man, gripping his tall oak staff that held a fist-size emerald green embedded in a gold spherical stone.

Audric looked at him with caution, remaining upon the short bridge with his ready hand upon his sheathed sword. “Who might you be?”

“I am Farridan, wizard of the Forests of Evergreen,” said the old man. “It is good to finally meet you, Audric.”

“What do you want with me?” said Audric, feeling frustrated in being delayed to ride to Cascadia. “I must be on my way.”

The wizard smiled faintly. “There’s no need to feel rushed now, Audric. Your escorts search for you as we speak yet they will not find you. I have cast a spell upon them that shall

have them going in circles. If they should come near your position, they will neither see nor hear us.”

Audric drew his sword, feeling discomfort from the wizard’s words. “I will only ask you once more, what do you want from me?”

The wizard suddenly pointed his staff at him. Audric’s grip loosened as his sword was pulled magically from out of his hand. The blade floated in the air, remaining motionless between him and the wizard. “What I want is for you to remain calm. You have no reason to feel threatened by me, I assure you.” Farridan stamped the bottom of his staff upon the saturated ground. The sword quickly flew through the air back at Audric. Before he could react, the blade sheathed itself back at his side. “Now then, I wish to speak with you, Audric, on matters concerning you and Carina.”

Audric stared at the wizard sharply. “Why should I trust you?” he said, struggling to free his sword which remained stuck inside its scabbard.

“If you do not, I could see to it that your father’s men discover you and have you restrained the rest of the journey to Lacamas.”

Audric thought for a moment over the wizard’s comment. Hearing the voices of his father’s soldiers within the forest, he finally spoke. “What do you know about me and Carina?”

Audric followed the wizard north through the forest. He kept a close eye on his surroundings; memorizing landmarks that could help guide him back to the forest’s main road if the wizard were to betray his trust and needed to escape.

“You have nothing to fear, Audric,” said Farridan a few strides ahead of him. “As I said, I have no intention in harming you, only to lend a hand in your quest. What I know of you and Carina is that you both joined by the bonds of true love. I also know that Carina was taken from you by men from Cascadia. That is why I have interrupted your escape from your father’s men.” The wizard halted and faced him. “The kingdom of Lacamas may yet have an important role to play in the coming war between Cascadia and Evergreen. What role it may be remains unclear, but it is important that you follow your father’s orders and help rebuild Lacamas’ army.” He turned on his heel and began leading Audric through the thicket once again.

Audric shook his head in frustration. “I still don’t understand how you know all of this. Has my father spoken to you?”

“No,” replied Farridan. “I have the power of foresight, to see future events unfold.” Suddenly, there came a loud rustling from within the dense ferns and green-leafed plants growing across the forest’s floor. From out of the darkness leaped three giant Timberwolves, barking and snarling with their sharp pointed teeth. Audric’s charger reared back on its hind legs, nearly throwing the squire off its back from the horse-sized wolves’ sudden appearance.

The Timberwolves encircled and stared at them sharply, readying themselves to pounce. Farridan quickly extended his arm out, opening up his hand that had been clenched in a fist and pointed his long, bony fine fingers at the wolves. In a language unfamiliar to Audric, the wizard spoke to them in a commanding tone. As Audric began to think the wolves were going to attack them, they all sat upon the ground, staring up at the wizard with looks of faithfulness and loyalty in their eyes.

Farridan laughed, petting one of the large wolves' massive heads as it panted happily. "The Timberwolves of Heritage Woods, *vicious* guardians of the realm yet loyal to those who dwell here. We have reached our destination, young squire. My home lies just ahead." He removed his hat and pulled over his deep-violet cloak's large hood over his head. The wizard led the way as the Timberwolves trailed behind him along with Audric, bewildered by the experience, and following a safe distance behind.

"Here we are," said Farridan as they approached a small stone cottage nestled among a grove of oaks growing among the firs. Audric dismounted his charger as the three Timberwolves raced back into the thicket and disappeared. "Come inside, Audric." The wizard opened the thick, oak door and the two entered the dank cottage. "A little light would surely be useful." He tapped the bottom of his staff upon the stone floor. Multiple beams of yellow light shot out of the small crystal sphere atop the staff, shooting in multiple directions. The beams disappeared, and as they did candles illuminated the cottage's main room. The light revealed a stone fireplace with a hanging cauldron within it.

"Please, sit," said the wizard, pointing his staff at a large table and chairs in front of the fireplace. At once, flames arose from out of the ashes upon the stone hearth, licking the thick round logs beneath the cauldron. Audric sat at the end of the thick oak table, enjoying the fire's warmth. Farridan removed his cloak and seated himself across the table from Audric. "Now then, let us talk."

"You may not have realized this, Audric," began Farridan, "but while you have been courting Carina, Evergreen has been in grave danger. Your father may have spoken to you about the coming war with Cascadia only recently, but the truth is that this conflict has been brewing for some time now."

Audric nodded. "I know about the Cascadian King's desire for Evergreen lands, that he feels he has the right to claim lordship over them and expand his kingdom." He paused, staring off into thought at the flames waving wildly in the fireplace. "I just don't understand why my father wishes to send me to Lacamas. He says I'm not ready to become an Evergreen Chivalrous Knight, but with Carina's capture I feel more than ready to prove my quality."

The wizard pointed his long finger at him. "Doing this, you will *fail* and Carina will never see you or her homeland again. Harken to me, Audric, you must travel a different path in order to reunite with your beloved and successfully aid your countrymen in this war. Lacamas is your *first* of many destinations on this path. There, the Lake Kingdom faces its own crisis. Help them raise their army and stand with them against the challenge they face in the east. Then, you just may gain what your father wishes for you to attain in order to become a Chivalrous Knight."

Audric thought over his words for a moment and then finally spoke. "I must know, Farridan, what would happen if I disobey my father and attempt to rescue Carina on my own?"

The wizard sighed, finally giving a decisive nod. "Very well, Audric. I will show you what will happen should you decide to go through with such a decision." He sprinkled some sparkling powders into a bowl upon the table, mixing them magically with his hands swirling

over the bowl. A mysterious purple mist slowly began to swirl out of the bowl and float above the table. As the mist became thicker, its purple color transformed to the colors of the kingdom's landscape. A clear image of a battle between the armies of Cascadia and Evergreen appeared in the center of the swirling mist. Audric watched in awe as men on both sides of the battlefield fought; swords and shields clashing and colliding in a grand *melee, long banners of blue and white representing Cascadia and Evergreen's green and gold waving in the breeze.

Suddenly, Audric recognized himself in the midst of the battle. Riding hard into battle upon his charger, he fought the Cascadian soldiers and knights well enough at first but then, Audric watched the image of himself in horror as a Cascadian pike man drove his sharp pike into his side. The image of Audric fell from his horse and lay still upon the churned-up ground as the battle raged on all around his corpse. Audric continued watching the image as he then saw the image of his father suddenly finding him. Despite the fighting happening around him, his father dismounted his steed and fell upon his son's body, weeping heavily in grief.

As his father fought off Cascadian soldiers surrounding him and Audric's body, he was soon cut down by a mounted Cascadian knight. Audric stared in shock at the image of his father falling to his knees, finally collapsing upon his son's lifeless body. The image of the battle slowly disappeared into the deep purple mist. Audric looked back at the wizard with tears forming in his eyes. "Now," began the wizard gravely. "This is what shall happen if you were to hastily attempt to rescue your beloved." He looked up at the swirling mist and waved his hands in front of the cloud. An image appeared in its center once more, only this time it was of Audric sneaking into Baron Vinn's castle. Audric watched himself fight off a few castle knights and guards. He then made his way to the stairs leading up to the top of the tower Carina was held in. Suddenly, Baron Vinn and a squad of Cascadian soldiers rushed down the stairs and approached Audric. The soldiers quickly surrounded him as Vinn knocked him unconscious. The image then transformed and fast forward through time, revealing Audric locked and shackled in the castle's dungeon, withering away from lack of nourishment, old age, and defeat. The image slowly faded within the swirling mist. Audric gazed back at Farridan, this time with determination held in his hawk-like stare.

"This is what the future holds should you attempt such hasty and rash actions," said the wizard as the mist disappeared.

"Then I know what I must do," said Audric.

Farridan smiled thoughtfully. "So you have decided then?"

Audric nodded. "I shall go to Lacamas and from there I will enter the war with a strong Lacamas army."

The wizard stood and crossed the room, retrieving two items from the shelves lining the back wall. He returned to the table and placed before Audric a wavy-blade dagger and a small glass potion bottle with a purple liquid inside, stopped with a thick cork. "These items shall help you along your way. This charmed throwing-dagger shall always return back to you without needing to retrieve it." Audric took the dagger graciously as the wizard continued. "This potion shall make you light on your feet. Drink just a sip to rise off of the ground." Audric held the small potion bottle's long neck and swirled the liquid inside, watching it bubble and fizz.

"If ever you are in need of my help, Audric, simply ask for it and I shall be there," said Farridan. "Your path to preparedness for this war shall have more twists and turns than you may think. Patience and attention are the most important tools you will need. Good luck!"

"I will and thank you," said Audric. "I suppose I should find my escorts and be off then." Suddenly, there came a knock at the door.

The wizard smiled faintly. "I believe that is for you."

Audric stood and went to the door. Opening it, he found his father's soldiers standing before him with looks of relief. "Audric, thank goodness you are safe!" said the first soldier.

The squire turned and looked back at Farridan. "I guess they're not mad at me after all for running from them."

"Why would they be?" said the wizard. "They believe they had lost you while traveling through the forest." Audric smiled, giving a nod of thanks back at him. He and his small company then departed from the Heritage Woods and headed east. They left the Forest Kingdom of Evergreen behind them, passing into the kingdom of Lacamas as the golden morning light peered over the hilled frontier.

Locked in the castle's tower bedchamber, Carina continued trying to come up with an escape plan. She had first thought of tying the bed sheets together to create a rope to climb down the tower from out the window. Yet the chamber was too high for her to reach the ground safely. The thought of knocking the guard standing outside the chamber door unconscious also crossed her mind. 'I could knock on the door and say that I need more water,' thought Carina as she sat upon the end of the bed. 'The guard would enter, and then I would catch him off guard by hitting him over the head with that chamber pot.' She glanced over at the empty pot on the stone floor beside the bed.

Suddenly, a dull 'thud' sound came from outside the chamber, followed by an armored-body slamming into the thick oak door. The door burst open. Lying unconscious upon the stone floor in the doorway was the guard as a Cascadian knight, accompanied by a host of armored knights behind him, stepped over the guard and quickly entered the chamber. Carina stood rooted in shock as they approached her. At that moment, she noticed a large eight-pointed star upon their deep-blue cloaks embroidered in silver thread on their left shoulders.

"Who are you?" said Carina. "What do you want from me?"

"If you value your life, you will come with me," said the knight, extending his gauntlet-covered hand out to her. Looking back at the unconscious guard charged in keeping her locked in the bedchamber, Carina reluctantly took the knight's hand in hers. He and his company quickly escorted her out of the chamber and made their way down the tower's long, spiral stairs.

"Where are you taking me?" said Carina as the Cascadian knight and his men quietly led her out of the castle in the middle of the night. She put on the dark blue cloak and hood they had given to her as they traveled the city's now quiet streets.

"Out of the city," said the knight, his dark blue eyes fixed on the top of the city walls as he watched the guards posted along the *ramparts. They halted in a darkened alleyway towards the south end of the city. The knight waited patiently when finally, the guards began to rotate from their positions. "Now," the knight whispered to his men. They made it across the

cobblestone streets to the south gate, the guards along the walls above them unaware of them as they completed their rotation.

Standing in the dimly-lit entrance to the gatekeeper's shack, the hooded and cloaked gatekeeper waited for the knight to approach him with Carina. His thick brown beard dripped beads of glistening water as a light rain fell upon the city. "For your loyalty and discretion," said the knight, handing the gatekeeper a small tied leather sack. The gatekeeper opened the sack and pulled out a handful of gold coins. He watched the coins tumbled off his fingers, making a jingling-sound as they collected back into the sack. Giving a slight nod, he looked curiously at Carina. The gatekeeper lifted up the great plank of wood barricading the gate shut, opening the large arched doors just enough for the small company to make their leave on foot.

"Quickly now," whispered the knight, leading them into the darkness of the surrounding woods outside the city walls.

At dawn, Carina and her escorts reached the Serrin River and the Cascadian city of Briarwood along its shores. To the west upon the wide river, Cascadia's capital of Blairmount stood on its island in the middle of the rushing waters. Blairmount's countless torch and lamplights glowed in the distance amid the early dawn's dim light.

As they traveled through the city, Carina noticed the endless gardens Briarwood contained. Lush green lawns with pruned trees and shrubs, rose bushes containing brilliant red and pink roses bloomed and glistened with morning dew. Grey-stone statues of those regarded highly in Cascadia throughout the centuries stood amongst the greenery as if watching over the gardens. Large stone fountains flowed with the gentile trickling-sounds of water spilling over the edges of their wide-rimmed bowls.

At last they reached their destination atop a hilled area near the south end of the city. Carina was led to a castle overlooking the city and River on the tallest of the green hills. The castle's outer-walls were tall and made of thick grey stone blocks that dwarfed the height of the average man. Four square towers stood at each corner of the walls, their blue and white banners waved slowly in the breeze high above. And at the center of the hill, the walls surrounded a tall-gabled stone keep containing many glass-covered windows, balconies and blue and white banners hanging over the railings.

"Whose castle is this?" said Carina

The knight smiled faintly. "Briarwood Castle is my home." He and his men then escorted her through the gate and into the keep. They walked through the corridors filled with tapestries sewn with colorful threads depicting the Cascadia kingdom and its people, animals, and flowers. Suits of armor stood like sentries in the corners and nooks of the stone corridors. Swords, shields, and banners used in battles fought long ago hung proudly along the walls.

They reached the top levels of the keep as sunlight shined through the windows onto the stone floors. The knight approached a large door and opened it, gesturing for Carina to pass through it. She entered a large open sitting area with wide windows overlooking the Serrin River running east towards the looming mountain.

"Please, sit," said the knight. Carina chose one of the eight red-cushioned chairs encircling a long table in the center of the chamber. She sat facing the mountain dominating the

horizon. The knight removed his helmet and combed through his shoulder-length hair that matched the color of his hazel-brown eyes. His men filed into the chamber and sat at the table, removing their helmets as well. “Forgive me, for this must all seem confusing,” said the knight. “I am Johnathan, leader of the Order of the Star.”

“The Order of the Star?” said Carina.

“An Order once highly regarded in the kingdom,” said Johnathan. “My company and I swore allegiance to Cascadia, to stand against all enemies of the kingdom, to never retreat, and to protect the people at all costs. It is an oath we have taken and shall always follow, even against our King’s-will at this hour.”

“I see,” said Carina, looking curiously at his and all of his company’s determined-looking faces.

“The Order of the Star has long aided Cascadia’s armies to keep the kingdom’s enemies at bay,” said Johnathan. “We were once regarded as ‘A mighty force’ by the kings of old. Now, we are seen as outlaws, *traitors* to our country and people. This coming war King Reynard has declared upon Evergreen has split Cascadia in two. Though most have sided with the King for fear of what punishment may happen if they oppose him, there are still those who trust in the Order of the Star’s resistance movement.”

Carina nodded. “The man who captured me, Baron Vinn, he said I was to marry him, that there was some purpose to this in the coming war.”

Johnathan frowned. “It is as I’ve feared then. You are no doubt a maiden who shall one day have land inherited to you, are you not?”

“I am,” said Carina. “My father is a respected merchant. His skills in dealing with traders from all corners of the world have helped us prosper.”

The knight rested his stubble cheek against his hand as he placed his elbow upon the table. “King Reynard has become sly with his invasion tactics.”

“Are you saying,” began Carina, “I was taken so that I would be forced to marry the Baron, giving him the inheritance to my father’s land?”

“Not just you, my lady,” said Johnathan. “There are countless other maidens from Evergreen as well. You are but the first to be kidnapped and be forced to marry one of noble blood from Cascadia. The King seeks to not only wage war and claim the counties of Evergreen he believes are owed to him, but in secret he seeks to also gain even more of the kingdom’s territory. Through his noblemen’s marriages with the daughters of Evergreen with land and wealth attached to their names, Reynard may seek to take the throne of the Forest Kingdom.”

“King Geoffroi must be warned of this,” said Carina in a desperate tone and quickly stood from her seat.

“He will be, I assure you,” said the knight calmly. Slowly Carina sat back down, her light blue eyes gleaming with concern as she stared back at him. “Understand, my lady, that I have had a terrible feeling for months that this was indeed part of King Reynard’s plan to conquer Evergreen. I shall send a messenger at once to your King of this matter, as well as one to your father that you are safe now in the Order’s care.”

Carina glanced at him curiously. “Can I not return home now that you have rescued me from the Baron?”

“I’m afraid that cannot happen yet,” said Johnathan. “So long as we are at war and Baron Vinn continues his search for you, you will not be safe in Evergreen. The Baron is an expert tracker and will never stop hunting you. From my understanding of his desire for you, it is *very* strong.”

Carina shook her head. “How is it you know so much about him?”

Johnathan’s sad gaze strayed to the windows facing the capital in the distance to the west. “Once he was a knight of chivalry, a great leader in the Order of the Star. Yet his greed for land, titles, and wealth overpowered his will to do good and duty to protect the people of Cascadia. Our King shares these same desires, as you now know, and has used Vinn along with many other former knights of the Order to do his bidding in raiding towns and villages. Vinn is one of King Reynard’s fiercest and most tactical leaders in his army. He is also my brother.”

“Your brother?” said Carina surprised.

Johnathan nodded; a flicker of sadness flashed in his eyes. “As Vinn and the King’s other faithful servants bring back the spoils of their constant raids, Reynard has granted them titles, castles, land and wealth, leaving many of our countrymen to starve and become vulnerable to counter-attacks by those kingdoms he sends his men to raid.”

“How awful!” said Carina. “Why do the people of Cascadia not rise up and stand against your King? They would certainly have the Order of the Star to help protect them, wouldn’t they?”

Johnathan smiled. “They would, yet the King and his armies are at this time too strong for the Order to fight against. And the people, well, they have for too long been afraid to oppose King Reynard. Submission is all they know in order to live with some peace in their lives.” He paused, calling for a messenger to come forth to the table. “Send word to King Geoffroi of Evergreen of our King’s current intentions. Also, find Carina’s father and relay a message to him that his daughter is with us and well protected.”

“Please, sir,” Carina spoke up. “My love, Audric, son of Sir Bruce of White Oak Woods, must know of my welfare. His father’s castle lies just across the plains from my father’s house in Oakhurst.”

The knight gave a slight nod. “It shall be done.” He turned to his messenger and spoke. “Three messages in all must be sent at once. Wait for the cover of darkness tonight. There have been extra patrols of the King’s men along the River of late.” The messenger bowed and took his leave. “Come,” said Johnathan to Carina as he and his men stood from the table. “A bedchamber has been prepared for your stay here. If you wish to find some rest, I shall see you to your chamber.”

A warm fire burned in the bedchamber’s fireplace as Carina crossed the room to the windows looking out towards the west. She gazed lazily at the Cascadian capital in the far distance as the Serrin River slowly flowed by Briarwood towards the grand city in the distance. She retired to the soft bed covered in fur blankets and smooth white sheets.

‘Audric,’ she thought, concentrating her thoughts and energy on him. Lying upon the bed, she rested her head upon the pillows. ‘I am safe here. I am being watched over by honorable men wanting to protect me. I love you, and I pray that we find each other soon.’ Thinking of Audric holding her in his arms under the oak tree back home, Carina drifted off into a deep, peaceful sleep.

As Audric and his father's men rode across the Lacamas frontier, Audric suddenly felt a strong sense of calm that his beloved, Carina, was safe and unharmed. Thoughts of her sleeping peacefully under the protection of an ally of Evergreen entered his mind. Attached to those thoughts came a strong sense of peacefulness and love. He smiled faintly, feeling Carina somehow communicated to him that she was fine. 'I hear you,' he prayed, sending his own love to her.

They rode along a tall ridge and halted. Far below them spanned a wide lake surrounded by a vast pine forest. "There, my lord Audric," said the first soldier, pointing at the stone and wood-planked structures of a city across the lake along its banks. "The Lake City of Camndon, capital of Lacamas and home to King Keen."

Audric gave a nod and gazed above the tall, forested hills encircling the grand Lake. Snow-capped mountain peaks jutted up over the tree-lined hilltops to the south and east like jagged spear-heads. "Come, Audric," said the first soldier. "King Keen awaits you."

As Audric and his escorts followed the paths leading down the hills towards the Lake, they soon entered a dank forest spanning before the northern banks. Within the moss-covered fir tree forest, the air was thick with dampness. An uneasy feeling crept over Audric as he looked up at the canopies of the looming firs. Suddenly, he halted his charger. "There," he said, gaining the attention of his escorts as he pointed up at the long branches high above them. "There is movement above us, I have seen it." The swaying green bows became still once more as Audric's eyes shifted back to the soldiers. "We are being watched."

"Nonsense," said the first soldier. "This portion of the forest surrounding Fallen Leaf Lake has been empty for years. All who dwell near the banks of the Lake reside in the capital." At that moment, the soldier gave a look of shock as a throwing knife suddenly struck his neck. He closed his eyes and slumped off his horse, his armored body crashing hard upon the forest floor.

Audric drew his sword, remaining upon his mount as he looked desperately about his surroundings. Suddenly, high-pitched whistling sounds of arrows cut through the air. He looked to his other escorts when he watched in shock two black arrows with orange feathers strike them each through their chest plates. He quickly looked up, hearing the cracking and breaking-sounds of the branches above them. From out of the cover of the forest's canopy, a squad of five soldiers emerged donning thick black garb with leather *cuirasses of black and orange. Large black hoods covered their heads and black cloth masks concealed the lower half of their faces.

The soldiers leaped down from the trees and surrounded Audric, pointing ready arrows from their taut bowstrings. Audric, ready to take whatever action necessary to free himself from their trap, gripped his sword tightly as five pairs of sharp-staring eyes were on him from all sides. A knight then appeared riding upon his black steed from out of the thicket, carrying a long orange and black banner. He lifted his helmet's visor, revealing his stubble face and dark piercing eyes. His long cloak and hood, black on the outside and bright orange on the inside, draped over his plate armor.

"My men await my command to fire," said the knight. "Tell me who you are and why you are traveling through these parts, or you shall share the same fate as your company."

Reluctantly Audric spoke. "I am Audric of Evergreen, and I have come here to visit the Lake City."

The knight looked at him sharply, approaching Audric upon his steed. "Well, Audric of Evergreen, I find it strange that a squire of the Forest Kingdom, I presume from your garb, has strayed from his lands while war brews at its southern borders. What is it that you seek here in Lacamas?"

Audric looked at the bowmen around him as they pulled back their arrows aimed at him. He began to speak when a pair of arrows whistled through the air. The white arrows with red feathers struck two of the bowmen in the chest as they fell instantly to the ground. They all looked up, seeing two young maidens leaping and swinging off the thick fir branches above. They descended upon the armed company, both donning red and white-leather tunics and black boots. Their black cloaks and hoods waved wildly in the air as they jumped down from the treetops. The first fired two arrows at once from her bow, striking two more of the bowmen before they could react. The second maiden drew her long knives, flipping and twirling furiously in the air towards the last of the five bowmen. Finally, she leaped over the bewildered bowmen and reached around his back, driving her knives deep into his chest. The knight looked on, shocked and outraged by his men's sudden deaths.

"Raiding Lacamas villages again, Sir Creston?" said the first maiden. "I would have thought you and your King would have learned from our last two meetings."

"I say we send his corpse floating down the river back to Skamania," added the second maiden. "Maybe then our country shall have some peace."

The knight frowned yet gave a faint smile from her remark. The second maiden aimed a ready arrow from her bow at him as the first stood ready to attack with her knives.

"STOP!" said Audric. The two shield-maidens looked at each other confused, and then turned their attention to the squire. "This man had my escorts killed, yet spared my life. You now have slain his men. I ask that you now spare his life."

The first maiden looked at him as if he had spoken in an unrecognizable foreign tongue. "Uh, Squire-whomever-you-are, this knight you wish to set free is an enemy of Lacamas. He has been raiding, pillaging, and killing in our realm for years now."

Audric nodded. "I understand, yet this conflict began between his men and mine. I wish to send this man on his way." At that moment, a host of armed Lacamas soldiers appeared from out of the surrounding thicket. Riding their armored white chargers among them were three Lacamas knights, two carrying long red and black banners. Their thick plate armor covering them from head to toe. The two banner-carrying knights donned black cloaks and hoods while the knight riding in between them wore red.

The red-cloaked knight rode up beside Audric. The second shield-maiden leaned towards the first's ear and began to whisper. "It's about time they showed up."

The Lacamas knight looked down at the maidens and spoke. "I have heard this squire's request, and I respectfully accept it."

"But Captain Michael," said the first shield-maiden. "Sir Creston is too dangerous to set free."

The Captain gave a slight nod, and then turned his attention to the knight. "Then he should pray that his King never orders him to set foot in our lands again."

Sir Creston smirked and looked at Audric. "Your quality has truly shown today Audric, Squire of Evergreen. Until we meet again..." The Skamania knight reared his charger around and rode swiftly off into the Forest.

"Thank you," said Audric to Captain Michael.

Michael gave a nod. "Chivalry and the knight's code of conduct may be old ideals in this kingdom, but they are not yet lost among some here." He then looked to the two shield-maidens. "Sophie, Jill, escort Audric to the castle. Take the western road around the Lake. We shall catch up to you once you have arrived. We shall sweep the rest of the Lake's forests for any more Skamania raiders."

“Without *us*?” said Sophie.

Michael glared at her. “You have your orders, now go.”

Sophie turned abruptly and pushed pass Audric. “Come, squire. My sister and I will take you the rest of the way to Camndon.

As they hiked through the forest that rounded the western corner of the wide Lake, Audric followed closely behind the two maidens. Sophie kept her grey/blue eyes straight ahead, keeping a sharp lookout of their surroundings for any more Skamania raiders. Her smooth hazel-brown hair, cut short below her fair-skinned jaw line, swished side to side as she strode ahead. Jill however kept her kind, chestnut-colored eyes on Audric, unsure yet optimistic of the Evergreen squire’s intentions in his coming to Lacamas.

“So Audric,” began Jill again with yet another question. “Tell us about your home. Where in Evergreen do you live?”

Audric looked down from his seat upon his charger at Jill, her faint freckled-cheeked face looking up at him with a pleasant smile. Her short loose-curved brown hair cut short above her shoulders, swished back and forth as she strode to keep up beside him and his mount. He thought over the question a moment, then began thinking of the peace and serenity of the meadow between his father’s castle and the home of Carina and her father. He pictured in his mind the grand White Oak tree standing before Carina’s home beside the little creek running through the meadow. He imagined sitting against the tree’s thick trunk with Carina leaning back against him in his arms; the tree’s cool shade shielding them from the warm summer afternoon sun as they listened to the creek water trickle and bubble over shallow stones.

“Audric?” said Jill, awakening him from his thoughts.

“I live with my father in the county of Burton,” said Audric. “Like the rest of the kingdom, the county is part of a vast network of dense forests and woods, connected with small rivers and patches of green meadows and glades rich with fragrant wildflowers.”

Jill smiled. “It sounds nice there. So, what brings you to Lacamas? Why is our King expecting you?”

“*JILL!*” exclaimed Sophie, her voice echoing through the forest. She turned and faced her younger sister with a sharp look in her eyes. “You have done nothing but ask him questions since we parted from the army! Give him *and* your mouth some silence for a time.” She turned abruptly and began walking again ahead of them.

“I’m sorry, Sophie,” said Jill. “It’s just that we don’t often see travelers these days. King Darrin of Skamania has been sending raiders to our lands for years now, trying to demoralize Lacamas and cut trade from other lands. I wouldn’t be surprised if we went to war against Skamania in the near future.”

“Enough!” said Sophie in a frustrated tone. “If King Keen seeks an audience with Audric, then *he* should be the one to explain to him our situation with Skamania.” She peered through the trees, seeing that the Lake City of Camndon was not far. “We’re almost there, let’s keep moving.”

The path led through the forest to the banks of the still-watered Fallen-Leaf Lake. They trekked along the Lake's wide curve and reached its southern banks. There, the walled-capital city of Camndon stood surrounded by the forest climbing up the high hills beyond the city.

A short boardwalk along the water's edge led them to the city gate facing the Lake. "Quickly," said Sophie as they crossed the planked boardwalk towards the looming gate. "Before the gatekeeper drowns the boardwalk for the night."

The guards atop the towers on each side of the tall gate doors recognized the sisters and hollered for the gate to open. The thick oak-plank doors grumbled open as five armored guards behind each gate door pulled them open. Sophie led the way inside the city when Audric suddenly heard a dull clinking sound. He turned and watched in amazement the boardwalk lower into the water. As it vanished from sight, the guards closed the gate and sealed it for the night.

"How did the..." began Audric.

"Boardwalk sink?" interrupted Jill. "Do you see that wheel and handle attachment beside the gate?" Audric looked and saw the crank. "Beneath the boardwalk, chains pull it down and lock it beneath the water when the crank is turned. It rises again when the crank's lock is released.

Audric smiled. "Not exactly easy for enemies to breach the city gate."

"That's the idea," said Sophie joining the two. "Think of the boardwalk like a drawbridge, but instead of rising up to the wall it sinks below the surface. You may stable your horse there, Audric," she said, pointing at the city stables near the gate. "But be quick about it, his Highness is waiting for you."

The three treaded up the worn, dirt streets of the city through rows of tall, wood-planked houses and shops illuminated with lamps that glowed golden light in the waning dusk. Red, white and black banners hung along railings and displayed proudly in large intersections of the streets. Citizens of Camndon walked to and from the city's lively taverns and inns for dinner. The smell of warm bread and fresh fish frying in skillets wafted in the air and into Audric's nose, making him even hungrier than he had been.

Finally, they reached the castle which stood on top of a stout, rocky hill along the south end of the city. A deep spiral path carved into the rock led them up to the castle's outer wall gate. Long red and black banners waved sluggishly in the gentle breeze atop the sentry towers as the gate doors slowly opened.

"Ah, so you've finally arrived," came a voice from behind as they entered the *bailey. The three turned to find Captain Michael and his two accompanying knights waiting for them near the gate.

Sophie scowled. "You had us take the western road around the Lake, the *long* way here."

The Captain smiled faintly. "Yes, but it turned out to be the safest route for our guest's arrival here. We encountered more Skamania raiders along the Lake's eastern banks."

"With all due respect, Captain Michael, Jill and I should have been there to help. Have we not proven our worth yet?"

Michael nodded. "Time and again, you two have proven yourselves worthy to this army in many skirmishes and battles. But bringing Audric of Evergreen here unharmed is far more

important at this hour than fighting Skamania raiders. The King believes him to be a valuable resource for our army. To have had him killed or captured would have devastated our relations with King Geoffroi of Evergreen, as well as our good King's plans for the army and the future of our country."

"Well here he is, safe and sound!" said Jill happily, presenting the Evergreen squire to him.

"Audric, son of Sir Bruce of White Oak Woods," said the Captain. "My apologies for not properly introducing myself earlier. I am Michael, son of Crandole of Camndon, Captain of Lacamas' army. To my left is Sir Robert, son of Rian, and to my right is Sir Finlay, son of Kerr. We are honored to have you here at this hour, yet curious to know why our kings see you as such a valuable resource."

Sophie stepped forward. "We should delay King Keen's audience with Audric no longer than we already have."

"Yes, Sophie," replied Michael with a hint of irritation in his tone. "As always, your determination to *always* be punctual serves you well." He paused, taking in a calming breath and spoke again. "Thus the reason why Audric here is still alive I suppose." He turned to Audric and gave a warm smile. "Come, his majesty awaits you."

Audric entered the castle's great hall along with a small procession consisting of the two maiden sisters, Captain Michael and his two knight companions, Sir Robert and Sir Finlay, along with a small host of castle knights. They proceeded down the long red carpet stretching across the grey stone floor. The carpet led to a stone dais where the King sat upon his high-backed throne. Behind him, along the wall, hung large red, black and white banners stitched with the heraldic arms of a black hawk. The King stroked his bushy blonde beard, gazing at Audric curiously as they approached the dais. His regal garb included a large red mantle lined with thick black fur, a gold crown with three black and three red jewels encrusted around its base, and thick gold rings worn on four of his majesty's five thick fingers on each hand. Gripped in his right hand, the King held a long scepter bearing a large golden hawk at its top.

"So, he has come," replied the King with a faint smile, watching Audric approach the throne dais. All bowed before the King then stepped aside so only Audric remained standing before him. "Lacamas salutes you for coming here, Audric. According to your father's messenger, it was difficult for you to leave. I understand your beloved has been taken captive."

Audric nodded. "It has become clear to me recently that the road to rescuing her leads through Lacamas and my purpose here."

King Keen's eyes gazed kindly back at him, gleaming a look of astonishment at him. "Truly." He stood from his throne and walked down the three-stepped dais, his tall, lanky stature making him loom over Audric. "Understand, Audric. I am aware that time is of the essence for you, for your beloved, and for your country. I can appreciate your situation, for time is against *me* and my people. To the east our neighboring enemy of Skamania is readying for war. Their army is massing, which includes thousands of mercenaries from neighboring realms. King Darrin has sent hundreds of raiders across Lacamas to spread terror and demoralize my people. So far, they have done a good job in doing so. Villages have burned, women and children captured to become slaves, unarmed men have died at the ends of Skamania blades, and what gold and possessions they had taken." He sighed, his light-blue eyes looking wearily back at

Audric. “Lacamas’ army is weak. We are too few in numbers, many future soldiers are still in training.” He leaned towards him, placing a hand upon the squire’s shoulder. “Would you offer me your service, Audric?”

Audric’s eyes strayed from the King. “Of all the most noble and honored Chivalrous Knights of Evergreen, all of the brave men deemed worthy for their feats in battles and quests, why have you asked for the aid of a squire who has yet to accomplish anything heroic, chivalrous or brave to anyone?”

The Lacamas King gazed down at him fondly. “Such humble words, I would not have expected anything less from a future Chivalrous Knight of Evergreen, let alone the son of Sir Bruce of White Oak Woods, a Chivalrous Knight highly regarded as one of your King’s finest warriors. Your father, an honorable knight, a good man and a good friend, wrote to me recently of your great potential in becoming a strong, Chivalrous Knight of Evergreen. Yet he says that you still lack some advanced skills.”

“Your Highness?” said Audric, not understanding.

King Keen nodded. “Engaging multiple enemies in combat, *advance* skills with a sword and shield, learning how to become strategic in warfare, and many other areas that your father wishes for you to learn and apply within my army. He speaks of you being a born leader, and a *master* swordsman. Allow yourself to discover it within you and rise as a knight of chivalry and honor.”

Audric looked into the King’s eyes, seeing complete truth and honesty within them. There was no hidden agenda, no lies or deception. A brief moment of silence fell upon the great hall as the two sisters, Captain Michael, and Michael’s men looked on with anticipation of what Audric’s reply would be. Audric stepped back and knelt on one knee before the Lake Kingdom King. “I offer my service to you, your Majesty.”

Keen laughed heartily and spoke. “So humble this young squire is, how marvelous!” he said, noticing the relieved faces of all watching in the great hall. “My first command to you is to rise. Rise a Squire of Lacamas and future knight of my kingdom.”

Audric stood as Sophie and Jill approached him from behind. They placed over his head and shoulders a black cloak and hood, trimmed with red and white-knotted embroidery. He looked at the both of them, seeing Jill gazing proudly at him. He then noticed in Sophie’s eyes a slight hope for him, yet at the same time pessimism and uncertainty.

“My second command to you,” began the King again, “is that you dine with us at this time and sit at the King’s table so that we may talk more.”

A great feast was held in the castle’s dining hall where the King’s entire court, dressed in their fine regal attire, ate and mingled at long tables lining the stone walls. Playing among the noise of all the conversations echoing in the hall, a small band of musicians played soothing music from their harp, flute, lute, and drums. Mouthwatering scents of roast chicken, seasoned vegetables, and fresh baked bread filled the hall as the platters sat among silver plates of glistening red and green grapes, silver goblets brimming with red wine, and full pints of golden *mead. As guests ate at the surrounding tables, many glanced curiously at the squire from Evergreen. Audric continued eating nervously beside the King at the King’s table, pretending to not see them.

“Audric,” said King Keen, his speech muffled from his mouth still full with chewed food. “Is something wrong? Food such as this is to be savored and enjoyed! You eat as if you had just been released from the dungeons.”

Audric, suddenly realizing the fast-pace of his eating stopped a moment, dabbing his napkin against his mouth. “I beg your pardon, your Highness.”

The King then noticed a few of those on his court glancing at Audric and whispering about him to each other. “Fear not, Audric. Do not be so nervous over them. ‘Tis been many years since we have had an honored guest.”

“What about one who is believed by their King to help raise Lacamas’ army and win a war?” said Audric, noticing more and more glances and whispers concerning him.

Keen smiled. “Fair enough.” He stood with his goblet in hand. All in the hall fell silent. “Lords and Ladies, it is an honor to break bread with you all and enjoy this great bounty with Lacamas’ future knight, Audric of Evergreen, son of Bruce of White Oak Woods, an honored, Chivalrous Knight and distant relation to King Geoffroi, Lord of the Forest Kingdom.”

What looked at first to Audric as suspicion in many of the guests’ eyes had quickly turned to joy and relief as the entire hall erupted in applause. Keen gestured to Audric for him to stand. Reluctantly Audric stood, giving a nervous wave. “We have in our midst a future Chivalrous Knight of Evergreen, here with us now to help lead the charge in the coming war against Skamania.” More applause sounded as the King raised his goblet. “For Lacamas and victory!” All raised their goblets and then drank as one. Keen sat back down as conversations arose once more in the hall.

“Feel better?” said the King as Audric took his seat.

“Yes, your Highness,” said Audric hesitantly, feeling even more pressure than before about the role he was to play in the Lake Kingdom.

Keen smiled thoughtfully. “You are a humble and chivalrous young man, Audric, which makes you a *terrible* liar. There is no need to hide your feelings from me. I see in your eyes the concern you try to hide. Much has been placed upon your shoulders of late, I know this.” He pushed away from the table and extended his left leg out for Audric to see. He lifted his red and white robe, revealing his right leg was a solid wood replacement. “Since I first understood the costs of war, I had always feared losing a limb. The very idea of it gave me nightmares as a child. I was but a young prince, defending my country against the northern barbarian hords. My father had placed me as General of Lacamas’ army when I was but sixteen. As nervous as I was about what responsibilities such a position of power held, I was even more concerned about letting my men down. Over the course of the war, I had proven myself to them to be an effective leader as little by little, we regained our footing against the enemy by reclaiming lost territory. It was the final battle that nearly saw Lacamas loose the entire war that my leg fell victim to an enemy blade.”

“How did the battle end?” said Audric.

The King sighed inwardly as he stared down at his wooden leg. “The battle was nearing its end as we held our enemy outside Lacamas’ northern borders. But then, the unexpected happened. What we thought to be an army of five to eight-thousand men suddenly doubled as reinforcements from the northern territories arrived and began attacking our left flank. With our men already weary from the battle now facing fresh warriors surrounding them, they began to retreat.” Keen paused, his eyes straying towards the great fire burning in the fire pit in the center of the hall. “At that moment I knew I had to act. The barbarians would have surely overthrown our weakening army, if not the entire kingdom if the whole of the army were to

retreat. As many turned and began retreating back across Lacamas' borders, I rode my charger with sword in hand the other direction. I began ripping through the barbarian ranks, cutting them down one-by-one as my brave steed trampled any who dare stood in my path. Seeing this, many of my men turned back and returned to the fray, red and black banners flying high as they charged against the fresh ranks of the enemy. Yet before my brothers-in-arms could reach me, I was thrown from my mount. It was then that as I tried to get back onto my feet, my leg was severed from my body. How the blade that took my leg cut through my armor still baffles me to this day. But what I do know, my brave squire, is that my will to act that day when others were retreating helped to change the course of the battle, ultimately winning the war." He looked back at Audric who gazed at him with slight confusion revealed in his eyes.

"My point is that your fears, whatever they may be that you're choosing to hide, are natural to feel. Only when you decide to confront those fears head-on and choose to overcome them, you shall be forever changed into something truly great." He placed a comforting hand upon Audric's shoulder. "Your father believes in you, Audric, as does King Geoffroi. Now it is time for you to decide if you truly believe in yourself."

Audric gave a slight nod. "Thank you, your Highness. I swear to do all that I can to see Lacamas through this coming war."

"It is all I ask of you," replied the King as the two touched their goblets together and drank to Lacamas' future.

"Good gracious!" said Godfrey. "You really sat at the Lacamas King's side as an honored guest?"

"I did," said Audric, cracking a humble smile. "It was a night I shall never forget. King Keen's words of encouragement launched me into a greater state of confidence in myself. Though this gift of renewed confidence would soon be challenged by Lacamas' own army. The following day, I was introduced to the knights of Camndon, Lacamas' finest knights. I was met by Captain Michael, Sir Robert, and Sir Finlay along with the two maidens, Sophie and Jill. It was that day I began confronting my fears, and my self-confidence was the first to be challenged."



Chapter Three Two Captured



"Knights of Camndon," began Michael, standing before the capital's five hundred knights. Beside the Captain stood Audric and behind them both were Sophie and Jill, along with Michael's trusted friends, Sir Robert and Sir Finlay. "This is Audric of Evergreen, son of Sir Bruce of White Oak Woods, an honored Chivalrous Knight of the kingdom and close relation to

Evergreen's King Geoffroi. Audric has come to help strengthen our struggling army with valuable knowledge and skills he has gained as Bruce's squire."

"So," came a gruff voice out of the sea of knights. One knight stepped forward from out of the crowd and approached Audric. "This is the squire that has gained the attention of our King." He looked over Audric from head to toe and scoffed. "What possible use could this inexperienced foreign squire be to us? Tell me, Audric, have you ever been in combat? Have you ever engaged a man in a fight to the death?" His dark, piercing eyes stared at Audric's as he took a step closer, now only inches from Audric's face. "Have you ever even experienced the surroundings of a battlefield, the screams of unimaginable pain and the horror of those dying around you?"

Audric, remaining calm in the midst of the knight's aggression towards him, simply looked back at him with a bold stare. "*WELL?*" exclaimed the knight, demanding an answer. Audric continued to remain silent, keeping his composure. "*Humph,*" expelled the knight. "That's what I thought. Our King has placed his trust on a *squire* who has nothing to share or contribute to this army."

"*Enough, Gavin!*" exclaimed Michael. "If King Keen believes Audric can help, then we must give him a chance."

"All right," said Gavin, glaring at Audric and drew his sword. "Let us see what skills he has brought. Just *what* can you do to strengthen our army, squire?" The knights then encircled around Audric and Gavin, leaving space for the two to duel. Audric drew his sword, his mind racing to remember his training to remain calm and keep his focus when engaging in a duel.

Gavin quickly came at him furiously with swift slashes from his sword. Audric quickly dodged his attacks. He swung his sword upward, countering Gavin's blade with an ear-piercing ringing. The two began to duel as Audric stood his ground, blocking the Camndon knight's attacks as Gavin swung and slashed his sword at him with pure aggression. Finally, after countless blocks, Audric found his moment to gain the upper-hand as the knight's moves began to miss him from his weariness of constantly swinging his blade. Audric quickened his pace, slashing his sword even faster at Gavin and putting the knight on the defensive. He hit Gavin's sword hard with every strike, sending him stumbling backwards.

As Gavin began to barely handle the barrage of attacks Audric administered, Audric struck his blade fiercely at the knight's, forcing Gavin to release it. The sword sailed through the air and stabbed into the ground before Michael's feet. Audric lifted his sword, pointing it at the knight's throat. Gavin, breathing heavily, gave a slight nod to another knight on his left. The knight quickly entered the circle, taking Gavin's place and began fighting Audric. Gavin stepped outside the space, watching the duel in frustration. Audric once again quickly got the best of the knight as he drew him out of the circle with swift strikes. One by one, the Camndon knights fought Audric individually, each one soon being out-matched and either tumbling out of the space, or forced out by Audric's precise and powerful strikes.

After numerous matches, Michael called for his fellow knights to stop. The knights halted entering the circle, seeing Audric breathing heavily and staring at them wearily with his ready sword still in hand. "*That's* the spirit, Audric!" yelled Michael excitedly, stepping inside the circle, putting his arm around the exhausted squire. "That is the spirit this army needs to strengthen and become great once more! Long has it been since Lacamas has seen one of its knights stand alone, fighting against many until he can no longer stand; fighting until he no longer draws breath." He stood before Audric, looking upon him proudly. "Sheath your sword, you have proven your worth enough today." Exhausted, Audric nodded and slowly sheathed his

blade, seeing Sir Gavin glaring at him amid his fellow knights he had defeated. “Tomorrow, we begin rebuilding Lacamas’ army. No more shall our defenses be seen as weak and vulnerable to our allies and enemies.”

Audric sat alone upon a stone bench in Camndon Castle’s torch-lit courtyard, thinking over what had happened between him and Camndon’s knights.

“That was quite the introduction you had today,” came a voice from behind. Audric turned, seeing Sophie approach and sitting beside him upon the bench.

Audric smiled faintly. “I suppose I had it coming. A squire from a foreign land, who has never been in combat, being introduced as a key in helping to strengthen their army. If I were them, I probably would have challenged me the way they did too.”

Sophie cracked a rare smile as her eyes strayed to the ground. “You did well today. I believe you made an impression upon the knights that will spread throughout the entire army tonight.”

Audric nodded, remaining silent as he watched one of the courtyard’s maple trees’ bows sway above them in the light breeze. Finally, he spoke. “Before I came here, I wanted greatly to be knighted in my country. I wanted to assemble a host of soldiers to accompany me to Cascadia to rescue my beloved, Carina, who was taken from me. Yet now that I have been granted this chance to become a knight of Lacamas, to lead men into battle, I feel my confidence in doing so is not as high as it once was.” He looked over at Sophie, who was watching him with a stern look in her eyes. “Your King is an honorable sire. He believes I can make a difference here. I just cannot see how that’s possible.”

Sophie nodded. “When you were home, you had a strong desire and purpose to be knighted. Your beloved was taken from you by the enemy. Your country, your very *home* has been threatened with war. Could it be you are not in such a rush to fight in our war because your own cause for going to war, your beloved, has nothing to do with Lacamas’ own cause?”

Audric shook his head. “I must help raise Lacamas’ army and aid in what ways I can. Then I can return to Evergreen a knight and join in the war effort against Cascadia.”

Sophie looked sharply back at him. “Do not fool yourself, Audric. I understand it all now. Carina is the only reason you wanted to fight in Evergreen’s coming war. You speak of wanting to be a chivalrous and honorable knight? Then stop the lies! Your focus has been solely on *her* and no others! I hear you speak, and what I hear is that only a small part of you wishes to help any others.” She stood and began to make her leave. “If you truly wish to be a knight, not just for your kingdom, but for *yourself*, then honor your father and your King’s commands and help us.” She left the courtyard as Audric thought over what she had said.

‘She’s right,’ he thought. ‘Since my departure from home, I have been thinking only of rescuing Carina, and somehow I must. Perhaps my determination to reach her has blinded me from how to rescue her in the first place.’ He stood from the stone bench, taking in a deep breath as another light breeze swept across the grounds, caressing his face. ‘Perhaps it is time I focus a little less on my own needs for now and more on those of Lacamas. I shall Carina with my chivalry intact.’

That night, Audric retired to a bedchamber the King had prepared for him in one of the castle's towers. He found no rest though, for much weighed upon his mind about his purpose in the Lake Kingdom. Suddenly, a knocking came from outside the chamber door. Audric crossed the candle-lit chamber and opened the door. "Jill, Captain Michael," he said, surprised of their late visit.

"Good evening, Audric," said Jill, her dark eyes holding concern in them.

"What brings you two here at this late hour?" said Audric.

"Sophie told Jill she had spoken to you earlier this evening," said Michael.

Jill shook her head in dismay. "She seemed more irritated than usual and would not say what you two talked about. But if she had said anything that might have swayed you to wish to leave, please tell us."

"I shall personally speak with Sophie about how we treat honored guests here to help our kingdom," added Michael.

"My lord," began Audric, but was immediately interrupted by Jill.

"Please, Audric," said Jill, "you mustn't leave yet. My sister can be harsh with her words sometimes. Do not allow whatever she may have said be the voice of the people and the army."

Audric smiled faintly as he held his hands up for their silence. "Sophie and I had an important and illuminating conversation earlier about my focus on the coming wars." His eyes strayed to the ground as he thought of Carina. "I would give all that I have and more to be looking for Carina right now. Yet if I am to ever find her, my focus must first be on the people of Lacamas and helping you achieve victory over Skamania."

Jill's look of concern for him melted into a thoughtful gaze as she stepped towards him, placing a gentle hand upon his arm. "Audric, Sophie may have had a point about the importance of your focus being on us right now, but do not believe it means that you must put aside your beloved Carina." Audric's eyes began to slowly well-up with tears. Hearing her words of acceptance, mingled with the idea of forcing to set aside his feelings of Carina, flared a sadness which rippled throughout his body and soul.

"Audric," began Jill again in a soft, compassionate tone. "What I saw today when you fought many of Lacamas' finest knights was a squire proving his worth, but a man determined to confront and fight until he cannot stand, can no longer lift his sword until he draws his final breath. It is *Carina* who draws all of this from you, doesn't she?"

Audric quickly regained his composure, giving a slight nod.

"You see, Audric," said Michael. "All knights have their own personal motivations to help elevate themselves to greatness, if they so choose to reach such heights. For now, your *focus* is Lacamas and our people. Yet your *motivation* will forever be her."

Audric nodded, thanking the Captain and Jill for their visit as they bid each other good night. "Until tomorrow, Audric," called out Michael as he and Jill began walking down the winding tower stairs. "Today, you have ignited the fire back into our army!"

As the brilliant glow of the early morning dawn creped above the hills surrounding Fallen-Leaf Lake, Audric walked along the torch-lit city's outer walls facing the mirrored Lake waters. The croaking-sounds of hundreds of tree-frogs around the great Lake, combined with

sweet melodies of chirping robins and finches perched in the distant firs filled the still, crisp autumn air. As he rounded the wall's corner sentry tower, Audric stopped in his tracks. Before him stood King Keen with a smirk across his lips and was staring at him curiously.

"You are not leaving us already, are you?" said Keen.

"No, your highness," said Audric. "I was just observing the city's walls and grounds. My father had taught me to search for weak areas in a city's and castle's walls. I thought I would put that lesson into practice this morning."

The King gave a slight nod. "Well? Have you found anything?"

Audric pointed at the wall to the left of the city gate. "I have noticed an area of the wall that could possibly be compromised. The stone is not as thick on this section. If that were to be known by an enemy, they could focus their strength here and break through. But what I am most concerned about is the city gate and the greater possibility of it being breeched."

"Breeched?" said Keen concernedly. "Breeched how? Is it not enough that once the boardwalk is submerged beneath the water, any invading force would have nearly ten feet deep of water between them and the gate?"

"What you say is true, your highness," said Audric. "Though have you not considered the possibility of invaders, such as the Skamanians, supplying themselves with rafts or boats to cross the Lake and attack the gate head-on? What about the possibilities of them planting men within the city, disguised as folk of Camndon, and raise the boardwalk by force once the invaders reach the gate?"

Keen laughed heartily. "Young Sir, this capital has stood for five-hundred years! In no point in Lacamas' history has any army entered this city. Your concern for the well-being and safety of Camndon is welcomed, yet your call for alarm over *wild* ideas of being overrun is unnecessary. I have my kingdom's finest knights guarding this city, along with Lacamas' other cities and towns. With your help, my army shall once again be strong enough to drive back any enemy force, no matter how great in numbers they may be." He paused, placing a comforting hand upon Audric's shoulder. "We shall meet our enemy upon the battlefield, near the Skamania boarder to the east. Not here along my city's walls."

"Yes, your highness," said Audric, convinced the King would hear no more of his warnings.

Keen searched his face. "You look tired. Did you not find any rest last night?"

"Some," replied Audric, glancing away from him as he knew what the King would say next.

"Well, there you have it," said Keen in a relieved tone. "Your weariness is driving you to be a little more cautious, perhaps even slightly paranoid of your surroundings."

Reluctantly, Audric gave a begrudging nod. He believed strongly from his education and training through his father that the potential of an attack on any city during wartime was always a possibility. He believed it to be wise to view any and all scenarios that may occur whether they had happened in the past or not. "Yes, your highness."

"Good," said the King. "Now then, find some rest before you report to the barracks today. I want my men to have you at peak performance, mentally and physically."

The King left him, returning back to the castle as Audric continued walking along the outer-walls of the city. He was not convinced the capital was impenetrable, that if the war were to reach Camndon, there were ways for the enemy to break through its defenses.

'If I have seen such weaknesses in the walls and city gate, then who is to say spies from Skamania have not seen them as well?' thought Audric. 'Why will the King not listen to me?'

Has his confidence blinded him from reality?’ Audric could feel once again the weight of responsibility begin to crush his confidence.

Suddenly, Audric felt something hard strike the back of his head. A sharp pain followed as it travelled swiftly through his head. He turned to discover Sir Creston and three of his men disguised as Camndon peasants. The Skamania knight quickly stowed his sword back in its scabbard. Audric quickly realized the knight had used the blunt bottom of the sword’s hilt to strike him. His vision began to blur, then darkness shrouded his sight as he collapsed to the ground.

“Good gracious!” said Godfrey. “You were captured right in front of the capital?”

Audric nodded, holding in his hands the warm cup of steaming tea. “I warned King Keen about the possibility of the enemy disguising themselves. Yet as I said, I was denounced in that instance as simply being overly concerned.”

“Such *arrogance* his majesty showed that day,” said Godfrey.

“It could be argued that the King displayed arrogance,” said Audric. “Or that he was overly confident in his fledgling army. By this time the men had been showing signs of becoming strong and confident once more.”

Godfrey carefully placed another log upon the fire in the stone fireplace, bringing its flames back to vigorous life. “So my daughter, *and* you, had been captured then?” he said with a playful smile.

Audric grinned. “I was. And as my captors took me quietly out of Lacamas by way of boat down the Serrin River and into Skamania, Carina and the Order of the Star were experiencing their own problems.”

Sir Vinn of Magilvary, along with a host of twenty of his finest knights, rode swiftly through the city of Briarwood and reached Briarwood Castle’s gate.

“By order of the King, I *order* you open this gate and bring Johnathan to me!” barked Vinn to the guards.

“Open the gate,” said Johnathan from behind the large arched gate doors. The doors grumbled open and the Cascadian Baron and his men rode into the castle’s bailey, dismounting their steeds and stood ready to fight behind Vinn. The Baron approached Johnathan as castle guards filed out of the keep and stood with ready swords and shields in hand.

“Brother,” said Johnathan in a pleasant tone. “This is an unexpected surprise. What brings you to Briarwood?”

Vinn stared sharply back at him. “Someone was taken from me.”

“Someone?” said Johnathan. “Who?”

“A maiden from Evergreen. She was taken from my castle two nights ago. I have come here to ask if you know anything about this.”

Johnathan continued to stare blankly back at Vinn. “Vinn, how would I know any of your personal business? We have not spoken since you left the Order of the Star years ago.”

“Rumors involving me and those *loyal* to his highness spread quickly through cities like yours,” replied Vinn. “I’m well aware of the kind of people you harbor and protect here, brother. Enemies of the crown, people who would see our King hanged. The kind of folk from this kingdom that would begin an uprising, had they the arms, the numbers to stand against his highness’ army.” He stared hard into Johnathan’s eyes. “The Order of the Star was once a force no army in the world ever wished to face in battle. Now the Order’s numbers have dwindled, its members being nothing more than rabble-rousers and propagandists. Why, brother, do you continue to lead what many, including myself and King Reynard, see as a ‘dead unit’ of the army?”

Johnathan looked back at him boldly. “I lead the Order because of its Oath of Chivalry I had taken when you and I had joined years ago.”

Vinn shook his head in frustration. “You defy our King by being associated with the Order, let alone lead it. Why Reynard does not dissolve the Order is beyond me.”

Johnathan smiled faintly. “It has been part of Cascadia’s history for centuries. Besides, the King has plenty of other issues vexing him at this hour than to waste his time thinking about the Order of the Star.”

Vinn gave a slight grin. “Why not join me, brother? Your talents are being wasted on this old, outdated company of the army. The King could use a knight like you to fight in the coming war against Evergreen. Do you not see that The Order of the Star has become nothing more than a glorified defense unit? Why not join me on the offensive and fight for what’s rightfully the King’s?”

The knight looked back at Vinn defiantly. “That is the difference between you and me, brother. I do not seek to gain what is not mine and what is arguably *not* our King’s. By remaining in the Order of the Star, the Oath of Chivalry does not allow the King of Cascadia to give us orders or to do his will. We are an army for our people. We shall stand our ground in defending Cascadia. The Order will not fight for Reynard’s greed to rob other countries, including kidnapping foreign maidens with titles of land and riches attached to their names.”

Vinn glared at him. “Rich foreign maidens, another rumor the Order is distributing across the kingdom?”

“Is that not why you have come here?” said Johnathan. “To find the maiden *you* had taken from her homeland?”

The Baron’s face began to turn red with boiling anger. “Tell me, brother, if I were to have your castle and city searched, would I find what I’m looking for?”

Choosing his words carefully, Johnathan spoke. “Search all you like, but I assure you that you will not find what you are looking for.”

Vinn searched his brother’s eyes a moment, seeing if he was hiding anything from him. Finally, he spoke. “I have no time for games.” Suddenly, a messenger passed through the gate, handing the Baron a message. Vinn quickly read the scroll and turned to his men. “Carina has been spotted near the outskirts of Blairmount.” The host of soldiers mounted their chargers as Vinn did the same and prepared to leave. He reared his horse around to face Johnathan one last time. “If I find that you have lied to me, I shall see to it that the King has you stripped of your titles and land. The Blairmount Castle dungeons shall be you and your men’s new residence. I suggest if you learn of any information on my future wife’s whereabouts, you inform me immediately.” The Baron and his company quickly rode off back through the city and headed west towards Cascadia’s capital.

“That was close,” said Carina, stepping out of the gatekeeper’s house.

Johnathan smiled thoughtfully at her and began leading them back into the keep. “Come, we have a war to plan for.”

“North Wood, Fircrest and Hearthwood are the only Evergreen counties with access into the Forest Kingdom,” said Captain Johnathan, looking over a large map of Evergreen and Cascadia with his fellow knights and Carina.

“There is also this entrance into Evergreen as well,” said Sir Lucas. “Cimarron County along Evergreen’s eastern borders.”

Johnathan nodded. “Yes, yet I do not believe King Reynard would be so bold as to march his men through the lands of Lacamas, Evergreen’s alley. No, he would remain cautious and send his men full-force into these counties across our borders to the north.” He paused and looked over at Carina who was quietly studying the large map. “Carina, where do you see Evergreen’s weakest areas for Cascadia’s army to invade?”

Carina traced her finger over the border dividing Cascadia and Evergreen. She finally placed her fingertip over the county of Hearthwood. “Hearthwood’s defenses are not as strong as they once were decades ago. It also lies directly across from Cascadia’s capital of Blairmount, here,” she said, drawing an imaginary line with her finger between the borders of Evergreen and the River City of Blairmount. “If I were King of Cascadia, I would assemble my army in Blairmount and attack directly north into Hearthwood. I would also send a force to North Wood County,” she said, drawing her finger towards Evergreen’s western borders. “This county has few garrisons left since the end of the Thirty-Year War with Caipolton, our old enemy to the west.”

“As I understand it,” began Johnathan, “the kingdoms of Caipolton and Evergreen still have all of their trade routes closed between them, severing all communications with each other since the end of the war.”

Carina nodded. “Tensions still run high between the neighboring counties of both kingdoms. Both peoples believe land is owed to them after what had been taken from each side during the war. But once the new border was drawn and agreed upon by the late kings of both kingdoms, only frustration and distain for each other fester in the hearts of land owners on both sides of the border. How are relations between Cascadia and Caipolton?”

Johnathan breathed out. “Trade and commerce have increased each year between us and Caipolton. The kingdom’s King Brom has instigated small invasions and raids to his neighboring countries to the north, just as our King has done to lands south of Cascadia. Both Kings have grown rich from others’ collective wealth. King Reynard will include Caipolton in his coming war, yet how and for what purpose we do not know.”

“Perhaps there is a way to know,” said Carina.

“How?” said Johnathan, suddenly looking at her suspiciously.

“By having Baron Vinn hold me captive in Blairmount Castle. I could gain valuable information from your King’s private conversations with the Baron and pass it on to you.”

Johnathan looked at her sternly. “Do not be absurd, my lady. I shall not allow you to be in our enemy’s hands. If he captures you, there is no telling what might happen to you.”

Carina smiled thoughtfully at the captain. “You must trust me, Johnathan. I have come up with a plan that will work in receiving, and sending you, information before and during the

war. It can help you and the Order aid my good King and foil King Reynard's invasion on Evergreen."

"If you are so confident, you will tell me your plan," said Johnathan.

"I will," said Carina. "Though only with you, in confidence."

Johnathan looked about the war room at his men. He trusted each man with his life, all he had fought in battles alongside with and knew their chivalry was strong and unbending. They would not repeat a word that would be spoken by Carina. Yet the maiden from Evergreen remained insistent. "Let us talk in private then," he said, escorting Carina to a chamber adjacent to the war room.

For nearly an hour, they spoke together behind closed doors as the knights of the Order quietly mingled, wondering and questioning what was being said between their captain and the maiden of Evergreen. Finally, the door opened and both Johnathan and Carina stepped back inside the war room.

"An agreement has been made," said Johnathan to his fellow knights. "We are to stage Carina's capture to my brother, Vinn, on one condition. Sir Erec and Sir Thomas, the two of you will accompany Carina as her personal guards. Watch and protect her with your lives."

"But Captain Johnathan," said Sir Erec, "how shall Carina be captive in Blairmount if we are to hand her over to Baron Vinn? Will he not take her back to his castle in Magilvary?"

Johnathan and Carina smiled faintly at each other, both thinking of the piece of the plan they kept quietly to themselves for the time being. "All shall be revealed in time," said Johnathan. "For now, we must trust in our plan to have Vinn take her. By doing this, we shall earn Vinn's trust, as well as the King's. It will hopefully shift their attention off of the Order and allow us to move forward with our plans for the coming war." He sent for a messenger, ordering him once he arrived to find Baron Vinn. "Tell the Baron of Magilvary that the maiden he searches for has been found. She may be retrieved here at the castle."

The messenger quickly rode out of the city as Johnathan and Carina watched him from the war room windows. He soon disappeared from their sight towards the grand capital of Blairmount in the far distance. "All is now set in motion," said Johnathan, gazing at the capital.

"Yes," said Carina. "Today marks a new beginning for the people of Cascadia, and the beginning of the end of their King's tyranny."

That night, Vinn and his men returned to Briarwood castle and met Johnathan at the castle gate. Along with Johnathan was Carina, her hands bound with Sir Erec and Sir Thomas standing guard behind her.

"I was wrong about you, Johnathan," said Vinn. "After leaving here earlier, I began questioning if you had misled me, that you were indeed hiding her from me. But now I see that you and the Order of the Star are not as disloyal and mischievous as I thought." Johnathan nodded and gestured for the two knights to hand over Carina to Vinn. "As for you," said the Baron, staring sharply at Carina. "You will submit to me, or I shall see to it that you never see the light of day." The two knights then helped Carina up onto the front of Vinn's charger.

"Where will you take her, brother?" said Johnathan. "Back to your castle in Magilvary?"

“No,” said Vinn abruptly. “My castle guards have proven they cannot prevent her from escaping my own home! I have matters to attend to in Blairmount in the coming weeks leading up to the war. She shall accompany me there and remain under the watchful eyes of the King’s castle-knights. There is no escaping the heavily-guarded Blairmount castle, nor can anyone wishing to rescue her enter it.”

Johnathan smiled faintly. “Smart of you to have her within your reach while you are away from Magilvary. I wish to also include with your future wife two of my finest knights. They shall make sure that she does not escape from you again. Please consider this an offering of assurance from the Order of the Star to you, to the army, and to our King.”

Vinn looked at him suspiciously. “Long has it been since I have trusted a knight of the Order.”

“They shall be under your command and can be the assurance you need that they will keep your bride-to-be safe within the castle.”

The Baron searched his brother’s eyes as he always did to see if he was lying. Yet once again, he saw only truth gleaming back at him. “You have found and given to me my maiden back as I requested were you to have discovered her. I shall trust you, brother, and allow your knights to accompany her.” He turned to Sir Erec and Sir Thomas. “But hear me now. If I sense any foul play or distrust from either of you, both of your lives shall be forfeit.”

The two knights bowed their heads in respect and agreement to the Baron’s terms and retrieved their horses. “Farewell, Johnathan,” said Vinn as the knights returned upon their chargers to make their leave with the company. “I pray to see you and the Order of the Star fight alongside myself and the King’s army in the coming war.”

Choosing his words carefully once again, Johnathan spoke. “We shall meet again upon the battlefield, brother.”

Vinn smiled thoughtfully back then rode out with his men, Carina’s escorts trailing not far behind Vinn. Johnathan watched as they took Carina out of the safety of Briarwood and rode along the wide Serrin River towards Blairmount in the far distance.

“Are you certain this plan will work?” said Sir Gairrek, a knight from Blairmount who joined the Order of the Star around the same time Johnathan had.

“Nothing is certain,” replied Johnathan lethargically, not taking his eyes off of Carina and Vinn disappearing into the distance. “We will continue to work with the best options and plans we have put in place, but absolute certainty is never within anyone’s making.”

Baron Vinn led his company towards the banks of the choppy-waters of the Serrin River. Before them stood the beginning of a wide, stone bridge leading across the waters towards the capital, standing upon an island centered in the River. Twinkling stars began appearing in the deep violet sky as the company rode across the lamp-lit bridge towards one of Blairmount’s three city gates.

As the Baron and company made their approach to the now closed arched gate doors, they were immediately opened as the guards recognized the Baron’s banners held to either side of Vinn by their carriers. The company rode through the bustling, white-stone streets of the capital as Carina looked at her surroundings. Like many cities of Evergreen and Cascadia, tall

wood and stone shops and homes rose high above the winding streets. Tavern and inn windows glowed orange and yellow from warm fires burning in stone fireplaces.

They rode half-way through the capital when the company finally arrived at Blairmount Castle. The stone-walled fortress stood high above the rooftops of the city, its many towers and spires piercing the night sky. The sheer size of the castle and its high walls took up nearly a third of the island city. Nearly a hundred yellow lamp lights glowed softly out of the windows from the keep to the highest tower.

“You’re either very brave or very foolish to have escaped from my castle,” said Vinn, escorting with his men Carina and her two escorts into the grand castle.

“I would have been foolish to have stayed,” replied Carina, keeping her eyes looking straight ahead as they began ascending a winding stairway up the castle’s tallest tower.

Vinn cracked a faint grin across his chapped lips. “In time you will learn to obey, then perhaps you will submit your love to me. If not, I fear your life with me shall be much more difficult.”

“You cannot truly believe that I will marry you,” said Carina. “Whatever romanticized thoughts you may have in me becoming your wife, it will not happen.”

“But it is already happening,” said Vinn. “There is only the wedding ceremony to prepare.”

Carina sighed in frustration. “And if I do not say ‘I do’ when asked if I take you as my husband?”

Vinn abruptly stopped along the stairway, drawing a dagger from his side and whirled around to meet her face-to-face. He held the sharp blade against her soft, fair-skinned throat and stared at her coldly. “There are ways I’m sure that can persuade you.”


Sir Erec and Sir Thomas gripped the hilts of their swords stowed in their scabbards, taking a step forward towards the Baron. At once, Vinn’s men drew their blades and surrounded the knights. Carina quickly held back the two knights behind her with her arms. She looked at them both with a stern look to cease their actions. Erec and Thomas reluctantly took a step back down a stair-step.

Vinn gave a curt laugh as Carina stared back at him sharply. “You see? Submitting to me is already within you.” He removed the cold-blade dagger from her throat and stowed it back at his side. Turning on his heel, he led them to the top of the stairs and approached the highest room of the tower.


The Baron unlocked the chamber door with the key King Reynard had granted him before their arrival back, forcing Carina and the two Order of the Star knights inside. “Now, shall we try this again?” said Vinn. “Until arrangements are made to where you can reside in the keep without escaping, you will remain here. I shall retrieve you for breakfast in the morning.” He shut and locked the chamber door, leaving Carina alone with her two guards.

“What now, my lady?” said Sir Erec. “I was certain he would have posted Thomas and myself *outside* the door to stand guard. There seems to still be distrust within the Baron about us accompanying you here.”

“Perhaps,” said Carina, “but right now, we need to focus on the next phase of our plan.”



Chapter Four
The Dungeons of Skamania



Audric awoke to the sounds of oars dipping and splashing into surrounding water. He found himself bound at the hands and feet in a boat with his three captors. They were travelling down a narrow river that cut through miles of vast forestlands.

“Where are you taking me?” said Audric.

The first Skamania soldier, rowing the boat with the left-hand oar frowned. “What now, Captain?” he said to the man sitting behind Audric.

Audric glanced over his shoulder and saw Captain Creston guarding him. “I was hoping he’d have been unconscious the entire way. Bag his head.”

The second soldier, manning the right-hand oar, took out a black-clothed sack as Creston held Audric’s arms down tightly. The soldier quickly placed the sack over Audric’s head and tied it shut around Audric’s neck. “Apologies, Audric,” said Creston. “But I mustn’t allow you to know where you are or the path we are using. Be silent the remainder of the journey and I swear that no harm shall come to you.”

The rest of the journey down the rough-watered river Audric remained silent, hearing nothing but the sounds of rushing water and the synchronized-sounds of both boat oars slapping against the water. What seemed to Audric like hours being bound and blinded, the boat slowed its pace and came to a slow drift. His bounds around his ankles were then cut by the soldiers. To Audric, they then sounded like they departed from the boat and were stepping upon a wood-planked dock.

Captain Creston lifted him up onto his feet, guided Audric out of the boat onto the dock as it creaked and swayed from the river water flowing by. He was then pushed from behind to start walking as the captain’s rough hands held his shoulders to help guide him. The sounds of the river slowly began to fade as they marched off of the dock and onto a stone path leading farther onto the land.

What seemed like hours to Audric passed as he stumbled blindly with his captors along the road. Here and there, he would trip randomly over loose stone bricks from the road, but felt the Skamania captain immediately helping him regain his balance and steering him to safer areas of the road.

‘They don’t seem to mean me any harm...yet,’ thought Audric. ‘This is going to be a bit difficult finding my way back to Lacamas if I can somehow escape.’ They arrived at a point along the road where it suddenly rose to an incline. As they hiked up the road, Audric sensed they were rounding a large hill.

Reaching the top of the hill, the sound of large wooden gate doors grumbled open as they passed them by. The feel of the rough stone bricks of the road soon became soft dirt and grass

under Audric's booted feet. The sounds of armored men coming and going all about him entered his ears, as did sounds of stabled horses in the distance.

The feeling of the air around him shifted as if they had entered into a closed room. The feel of the ground changed once again as well. It was now a smooth, flat surface he and his captors treaded upon. They came to a halt and Creston removed the bag from Audric's head. Sitting before Audric upon a tall-backed wooden throne was a King donned in a brown and white-fur mantle. A large gold crown sat atop his long, wispy grey haired-head. His pale grey eyes encircled with thick heavy wrinkles gazed upon him blankly.

"Hail, King Darrin," said Captain Creston. "We have brought you the Burton County squire as requested."

The Skamania King nodded, raising his hand up for silence. "So, this is the young man King Keen believes will help rebuild his army?"

Audric, fighting the Skamania King's intimidating stare, looked him straight in the eye and spoke boldly with few words. "To help defend the people of Lacamas from those desiring to do them harm."

"I see King Keen has already lectured you on who has been threatened with harm," said Darrin. He slowly stood and stepped down the throne's dais. "Come with me, I shall educate you on what harm has *already* been done."

King Darrin led the way across the dank, black and orange banner-lined great hall towards the entrance. "See for yourself who suffers at this hour!" he said, pointing at the now open doorway out of the hall. Audric stepped outside, crossing the castle's bailey and exited the outer wall gate. He then stared rooted in shock at what lay before him.

Below the hill a decaying, poverty-stricken city of Hamlin spanned across the land. Surrounding the city were farmlands, dried-up and dusty from drought and lack of nutrients in the earth riddled with jagged cracks. Countless beggars in the city sat idly on street corners pleading for food or coin to the few passing through the capital.

"My people are dying," said the King, approaching Audric from behind. "Food has become scarce across my kingdom. Farms have not grown crops for years now. Many of my subjects have become disease-ridden or are starving in the streets throughout every town and city."

Audric watched as a child drank from the same soiled puddle of water a pair of stray dogs drank from. "What happened here?"

"*Keen* happened," replied Darrin. "That *tyrant* poisoned my kingdom's watersheds with plagued rats collected from the south! All of the food grown from Skamania's farms became poisonous to eat. Livestock became poisoned as well as they drank from all water sources across the country. Many herds of cattle and sheep perished from the plague."

"Why would King Keen do this?" said Audric in disbelief.

"I suppose he tells you a different story concerning the feud between Lacamas and Skamania," replied King Darrin. Audric remained silent, continuing to stare at the disparity of Skamania's capital below. "The truth is that our two kingdoms have never shared peace with one another. Peace treaties, alliance attempts, all have fallen apart over the centuries due to opposing ideologies. Countless wars between our countries have been fought over various issues relating to land, resources, riches, and of course over insults and threats against both royal families. Yet in all the years of Lacamas and Skamania's troubled history with each other, *never* has a King been so dishonorable, so *scandalous* as to sneak poison into his rival's land, murdering thousands of innocent people!"

Audric looked at the King suspiciously. “This sounds nothing like the King I met in recent days.”

“No?” said King Darrin. “How suspicious was it to you that a king requested your aid, the aid of a *squire*, to help rebuild his army? What king puts that amount of pressure on such a low-ranking young man? What is it, Audric, that *you* believe King Keen seeks from you?”

“I beg your pardon, your highness,” said Audric, “but what does that have to do with the plague running rampant in your kingdom?”

“It demonstrates distraction tactics Keen is using to promote his war against Skamania,” replied Darrin. “Gaining sympathy from neighboring kingdoms, such as Evergreen, to support his cause to war. He claims his army is weak, but is it? I suggest Lacamas’ neighbors take a closer look.”

“You think King Keen is on the *offensive* of the coming war?” said Audric.

“Of course he is!” roared Darrin. “He wishes to finish what he began with poisoning our water supply and killing every last man, woman and child of my kingdom!” The King stared at him hard. “I suppose Keen has said to you that I am launching the war against Lacamas. Well I tell you now, I have sent out bands of raiders there these past few months, this is true, but only to send a message that Keen will not demoralize my kingdom with his dishonorable plague attacks!”

“My lord,” said Captain Creston. “What do you wish to do with Audric?”

The King stared sharply back at the captain. “At this moment, I wish to send him back limb by limb to Keen, finally sending him the squire’s head!”

“Your highness, he spared my life when my men and I were confronted by Lacamas’ forces near Camndon,” said Creston.

Darrin gave a look of confusion at him. “And now you wish to denounce my will and spare him?” The captain gave a slight nod. “I see. Just when did I miss the point in time my captain became a *chivalrous* knight of honor?” he said sarcastically.

Creston’s face hardened with anger as he stared sharply back. “You requested, sire, that I bring you Audric to speak with, and you have. Now I ask that you let him go so that my debt is settled with him.”

“Don’t be a fool!” said the King. “I shall decide his fate here. Whether he is sent back to King Keen in pieces, or locked in my dungeons for the rest of his days, I have not yet decided.”

“My lord, either choice you make may cause an issue between Skamania and Evergreen, let alone Lacamas,” said Creston. “We cannot at this time aggravate such a powerful kingdom as Evergreen.”

“That is none of your concern,” said Darrin. “Now do as I say, take him to the dungeons while I make up my mind about his fate.”

“My lord!” said a messenger hastily as he ran into the great hall where King Keen was holding court. “Audric of Evergreen, he has been taken!”

The hall fell deafly silent as all eyes of the court turned to the King, who stood abruptly from his throne. “*What?* Taken! What do you mean *taken?*”

“Send them in,” said the messenger to the guards waiting outside the great hall’s entrance. The guards escorted in a peasant couple, who both fell to one knee immediately and bowed their heads to the King. “These two witnessed what happened, your highness.”

“Arise,” said Keen kindly to the couple. “Tell me what you saw. What happened to Audric?”

“The Evergreen squire was taken by Skamania soldiers, your highness,” said the old man, helping his elderly wife back onto her feet. “Two soldiers and a knight in all, disguised as peasants of Camndon.”

The King scowled. “Are you certain they were from Skamania?”

“Yes, my lord,” replied the old woman. “We have encountered the knight before. He and his men raided our village east of the Lake a month ago.”

“We were picking mushrooms along the edge of the Forest when we saw them sneak up behind the squire, knocking him unconscious,” said the old man. “Then they took him on horseback towards the River.”

Captain Michael stepped from out of the crowded court and approached the King. “They will use the Serrin River to take Audric back with them to Skamania. It is likely they are taking him to their King at Hamlin Castle.”

Keen’s face began to turn bright red with anger. His eyes stared sharply at the peasant couple as he struggled to hold his composure. “Thank you both for reporting this terrible event to me.” He turned his attention to one of his servants and held out his hand. At once, the servant approached and handed him a small leather purse that jingled with coins inside. “For your loyalty and honesty,” he said, handing them the purse.

“Thank you, your majesty!” said the couple together as the guards then escorted them out of the great hall.

The King turned to his captain, unable to hold back his anger any longer. “I want Audric safely back in Camndon *tonight!* No exceptions, Michael! King Darrin shall not hinder us from rebuilding our army!”

“My lord,” said Captain Michael calmly, “sending a small force into Skamania for a rescue mission will not go unnoticed by the enemy.”

Keen grabbed the Captain’s arm gruffly and pulled him closer. “I do not care *how* you do it, I do not care how many men you use. Get Audric *back* here!”

Michael looked sternly back him. “Yes, my lord.” He quickly headed for the great hall’s entrance with Sir Robert and Sir Finlay striding alongside him as a loud rabble from the court echoed in the hall. “Summon the sisters to the war room,” he said to his fellow knights. “I must speak with them at once.”

As they left the hall, a raven who had been watching them from one of the tall, narrow hall windows launched itself into the air and flew swiftly to the west towards Evergreen’s Heritage Woods.

The dungeon-cell door slammed shut as Audric heard it lock on the outside. The stone-brick walled cell was dank and had a heavy musty smell. The only source of light came from the

lit torches lining the dungeon halls outside the cell. Yellow light from the torches' flames shined through the cell-door's open square window.

Audric explored the cell cautiously, feeling slightly concerned that he may not be alone. Suddenly, he felt cold iron chains attached to the walls. At the bottom of the two strands of thick-linked chains were a pair of empty shackles to restrain a man's wrists. A wave of relief swept over him as he continued along the walls in the darkness. He came to another pair of chains along the opposite side of the square dungeon cell; only these chains did not move or sway as easily as the others. He slowly followed the two strands of black-iron chains down the wall, only this time feeling bare-bone wrists the shackles were clamped around.

Audric jumped back in surprise into the light shining into the cell from outside in the hallway. His heart raced and his breathing quickened as he stared sharply at the darkened wall. In the dim light, he could barely see the skeletal remains of a prisoner slumped against the wall. Its bone-arms stretched upwards from the shackles clamped around its wrists.

At that moment fear, confusion, and despair flooded his mind as he couldn't take his eyes off the shackled skeleton. "*Argh!*" expelled Audric, turning from the skeleton and faced the opposite wall at the empty pair of shackles. A thought then crossed his mind that instantly rattled him. 'Are those to be *my* shackles?' he thought. 'Am I to die here alone as the man behind me had?' Anger quickly seeped into his mind of his situation. Kicking a loose rock across the cell, he smacked the empty shackles' chains with his bare hand, causing them to jingle along the wall. 'I cannot believe this!' he thought, beginning to pace around the square cell. 'What am I to do now?' He began remembering an event involving both he and Carina when they were children.

'The day I accidently fell into that sink-hole near the Marshlands near Carina's home,' thought Audric, thinking back to his childhood. He began to remember that event, the sheer panic that had struck him as he tried to climb out of the slick mud walls of the hole.

"Audric, look up at me," Carina said, kneeling down at the hole's edge. Finally he did, their eyes locking onto each other's. "Audric, keep your eyes on me, don't look anywhere else. You will get out of this, just hold on! Everything will be all right." The young Audric reluctantly nodded. His despair and panic faded as he held his stare on Carina's comforting sky-blue eyes looking calmly back.

'Eventually, her father came to our aid with rope and pulled me out of the sink-hole,' thought Audric. Remembering Carina keeping him calm through the experience, he felt at that moment his current feelings of despair and anger over his predicament quickly fade.

"Audric?" came a voice within the cell.

The squire reached for his sword, but quickly realized it had been taken during his capture. He balled his hands into fists and turned to confront the source of the voice. "Who is there?!" To his surprise, the wizard Farridan stood before him in the center of the cell. "Farridan! But how...how did you get in here?"

"Well...I am not actually here," replied the wizard. He reached out with his tall wooden staff and swung its sphere-jeweled head at Audric's forehead. The squire immediately flinched, expecting the staff to strike him. Yet the staff went through him without any feeling. "You see? What you are witnessing is merely a vision of me. I have cast a spell to see and speak with you from the comforts of my home."

Audric smirked. "That is all well and good, and though I am grateful to see you, how can you possibly help me if you are not really here?"

The wizard began eating a carrot, crunching on its pointed end as he spoke. “Think of me right now not as your help to escape, but as your help for not falling into despair over this minor setback.”

“*Minor* setback?” said Audric. “You call this *minor*?! How am I supposed to get out of here?”

“Well,” began Farridan with his mouth full, continuing to crunch on more of the carrot that he held casually in his hand. “You may find it comforting to know that my trusted raven has told me that King Keen is well-aware of your capture. He has sent a rescue party to come get you as we speak.”

Audric scoffed. “Your raven told you this, did he? Well, Farridan, that *is* comforting to know you receive information...from a bird.”

Farridan looked at him confused. “Something troubling you, Audric?” he said, taking another bite of carrot.

“Are you serious?” said Audric, astounded by the wizard’s lack of care of his predicament. “Carina is somewhere in Cascadia, war is coming to the lands of Evergreen and Lacamas, and I’ve become a prisoner of Skamania talking to a vision of a wizard who has befriended me, yet I barely know him, who has told me his bird supposedly spoke of King Keen sending a rescue party to come get me. So *yes*, wizard of Heritage Woods, I am slightly vexed!”

The wizard’s bushy grey eyebrows rose as he stared blankly back at him. Suddenly, sounds of armored bodies being slammed against the stone walls of the dungeon halls echoed into the cell. Audric went to the cell-door’s open window and peered out. At that moment, he witnessed a dungeon guard being high-kicked hard in his plate-armored chest. The guard slammed against the wall behind him, falling unconscious to the floor. Just then, Sophie and Jill raced around the hall’s corner and headed towards his cell.

“Hello, Audric!” said Jill happily as she and Sophie noticed him from his cell door’s window.

Audric turned to Farridan, who simply smiled faintly back. “No need to be vexed either, my lad,” said the wizard and with a wink, his image vanished.

“Where is the key you took from the guard, Jill?” said Sophie from outside the cell.

“Here,” replied Jill. The lock clicked and the door quickly swung open as Audric and the sisters approached each other.

“You found me,” said Audric with a faint grin at Sophie.

A flash of relief showed in Sophie’s eyes as her fair cheeks began to blush. “Yes, well, you were *loud* enough to give away your whereabouts,” she said, her eyes returning back to their usual stern gaze. Audric glanced and winked at Jill, who gave a bright grin as she quietly giggled at her sister. “Come on, let us get you out of here.”

Sophie and Jill stealthily led Audric out of the dungeons and outside Hamlin Castle’s walls. Under the cover of darkness from the starless-night, the three made their way down the tall hill the castle stood upon and headed for the River in the far distance. “Let’s begin to run from here on,” said Sophie softly as they reached the edge of a vast forest spreading across the eastern borders of the capital. “The River is only a few miles from here.”

The three ran into the forest, following a worn path south towards the River. Tall pines creaked and swayed in the howling winds blowing to the west. Thick branches from the swaying

pinetrees cracked and fell all around Audric and the sisters across the forest floor. Suddenly, as more of the heavy green-needle and pine cone covered branches fell, Skamania soldiers jumped down from within the surrounding trees to the ground, surrounding Audric and his companions. Sophie drew her sword as Jill quickly drew her long fighting knives.

“I had hoped they wouldn’t have caught up to us so quickly,” said Sophie as she and Jill stood in front of Audric.

“Surrender,” spoke a voice from out of the darkness of the forests’ thicket. Trotting out of the thicket upon his charger onto the path, Sir Creston approached the sisters with a satisfied grin.

Jill’s thin, light brown eyebrow lifted. “Without a fight?” At once, she and Sophie charged and ferociously attacked the surrounding Skamania soldiers, taking them all by surprise by their sudden actions. One by one, the soldiers fell dead at the ends of the sisters’ blades they swiped and slashed at them with deadly speed and precision. Yet as the soldiers fell at the sisters’ feet all around them, more quickly emerged from out of the surrounding thicket, joining the skirmish with ready swords and battle axes.

‘If only my sword had not been taken,’ thought Audric, using only his fists and forearms to defend himself. His greatest possession his father had given to him to train with as a squire of his father’s house and of Evergreen, taken by Sir Creston and his men upon his capture.

The battle raged on, the slain bodies of Skamania soldiers continued piling up along the forest floor as Sophie and Jill fought hard to protect Audric. “We cannot keep this up, Sophie!” said Jill after she flipped herself over a Skamania soldier, twisting and breaking his neck with her ankles before landing back onto her feet. “There are just too many of them!” She stepped backwards a few steps, ready to make her next attack when suddenly, she felt her hair along the back of her head being roughly pulled upward. A razor-sharp blade held lightly against her throat.

“*Enough!*” ordered Sir Creston, holding onto Jill’s hair tightly as she remained deathly still, feeling the cold steel of his sword against her neck.

“Jill!” exclaimed Sophie.

“Hand over Audric, or your sister’s head leaves this forest without a body,” said Creston. Sophie stared sharply back at him. “Let her go, then we shall discuss terms.”

The Captain sneered. “You are in no position to negotiate. Now for the last time, hand him over!”

Audric discreetly took out the potion bottle Farridan had given to him and drank a portion of the glowing liquid inside it. He instantly felt his body becoming lighter, as if the very wind blowing profusely all about them could blow him away like a feather. His feet touched off the ground and he soon found himself floating high above them all. Taking the dagger the wizard had also given to him, he held it up. “Let her go!”

“What magic is this?” said Creston as he and his men stared up at him in awe and confusion.

“Audric, what are you doing!” yelled Sophie.

The squire aimed the charmed dagger at Creston and quickly threw it. The dagger sped through the air, striking the knight’s hand holding onto Jill’s hair. Creston yelled in pain from the dagger’s strike, releasing her locks. Jill immediately pushed aside the Captain’s hand that held his sword against her throat and ran to her sister’s side. The dagger twirled and sped back into Audric’s awaiting hand. “The next time I throw this, it shall be the last thing you ever see,” said Audric, still floating high above them. “Now let us go!”

Creston smirked, holding his hand and wincing in pain. “Enchanted weapons and spells shall not sway me to disobey my King’s orders.” He looked to his men and pointed his sword at the sisters and the floating Audric. “*Attack!*”

The soldiers went into action, crossing their blades with Sophie and Jill as others fired darts and arrows at Audric. Audric made use of the dagger once again, knocking the arrows’ trajectories off and away from him. Suddenly, thunderous sounds of hooves stamping upon the soft moss and twig-covered forest floor grew amid the fighting. Emerging from out of the darkness of the forest, Captain Michael, Sir Finlay and Sir Robert led a host of nearly three hundred Lacamas knights and soldiers into the fray. Their red, white, and black banners waved wildly in the air as they charged upon their mounts and on foot at the Skamania soldiers. Just as swiftly as they had entered the melee, so soon did the Skamania soldiers fall from the Lacamas knights’ strikes of lances and swords.

Captain Michael suddenly turned, catching someone in the corner of his sight. It was Sir Creston calling his few remaining troops to retreat. The two knights locked sharp stares at each other. As Audric witnessed what seemed to him to be a deep-seeded hatred between the two, Captain Michael made to charge at Creston when the Skamania knight immediately reared his charger around and led his men to retreat back to the castle. For a brief moment, Michael simply watched from atop his charger Creston fleeing from the forest, then finally turning his attention back to his men and the sisters.

“*You two,*” he said, riding up to Sophie and Jill who stood together as Audric floated back down to the ground behind them. “What do you think you were doing? You could have been killed, or worse, been killed and have Audric taken back to the dungeons!”

“We freed him from the castle dungeons, did we not?” said Sophie with a glare.

Michael grit his teeth. “You promised me you would have a plan to escape once you freed Audric. Did this plan include getting caught by the enemy on your way out of the country?”

“Everything was fine until we entered the forest,” said Jill calmly.

“Yes,” said Sophie, not taking her gray/blue eyes off of Michael. “That is true, dear sister. Perhaps your arrival with such a great host of men raised the alarm here and brought the Skamania soldiers along our route to the River.”

“Do not *begin* to point blame, Sophie,” said Michael in a frustrated tone. “It is fortunate that King Keen insisted to send us here to ensure your safety back along the River.”

Sophie remained silent as she stared defiantly back at him. Michael’s cold stare melted and looked calmly at her. “I give you full marks for retrieving Audric and getting him out of the castle safely. But I have warned you before of your reckless planning. Such poor judgment could have had dire consequences here tonight.” He stepped towards Sophie and Jill, placing his gauntlet-covered hands upon the sides of their arms. “The last thing I ever wish to have happen is my two secret weapons, two soldiers I consider *sisters* of mine, captured or killed.”

Audric suddenly noticed Sophie’s lower lip slightly quiver for the briefest of moments as she nodded in agreement. Captain Michael smiled thoughtfully at them both. “Good. Now then, let us head to the River. Our ship waits to take us through the night back to Lacamas.” He turned to Jill, looking back at him with relief gleaming in her chestnut-brown eyes. “You and Sophie’s combative skills never cease to amaze.”

“Thank you, Captain,” said Jill, smiling brightly.

Michael then turned his attention to Audric as he mounted his charger. “That was quick thinking, Audric. Your actions shall be shared and should impress King Keen upon our return.”

The Lacamas war ship sailed up the Serrin River in the silence of the night. Conversations were kept to no louder than whispers, all of the ship's lanterns remaining unlit to not draw attention of the enemy patrolling the Skamania shores.

Audric continued staring at the tree-lined banks of Skamania's side of the River. Quietly approaching him, Jill stood beside him along the side of the ship. "You look worried," she whispered to him as Audric's attention did not leave Skamania's shores slowly passing by.

"I do not think we have seen the last of Skamania forces," whispered Audric back, watching shadows of the fir bows along the banks dance among the trees' thick trunks in the moonlight. "They would not have given up so easily, would they?"

Seeing him watching the shadows intently, Jill nudged his arm. "You know, those shadows are only trees and not Skamania soldiers hiding in the thicket, right?"

Audric glanced at her, seeing her thoughtful stare and gave a slight grin. "I am aware."

Jill gave a decisive nod. "Well good. We are nearing the borders of Lacamas now and soon, we shall be safely back in Camndon." She stepped away from him and went to her sister who stood along the opposite side of the ship, watching with a jaded-stare the banks of Cascadia passing slowly by.

"He will not take his eyes off the Skamania shores," said Jill.

"Who?" replied Sophie in a lazy, irritated whisper; her eyes not leaving the River banks.

"Audric. He has not moved since we left."

Sophie shrugged. "Well, I suppose that makes him one of the ship's best lookouts, doesn't it?"

Jill looked at her surprised. "You don't think the Skamania army would hunt us down this close to our country's border, do you?"

Suddenly, the sounds of heavy-booted feet hurriedly crossing the wood-planked decks erupted amid the silence. "Captain Michael! Skamania ships approach!" said a soldier, pointing at three black-sail *cog ships behind them.

The Lacamas Captain quickly crossed the decks and approached the back of the ship. "How are they reaching us so fast?" said Sophie.

"They are using not just the wind in their sails, but oars as well," said Michael, pointing at the gaining ships' sides where lines of oars dipped in and out of the river. "To arms!" exclaimed Michael to his men. Two of the Skamania ships came along each side of their vessel as the third remained close behind them. The two cogs rammed against the ship's sides. Skamania soldiers immediately leaped off their ships and crossed blades with the Lacamas knights.

"*Stand your ground!*" yelled Captain Michael, fighting off three Skamania soldiers with swift strikes from his sword. All about the Lacamas war ship, soldiers and knights on both sides fought ferociously against each other. The ringing sounds of swords clashing, the dull-sounds of Lacamas *kite-shields slamming into armored Skamania soldiers, deafening yells of the men fighting, and the sporadic splashes of men tumbling overboard into the River filled the crisp midnight air.

Taking a fallen Lacamas soldier's sword, Audric quickly entered the battle, fighting alongside the lightening-fast Sophie and Jill. The sisters ripped through the Skamania ranks with their blades and acrobatic fighting style. Yet as the Skamania soldiers were slain one by one, more continued to board the Lacamas vessel from both sides. Audric sprinted across the ship through the fighting and approached Captain Michael and his fellow knights, Finlay and Robert, helping them defeat the soldiers surrounding them. "We are outnumbered, Michael!" said Audric over the constant noise of battle. "We must do something other than fight them off with sword and shield!"


Michael shook his head. "This, Audric, is how river battles are fought! My men are defending this ship well. We all are! The Skamania ranks are weakening in numbers. We must hold our ground until they are defeated!"

"But your men are growing tired as more of the enemy continues to board the ship! We cannot hold them off much longer!" said Audric. Michael ignored him and continued fighting off the enemy. Audric quickly searched his chaotic surroundings. Finally, he discovered what he was searching for. Taking a slain Skamania soldier's bow and quiver full of arrows, he raced up to the ship's bow and lit one of the vessel's lamps. He carefully dipped the arrowheads in the lamp's oil and lit each of them on fire. One by one, he shot the fire arrows through the air, each one striking the dry wooden decks, masts and sails of the Skamania ships. The fires quickly spread across the ships, their flames growing higher and more aggressive with each passing moment. The remaining soldiers on the ships quickly jumped overboard into the River. Those still fighting on the Lacamas cog were forced to the ship's sides and stern by the Lacamas knights and soldiers.


"Surrender, or face the cold depths of the River," said Michael to the Skamania soldiers. At once, the soldiers leaped off the sides of the ship, splashing into the rough waters below. As the Lacamas ship passed by the now fire-engulfed Skamania cogs, all upon the ship watched as the Skamania soldiers swam sluggishly in their armor back to Skamania's shores.

"They would rather try to cheat death from the River's strong currents than surrender?" said Jill, astonished by the soldiers' actions.

"Would you surrender to them?" said Michael. "Would any of us?"



Chapter Five



A King's Conspiracy

"I must admit, Audric," began Captain Michael as he, Sir Finlay, Sir Robert, and the sisters held a late-night meeting with King Keen in Camndon Castle's great hall. "Your quick thinking and decisive actions helped ensure our return home."

"That, Michael, is why Audric is here," said King Keen. "That is why I requested for a son of Evergreen, a squire from the House of White Oak Woods well on his way to becoming an honorable, Chivalrous Knight. We must put aside our old tactics and war strategies. Learning from the best our closest ally teaches their future Chivalrous Knights about battle tactics and war strategies is what we now must do." He then turned his attention to Sophie and Jill. "Well done

freeing our guest out of the Skamania King's dungeons. You have done your country a great service bringing Audric back alive and safe." The sisters bowed their heads to him. "Though I must say, I am thankful for sending Michael and his company. For it seems my presumptions of trouble finding you along your route back to the River were correct."

Sophie's eyes flashed a look of anger. She began to say something when Captain Michael suddenly cleared his throat, getting her attention and gave her a stern look as if warning her to not begin a fresh fight over an already settled matter. She closed her eyes and took a calming breath. "Yes, sire. The mission was truly a collective effort in the end."

The King gave a decisive nod then turned to Audric. "Tell me, Audric, what happened to you during your capture?"

"I was taken to King Darrin, where his lordship and I had an interesting conversation," said Audric.

Keen's eyebrow rose. "Interesting? What do you mean by interesting? What did he say?"

Audric glanced at each pair of eyes now staring intently at him. Captain Michael, Sir Robert and Sir Finlay, as well as Sophie and Jill were hanging onto his every word. "Your highness, perhaps we should speak of this in private."

Keen looked at him thoughtfully. "Nonsense. Whatever you tell me at this time can be shared with my most trusted men and women in my kingdom."

"Very well," said Audric. "King Darrin revealed to me why he has been sending raiders into Lacamas, as well as why he declared war against you. He showed me from outside his castle atop a summit overlooking Skamania's capital of Hamlin. Plague has crippled the Skamania kingdom. The people were sick and dying in the streets below me, crops surrounding the city were diminished."

"Good heavens," said Keen concernedly. "How has something so extremely rare in this part of the world come to Skamania? And how has a plague spoiled the kingdom's crops?"

Audric took a calming breath. "That is why you were mentioned, your highness."

"Me?" said Keen.

"Yes. King Darrin accused you of releasing rats carrying the deathly plague into Skamania. He blames you for the decay occurring across Skamania and the near destruction of its capital."

Captain Michael took an abrupt step forward towards the King. "That is *outrageous!*"

Sophie came to Michael's side. "It's all lies!" Jill quickly went to her, taking her sister's hand into hers to calm her.

"My lord, this cannot go on," said Sir Finlay. "The people of Skamania must know the truth!"

"And you believe they would trust us, Skamania's oldest enemy?" said Sir Robert. At that moment, the knights and the sisters began venting loudly their frustrations and concerns to the King.

Keen stood from his throne. "SILENCE!" he roared, his voice echoing loudly throughout the great hall. All fell silent, and the King quietly spoke again. "It pleases me to know you all have faith in your King to not commit something so heinous, even to our fiercest rival enemy. Audric, I must now hear from you. What is it that you believe happened in Skamania? Do you believe me to be the culprit of this atrocity?"

Audric thought back to all he had seen in Skamania's capital and the accusations King Darrin had posed upon King Keen. Finally, he shook his head. "No, your highness. I do not believe you have done this."

Keen smiled faintly. "And what, may I ask, has drawn to you to your conclusion?"

"The plague itself, your highness," said Audric. "My father taught me about the various plagues in the world. I learned where they derive from, how they are able to spread, the effects of each one, and most importantly in this case, *what* the plagues effect and for how long. King Darrin said that you had released rats ridden with plague, saying it was the cause of his capital's decimation. I can tell you confidently that the plague he accused you of spreading, common with rats as its carrier, does *not* contaminate food or water sources like others do in this world. Its effects on man are very mild at best, one day at most of feeling slightly light-headed and in some cases feeling faint."

"If it is not the plague that has done this to the kingdom, then what has?" said Michael.

Audric looked back at the Captain confidently. "It has to do with Skamania's crops. The air below the castle seemed thick with a slightly foul scent. When Sophie, Jill and I headed past the outlying crops, I immediately recognized what the stench was. Skamania's wheat, corn and vegetable crops were contaminated by outbreaks of Anitans, a deadly mushroom grown in the southern counties of Cascadia. Once a crop is contaminated with this fungus, it withers and dies within a day or so. As it decays, so do the mushrooms feeding off of them and as they do so, spores from them are released into the air so that they may find more breeding grounds. Breathing in these spores for long periods of time can cause sickness and death to those who breathe it consistently.

"What does this all lead to then?" said the King.

"I believe King Darrin's story of plague from rats was a lie," said Audric. "It is my opinion that Darrin got his hands on Anitan mushrooms and had them secretly planted in the kingdoms crops. With Skamania on its knees, he created the plague story to gain support from his subjects, avoiding a likely uprising of resistance from them, to wage war against Lacamas."

Michael frowned. "Who would do such a terrible act to his own people?"

"A King who has been desperate to claim lordship over Lacamas for decades," replied Keen. "It has never been peace and prosperity King Darrin desired, only expanding his kingdom."

"I believe there is more to this story that concerns the support King Darrin needs to wage this war," said Audric. "I question how he attained the deadly mushrooms. A treaty was signed centuries ago by Cascadia and its neighboring kingdoms to not remove them from their habitat in southern Cascadia."

Jill quickly answered him. "Perhaps the Cascadian King has broken the treaty and is aiding King Darrin in his cause to war with us."

Keen scowled. "If this is true, we must know who and what we are truly up against in this coming war. Michael, send a messenger to Cascadia's King Reynard. Inform him of my awareness of Anitan mushrooms being used in Skamania. Have him ask the King if he supplied King Darrin with them. Our relations with Cascadia are not great, but stable enough to at least get my concerns heard and earn a reply."

"Won't the Cascadian King simply lie if he truly has supplied the mushrooms?" said Michael.

"I am certain he will," replied King Keen. "He too has declared war upon his neighbor, and the more I think about this issue, the more I believe he and King Darrin have a secret

alliance. Once he is aware of me knowing about the mushroom outbreaks in Skamania, my hope is that he will break what ties he has with King Darrin. For I am confident Reynard fears Lacamas combining forces with Evergreen in his own war against the Forest Kingdom. He knows that he would then be greatly outmatched.”

“The Anitan Mushroom Crisis,” said Godfrey as the fire burned bright in the fireplace, slowly beginning to consume the fresh logs he placed upon the stone hearth. “I remember that terrible event in Skamania.”

Audric nodded. “It nearly destroyed the entire kingdom.”

“What about this messenger King Keen sent to the Cascadian King? I imagine it had to have stirred some controversy. And what about Carina? What happened with her and the Order of the Star while she remained prisoner in Cascadia?”

“Well,” began Audric again, “by the time the Lacamas messenger reached Blairmount to speak with King Reynard, Carina’s letters sent during her time with the Order of the Star in Briarwood finally reached King Geoffroi and my father. Geoffroi then had a messenger sent to Lacamas to find and give me a message from Carina. To read of her safety under the protection of the Order of the Star, it brought me great relief. Little did I know at that point in time while I was reading her message, she was being held captive in Blairmount Castle and about to dine with the Cascadian King.”

Blairmount Castle’s dining hall was lined with long tables holding platters of fresh fruit, goblets of red wine, and loaves of freshly-baked bread. As Carina and the two knights from the Order of the Star were seated at a table on top of a dais at the end of the hall, they watched as the Cascadia’s King’s relatives, his court, and noblemen from across the kingdom entered the hall and were seated at the tables along the walls. Lively conversations among the guests filled the hall as they began drinking wine and eating the food laid out before them.

“No one here seems to care that we are dining with them this evening, my lady,” said Sir Erec to Carina.

“I would not say ‘no one’,” came a voice off to the side. The three turned their attention towards the voice, seeing Baron Vinn of Magilvary climbing the short stone dais steps and approached the knight. He roughly jerked the back of Erec’s chair. “You are sitting in my seat,” he said sternly.

Carina looked down, seeing the stone-faced knight gripping the hilt of his sheathed sword tightly in his grasp. He glanced at Carina, who expressed a pleading look in her light blue eyes to not do anything rash. Erec slowly stood, releasing his grip on his sword and shuffled behind the seats to an empty chair beside Thomas. Vinn scowled at him as he sat beside Carina and took a swig of wine from a goblet.

“My lords, my ladies,” said a herald at the hall’s doorway. “King Reynard and his wife, Queen Angelique.” The King and Queen of Cascadia entered the hall, donning their silver crowns and fine regal attire, as all rose from their seats. Holding each other’s hand, they treaded across the stone floor towards the table at the end of the hall. The King sat himself in-between Baron Vinn and the Queen as all sat back down and resumed their conversations.

“So,” began the King, “I see our three guests have joined us for dinner this evening.” He looked over at Carina. “You must be Carina,” he said, glancing over at Vinn who gave him a slight nod. “The daughter of a well-renowned merchant. I was pleased to hear of your engagement to my most trusted and loyal knight.”

“It was quite a surprise to me that such a decision was made without my consent,” replied Carina.

Vinn looked at her sharply as the King laughed. “Well, my dear, in times of war marriage is not necessarily a contract based on love, but on leverage. Years of peace between our two countries occurred due to my marriage to King Geoffroi’s sister. Though love was not involved in our union, it did bring decades of peace.” He looked over at his wife, who was ignoring his words and continued to drink her wine. Servants then entered the hall, carrying tray after tray of steaming roast chickens and set them upon the long tables. Reynard immediately grabbed a large drumstick and ripped it off the side of the golden-browned skin hen. Biting deep into the tender meat, the juices dribbled out from the sides of his mouth.

“Is it true that I am not the only heiress from Evergreen to be forced into marriage with Cascadia’s noblemen?” said Carina.

“You are correct,” said the King, wiping his mouth with his hand. “When I launch my campaign against Evergreen, I will not only attain the *counties* that are rightfully mine, but I shall also collect interest for the time I have had to wait to gain them. As my knights, counts and barons marry heiresses of Evergreen, I shall gain what land they are to inherit in the future.

As the King dangled his hands at his sides for his hounds that wandered around the table to lick clean, a messenger from the kingdom of Lacamas was escorted into the hall. “What is the meaning of this?” growled Reynard as the messenger’s escorts approached his table.

“My lord, an urgent message has come from King Keen of Lacamas,” said the first castle guard.

The King frowned. “Urgent, eh? I doubt it. Keen and I have not spoken to each other in years. Come now messenger of Lacamas, what news have you from the Lake Kingdom?”

The messenger approached the table and bowed in respect. “His Majesty has sent me regarding the dire state of the Skamania kingdom.

Reynard scoffed. “And what does Lacamas’ enemy have anything to do with me and my kingdom?”

“King Keen has grown concerned over the discovery of Anitan mushroom-outbreaks across Skamania’s farms and crops,” said the messenger. “Skamania’s people are unaware of the dangers of the mushrooms, believing the thousands of deaths across the kingdom occurred from plague carried by rats. King Darrin has told his people it was Keen who released the plague-carrying rats into Skamania. It has recently become clear that it is Anitan mushrooms that have caused this crisis. King Keen is curious to know how these deadly mushrooms have found their way to Skamania from southern Cascadia.”

King Reynard’s face turned bright red as he began stumbling his words for a moment, then he finally composed himself to speak. “How should I know how the mushrooms found themselves hundreds of miles from their habitat?” The messenger remained silent. “Hmm,”

began the King again, “so war is being launched by King Darrin against Lacamas due to a misunderstanding. Still, I do not understand why King Keen has deemed it necessary to interrupt my dinner with this.”

“Again, your highness,” said the messenger, “with all due respect by my good King, it is in regards to Keen’s concern of *how* the deadly mushrooms from your kingdom managed to enter into Skamania.”

The King rose from his seat, looking sharply down at the messenger. “Now you listen to me, messenger of Keen’s. The Anitan Mushroom Treaty has held in-tact for centuries. If your King questions if I had any involvement unleashing death upon a kingdom, one which I have no interest in whatsoever, you may tell him Cascadia has nothing to do with their crisis! Now *leave* before only your head returns back to Lacamas! How dare Keen accuse me of such treachery! You may tell him that whatever alliance Lacamas and Cascadia once had is now dead!”

The messenger bowed and left the hall with the castle guard escorts. The King sat back down, noticing the entire hall had grown silent from watching all that had happened. “What are you all looking at?” he said gruffly, seeing all eyes were still on him. “Eat! Be merry! Talk amongst yourselves!”

The guests resumed their separate conversations as Queen Angelique turned to Reynard and smirked. “So that is what you had been plotting behind closed doors these past few years,” she said. “I can only imagine what your forbearers would say if they knew you had shredded the treaty, spreading death to thousands of innocent people.”

“That is enough, Angelique!” said Reynard in a harsh-toned whisper. “If I am to have guaranteed success, Cascadia needs allies to help in the war effort. The people of Skamania are a bold, rebellious people. The plague-story King Darrin conjured, after secretly planting the mushrooms in all of Skamania’s crops, has ignited war against Lacamas in the hearts of all Skamanians. Once Lacamas is defeated, Skamania shall be a powerful ally to us.”

“My lord,” said Baron Vinn. “Perhaps now is not the time to discuss such plans.” He gestured at Carina and the two Order of the Star knights who continued eating, yet listened carefully to the King’s conversation inconspicuously.

Reynard laughed. “And who are they going to tell such things to? They are not to leave this castle, nor send or receive any messages to anyone. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sire,” said Vinn. “Your highness, about my marriage to Carina. I wish to have the ceremony before the war begins if that is possible.”

The King sighed and shook his head. “I’m afraid not. Originally, I was to have all of my noblemen marry those they have claimed from Evergreen before the war, but now that the Anitan mushrooms have been discovered in Skamania, along with Cascadia’s involvement being questioned, we must push the campaign to a closer date. There will be no time for the marriages until a suitable time comes after we have gained territory in Evergreen.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Vinn begrudgingly. He looked over at Carina, placing the back of his hand gently against her fair-skinned cheek. “It seems our union will have to wait, my dear.” Carina turned her cheek away from him, her eyes gleaming disgust at the Baron. “*Humph,*” expelled Vinn. He began eating a piece of chicken as he spoke. “You may as well accept your fate here with me. This castle, let alone this city, is impregnable to any rescue effort that whelp you claim to love may attempt. If he is seen anywhere near Blairmount, or for that matter anywhere in Cascadia, he shall have me to deal with.”

Carina smiled faintly. "I look forward to the day when you're confronted with my beloved." Her eyes gleamed a strong confidence at him, making the Baron's stare stray back down at his plate of food.

"All in good time," Vinn mumbled, taking another bite of the steaming, savory chicken.

"Well," expelled Carina in an exhausted tone, speaking privately to Sir Erec and Sir Thomas in her chamber atop one of Blairmount Castle's highest towers. "I think we have learned a great deal tonight about what we are up against."

The knights nodded. "It was certainly unexpected of the King to rush the war," said Erec. "It must mean Cascadia's army is nearly assembled and ready to invade."

"King Geoffroi must be warned," said Carina. "We must send word to him and King Keen of Lacamas about what we have discovered tonight."

"My lady," said Erec. "Our best chance in doing so must be to find a way in reaching the Order."

Thomas shook his head in frustration. "Yes, but *how*? Both of us are just as much prisoners in this castle as Carina." Suddenly, there came a knocking upon the chamber door.

"Whatever happens at this point," said Carina, "you two must find a way to reach Captain Johnathan tonight and return back here unnoticed. Can you do this?" The two knights reluctantly nodded. "Good," said Carina and opened the door. Standing before her were three of Baron Vinn's vassals.

"My lady," said the first of the three knights. "The Baron would like to have a word with you," he said with a smirk. The two Order of the Star knights stepped forward behind Carina when the vassal held up his hand for them to halt. "Just the maiden."

"We are her personal guards," said Thomas. "We go wherever she goes in this castle."

The three vassals stepped into the chamber. "The Baron and his majesty wish to remind you that a captive's *guards* do not make the rules," said the second vassal knight. "Now, if you two do not allow us to take her without you, your lives shall be forfeit by order of the King!"

Carina looked back at the two knights, courage and confidence gleaming in her eyes. "Remember what I told you. No matter what happens tonight."

The knights frowned then stared sharply back at the Baron's vassals. "If anything should happen to her," said Erec, "whom we have sworn to protect and were invited to do so by your lord, I swear you shall see whose life will truly be forfeit."

"Mark our words, *vassals*," said Thomas. "If any harm comes to her, you and Baron Vinn shall have the entire Order of the Star to face."

The vassals grinned. "Your threats mean *nothing*," said the first vassal. "The Baron's entire household, including his knights and soldiers under his command, are under the protection of the King. You shall have his majesty to answer to if the Order chooses to act so rashly." The other two vassals grabbed Carina roughly by her arms and removed her from the chamber.

"Come, Thomas," said Erec as the two knights kept their sharp-staring eyes on the vassals taking Carina down the tower's spiraling steps. "We have a mission tonight, one that may rule the fate of entire kingdoms."

“Ah, there she is,” said Baron Vinn as his vassals escorted Carina into one of the many common rooms in the keep. A great stone fireplace held a bright-flamed fire illuminating the room with an intimate orange glow. “Please have a seat, Carina.” The Baron gestured for her to sit beside him upon a soft-cushioned bench facing the warm hearth. He then looked to his men. “Leave us.” The knights released Carina and filed out of the room. “Come, sit down,” said Vinn with a faint smile, taking a sip of red wine from his goblet. Cautiously, Carina stepped towards the bench and sat beside him, her eyes carefully watching him for any sudden or threatening moves.

“Why have you called for me this late?” said Carina solemnly.

Vinn poured some more wine into his goblet. “Would you care for some wine? It is absolutely wonderful!”

Carina shut her eyes and shook her head slightly. “What do you want?”

The Baron’s eyebrows rose. “You seem troubled. Fear not, I mean you no harm. I only wish for your company at this hour.”

A moment of awkward silence was then shared between the two. Finally, Vinn spoke. “Carina, I have travelled far and wide across this vast continent, visiting many different kingdoms, meeting countless fascinating people along the way. Yet never in all my travels have I ever encountered someone so fair, so kindhearted as you.” Carina’s gaze strayed from him to the warm fire. “For some time now, I have watched you from afar. I have witnessed the kindness you have shown towards the poor when you and your father visit the towns and cities near your home. You graciously give the needy bread and fresh vegetables from your gardens, pouches of gold coin, but most of all, when you have placed your soft, delicate feminine hands in the filthy, callused ones of a poor and physically disabled person. You speak to them with hope and kindness held deeply in your sparkling blue eyes that they shall be in your thoughts and prayers. *That* is one of many truly special qualities I have discovered about you.” The Baron laughed and took another sip of wine. “Would you believe me if I told you that there were times when I watched you with these poor, decrepit people and wished in that moment that I had been one of those you had held hands with, telling me that *I* would be in your thoughts and prayers?”

“Why did you not ever introduce yourself to me?” said Carina.

Vinn smiled, gazing bashfully down at the stone floor. “I did not think you would like me. A knight, known only for committing atrocities against other realms to fulfill his King’s will, did not seem the type of person someone like you would wish to associate with.” He paused, looking back up at her as Carina gazed concernedly back. “In hindsight, I knew that if you were unaware of my existence that the attraction, the feelings of love I had for you, that I continue to have for you, would not spoil from your likely words of rejection and resentment of me.”

“But if you had been watching me for some time now, then you must have known about my love, Audric,” said Carina.

The Baron took another long drink of wine from his goblet. “I pretended he did not exist. Never had I felt challenged nor threatened by that *squire* you claim to be your true love, nor do I now.”

“So,” said Carina, intrigued by what seemed to her to be an honest confession from him. “It seems that the reason why you never properly introduced yourself to me before has become the reason for us being alone together now. Kidnapping me, threatening my beloved, forcing me to marry you, and leading a war against my country, *all* of this does not seem to me like the man who wished to have had his hands held by mine. A man, who has shown me kindness and honesty since I entered this common room tonight.”

Vinn remained deathly silent, staring sharply at the fire. Carina glanced over at the empty wine bottle standing upon a short table in front of them, confirming that he had drunk the bottle alone and was intoxicated. She realized her opportunity to free herself from being his captive and quickly came up with a plan. Reaching over, she gently placing her soft, fair hands over the Baron’s and held them gently as she spoke. “Vinn, look at me.” The Baron looked back into her eyes, his scowling-look of disappointment and regret transforming into a look of confusion and hope. Carina noticed her reflection staring back at in his eyes. “Will you not let me go? Will you not allow me to continue living happily and in peace? Is that not what you have wished for me since you first saw me?”

A tear formed in Vinn’s eye and rolled down his cheek as she continued holding his hands. “But I thought,” he began speaking softly, “I thought you and I could make each other happy. I had even hoped that perhaps someday, you would grow to love me.”

Carina gazed back at him sadly. “But I am already happy, and in love.” Vinn turned his head abruptly, his gaze straying to the fire. “Vinn, please...”

“No,” he said curtly. “That *squire* of yours, Audric, he has *poisoned* your mind. It has made you not want to have anything to do with me.”

“That’s not true,” said Carina calmly.

“No, sweet Carina, it *is* true,” said the Baron. He jerked his hands from out of her gentle grasp. “Leave me, I wish to be alone.” Carina remained still, trying to think of anything else she could say that might convince him to set her free. Vinn suddenly stood and swiped the empty wine bottle from the table. He hurled it violently at the fireplace, the bottle shattering into pieces within the flames. “GO! *NOW!*” he roared.

Shocked by his sudden violent rage, Carina slowly stood and cautiously walked out of the chamber, leaving the Baron alone once again to his thoughts.

The next morning, Carina awoke to a loud knocking at the door. Stepping quickly across the cold stone chamber floor in her bare feet, she approached the door. “Who’s there?” she said, shivering from the chilled air in the chamber in her white sleepwear.

“Erec and Thomas, my lady,” replied Erec behind the door.

Carina opened the door, noticing the two knights looked different than she remembered from last night. “Your armor and cloaks, you’ve changed them,” she said, looking at the knights donning the armor and cloaks of Blairmount Castle knights.

“Fear not, Carina,” said Thomas as the two knights entered the bedchamber and closed the door behind. “We ‘borrowed’ the armor from the armory once the guard dozed off last night. We were able to blend-in as castle knights in order to sneak out of the castle and city.”

“And did you?” said Carina.

“We did,” replied Erec. “But first, what did Baron Vinn want from you last night? Did he *harm* you?”

Carina shook her head, “The Baron just wanted to talk. In short, he means not to harm me, but to win my love. I tried to explain that my heart belongs to Audric, that I will never be happy so long as I am here.”

“Interesting,” said Erec. “I never knew the Baron to be such a romantic.”

“So, about *your* night. What happened?” said Carina.

Erec and Thomas removed their helmets, combing their fingers through their long blonde and light brown hair from being matted-down throughout the night. They placed the helmets on a nearby table as Thomas began making a fire in the chamber’s fireplace. “It seems the people of Blairmount hold King Reynard’s knights in the highest regard. Time and again, we had encountered people on the streets and they respectfully bowed their heads to us, greeting us with kind but fearful looks in their eyes as they wished us a pleasant evening.”

“That, or they were just frightened to not say or do anything that could possibly offend us,” said Thomas.

Erec laughed. “Yes, I suppose acting the part of the King’s household knights helped a bit in our escape. Playing the roles of self-righteous scoundrels, deeming those of lower status as *lesser* men as we passed by, did help our illusion of being Blairmount Castle knights.”

“So,” began Thomas, “We reached Briarwood just after midnight and held a meeting with Captain Johnathan. We told him all that had transpired and what was said at dinner with the King. Johnathan then sent messengers to the kings of Evergreen and Lacamas immediately after we spoke.”

Carina sighed in relief, “That is good to hear. With these revelations of King Reynard supporting Skamania in their war against Lacamas, as well as his intentions to begin his war against Evergreen sooner than expected, both King Geoffroi and King Keen should gain more time to make preparations.”

“There is something else,” said Thomas. “Our messengers have returned from Evergreen. Your father expresses his relief of your safety. King Geoffroi commends you of your bravery and involvement with The Order of the Star. His majesty has requested that you and the Order continue to message him with what intelligence we gather, as we now have with last night’s information, and in his lord’s words: ‘Tread lightly in the River Kingdom’.

“And as for your father,” said Erec. “He wanted to let you know the entire county of Burton now speaks of your courage. Your countrymen stand behind you with pride and pray for your success and safe return home.

“Goodness,” said Carina, placing her hand against her chest and sat upon the bed. She could feel her heart race from the surprising news. “I am truly grateful for their thoughts and support!”

Erec looked at her fondly and stepped towards her. “There was also one other message that was sent by a recent Lacamas messenger. Audric received your message, my lady.” He handed her a rolled scroll with a red ribbon wrapped around it. “Apparently, he is aiding Lacamas in the coming war against Skamania.”

“Oh, my sweet Audric,” Carina whispered with a bright smile as she quickly broke the red-wax seal, unrolled the scroll and began reading her love’s message.


“In truth, I only assume she read the message I sent,” said Audric, staring down at his cup of tea in his hands. “I was told some time after I had sent it that she received my letter with joy and relief, whispering the words ‘My sweet Audric’.”

Godfrey smiled thoughtfully at him. “I believe it would be safe to say that she had. May I ask what you had written to her?”


“I explained what had happened to me after her capture, as well as the reasons why I was currently in Lacamas,” replied Audric. “I gave her my word that I would come for her when the timing was right, and that I was eternally grateful to the Order of the Star for their protection of her. I also asked for her forgiveness in not having the strength to stop Baron Vinn from taking her that fateful afternoon. I promised Carina that justice would be done upon the Baron the day I come for her. At the end, I expressed how much I truly loved and missed her, that she was in my thoughts and prayers each and every day.”

A moment of silence between the two men passed when Godfrey finally spoke. “So, I imagine King Keen received the message regarding Cascadia’s involvement in King Darrin’s war plans. What part did you play exactly in readying Lacamas’ army for the war with Skamania?”

Audric gave a slight nod. “King Keen’s suspicion of Cascadia supplying King Darrin with Anitan mushrooms was only the beginning of his boiling anger towards King Reynard. More was to come of Cascadia’s involvement in the Lacamas-Skamania war. Yet it would be months before King Darrin would assemble his army and launch the first assault that would commence the war. Sickness and death spread throughout Skamania by the deadly mushrooms. During this time came many long days of intense training of newly recruited Lacamas troops, as well as advances in weaponry and machinery that would forever change the way the Lake Kingdom would engage, and be viewed by the world, in warfare.”



Chapter Six



Knights of Lacamas

“*NO!* That is completely *wrong!*” exclaimed Captain Michael to Audric. Camndon’s barracks was filled with knights and soldiers from the capital and surrounding towns, practicing their skills with swords and shields, battle axes, bows, and spears. “Audric,” began Michael again approaching the Evergreen squire sparring with seven Lacamas soldiers at the same time. “If you are to engage against multiple men at once, as you have claimed you are capable of doing, then you must not leave any side of your body vulnerable. Look now behind you to your left side.” Audric glanced over his shoulder, seeing one of the soldiers pointing his blade at him. The sharp, pointed sword tip was mere inches from his waist. “You would have been slain within seconds because you are *still* losing focus of your surroundings, even after months of training!”

“I am sorry,” said Audric. “I thought I had all sides covered.”

Michael's clear blue eyes gazed back at him with a look of confusion. "You *thought?* You thought! *Audric*, when you eventually find yourself fighting for Lacamas, for those fighting alongside you, and for your very life, you do not *THINK*, you must act! Act with swift, decisive moves and strikes!" He grabbed Audric's armored shoulders roughly in his hands and looked him square in his eyes. "Listen to me and listen well. The moment you decide to *think* of your next move on the battlefield, your life will be forfeit to the enemy. Do you understand?" Audric stared boldly back at him, seeing the intensity of just how serious the Captain was and gave a slight nod. "You are an excellent swordsman, Audric. Your stamina and bravery to stand against an onslaught of armed men on your own, matched with your impressive skills with a blade, make you a worthy warrior. But if you are ever to become a knight of Lacamas, let alone become a part of the legendary Chivalrous Knights of Evergreen, you *must* develop your instincts in order to eliminate all vulnerability of attacks upon you." He rested a comforting hand upon Audric's armored shoulder. "Take a break. Try again with this exercise when you are ready." The Captain then strode off, walking among the Lacamas knights and soldiers sparring with each other throughout the barracks' open combat area.

Audric aggressively sheathed his sword and trudged towards an empty bench sitting under a large oak tree. He threw down the Lacamas kite shield given to him to practice with upon the dusty ground and sat upon the bench.

"Well that didn't look like it went so well," came a voice off to his side. Audric turned his attention away from the knights and soldiers, seeing Jill approaching him.

"I am not where I thought I was when it comes to combat skills," said Audric in a frustrated tone.

Jill smiled thoughtfully at him as she sat beside him upon the bench. "Do not be so hard on yourself. Developing combat instincts was something Sophie and I struggled with for years."

Audric looked behind her towards the back of the open area, seeing Sophie practicing her swift fighting moves against groups of ten to fifteen soldiers at a time, slicing her thin light-weight blade through the air as she flipped over her opponents, twisting and turning her body with precise accuracy as she fought off each and every one of the sparring soldiers. "You two seem to have no trouble with such instincts now."

Patting his knee, Jill looked at him reassuringly. "I have noticed Michael working with you fairly extensively these last few months. Your face shows more discouragement than I have seen up until now. Do not let his criticisms get to you. Michael focuses on you not to bring you down, but to build you up."

Audric nodded. "I feel he has helped me raise my skills to a higher level since my arrival here. It's just..."

"You have never been part of an army," said Jill.

Audric reluctantly nodded. "I feel like I am not accomplishing what our kings have expected of me. I feel like I am wasting everyone's time, including my own."

"Is that so?" said Jill. "Well, do you think *that* has been a waste of yours or the army's time?" She pointed over at the seven soldiers he had been sparring with as they practiced fighting with their swords with each other. "Those soldiers have never even *seen* a battle before, and as you can see, they are fighting like they have been in countless ones before! When they first came to the barracks months ago, those seven were so new to the army they could barely swing a sword steady in the air. Now, thanks to you and your training with them along with countless other soldiers, and even a few Lacamas knights who you have shared your knowledge

of sword skills, *and* retaining a level of stamina throughout long periods of fighting, Lacamas' army is continuing to grow into a stronger force!"

Audric looked about the open area filled with knights and soldiers, seeing the countless faces he recognized throughout the intense months of combat training. All were now fighting with greater confidence, sharpened skills with their respected weapons, and showed a burning desire in their eyes, in every move they made, to win against their sparring opponents. "It seems the quality of leadership our kings see in you has come out not through spoken words, but through hard work, dedication to the men here, and your unbending determination to never back down and simply give up," said Jill. "Remember the first two months of training? You had Lacamas knights challenging you over and over again to duel, some lasting hours at a time. Sure, you may have lost here and there along the wake of them all, yet that *drive* to keep fighting, that determination to never surrender has now been passed on. Look at them all, they fight now with *passion*, something that has been lost in our army for decades!" Audric looked over at her, seeing a sense of pride gleaming from her dark, chestnut-colored eyes. "You helped show them what it truly takes to be a victorious warrior."

Audric smiled faintly. "Thank you, Jill."

"Do not get discouraged," said Jill as she stood up and jogged back to her combat exercises with Sophie. Feeling a renewed sense of self-confidence, Audric rose up from the bench, picked up his shield, and strode back to the seven soldiers watching and waiting for him with ready swords in hand.

Over the course of the summer months, Audric continued to spar and train with many of Lacamas' knights, learning a variety of combat skills. He soon developed and perfected his instincts, knowing what to do the moment he was faced with unpredictable dangers of combat without having to think of his next move. Earning the respect of the soldiers, Audric eventually earned the respect of the knights, whom there was now not a knight in the kingdom that could outmatch his skills with a sword and shield. During combat exercises, Audric proved himself time and again to be an effective leader. His strategies of secretly out-flanking his opponents, tricking them into believing they only had so many men to confront, when in reality Audric had a host of men circle around the practice-battles unseen in the surrounding woods, only to re-emerge from the rear and have them surrounded.

With his growing success and popularity of becoming a skilled leader among the Lacamas army, Sir Michael took notice of the squire from Evergreen. He reported to King Keen what accomplishments, fighting skills and leadership qualities he had gained throughout the months of training. The King listened each day to his Captain's reports, feeling both pride for Audric as well as a sense of great reassurance of his decision to request him from King Geoffroi.

The last days of what seemed like a lengthy, hot summer season finally arrived. As King Keen sat to feast with his court, a messenger raced into the dining hall.

“My lord, an urgent message has come for you,” said the messenger.

“Well come forth then,” said Keen as everyone in the hall stopped eating and drinking and looked to the King. The messenger approached the King’s table and handed Keen a rolled scroll, bowing his head with respect. The King read through the message written upon the scroll, his bushy blonde eyebrows suddenly rising in surprise. The entire hall was silent, only the crackling sounds of the logs burning in the hall’s large fire-pit could be heard.

Finally, Keen spoke. “The kingdom of Evergreen is under attack. King Reynard of Cascadia has launched his first attack in his campaign against our ally.” A loud uproar of concern filled the hall from the court. Audric looked at the King with a bold determination to act blazing in his eyes. Keen frowned and arose from his seat as he held his hands up in the air for his court’s attention. “Silence, silence in my hall!” he exclaimed over the rabble. The hall soon quieted once again as all paid close attention to their King. “Undoubtedly this is a dark hour for our friends of the Forest Kingdom with many challenging days to come. It is why I decry that Lacamas supply Evergreen with what supplies they may need in this war.”

The Steward of Lacamas stood. “What about soldiers, your Highness? Do we send aid to Evergreen to help combat the Cascadian invasion?”

Keen breathed a deep sigh. “I cannot afford a single Lacamas soldier to fight in any war other than our own against Skamania.”

“But surely they will not strike until perhaps near the end of winter?” said the Steward. “King Darrin has been reluctant to send any raiding parties into our lands of late. Skamania’s noise of war seems to have quieted.” Loud and lively debate soon followed the Steward’s words from the court as their noise once again filled the hall.

“*Hearken* to me!” roared the King. All fell silent once more. “Let it be known that it is not *if* Skamania will ever begin a war against us, but *when*. My scouts report that Skamania has quietly been assembling a vast army, consisting of their men and those of Cascadia who were sent by King Reynard to ensure Skamania’s victory. It is no longer a matter of months and years that King Darrin will strike Lacamas, but days. Now then, with this latest information concerning Evergreen coming to my attention, I wish to have my captains and knights from the city join me in the war room for further talks on this matter.” He looked over at Audric, who was watching him intently. “Audric, I ask that you be present as well.” Keen began making his way out of the hall, escorted by Captain Michael, Captain Robert and Captain Finley, along with the capital’s knights as Audric followed them closely behind out of the hall.

After several hours into the night discussing battle plans for the coming war against Skamania, all tiredly adjourned from the war room with the exception of the King, Captain Michael and Audric. “Audric,” began Keen, “you have shown great patience tonight considering the news of your homeland’s current crisis. Tell me, do you desire at this time to return to Evergreen?”

Staring blankly back at the King, Audric felt taken aback by the question. “I have given you my word, your highness, that I would remain here and help you achieve victory against Skamania. Yet I would be lying if I to say I feel no desire to return home to fight for my country and rescue my beloved. I did not expect Cascadia to begin the war so soon.”

Keen looked at him thoughtfully. “No one could have expected when exactly King Reynard would send his army to attack. I must confess something to you, Audric. I feel conflicted over my decision to have you remain here. I should not have made you believe that you must stay here until our war’s end. It is why I, along with the whole of Lacamas, would understand if you decided to return to Evergreen.”

The squire remained silent, thinking over Keen’s words. An opportunity to return home, to fight in the war and begin plans to rescue Carina had arrived without him having to sneak off dishonorably to do so.

After a moment, Audric finally spoke. “Your highness, my King and my father sent me here to help in what ways that I could. To aid you through the skills I had learned as a squire of Evergreen, battle tactics I learned from my father, and other qualities he and my King seemed desirable to pass onto Lacamas’ armies. What I had forgotten was what my father had wished for me to gain during my time here, which was to complete my training as a squire to become a knight.” He paused, looking at the King concernedly. “How can I possibly leave you all, who have been like family to me, after all the help and knowledge you have given me to rise one day to become a Chivalrous Knight of Evergreen?”

“And do you feel you have completed your squire training? Have you attained such skills needed to become a knight one day?” said Michael.

Audric gave a confident nod. “I have.”

“Well, I agree with your assessment, Audric,” said Michael. “You have trained hard this past year and have gained great respect from the army. I am constantly approached by knights, whom you have met and trained with, who tell me they believe you should be knighted. Your acts of valor during your escape from Skamania, solving the mystery behind Skamania’s decay from deadly mushrooms supplied to King Darrin, and your unmatched sword skills and outstanding leadership you have shown day after day while training has not gone unnoticed.”

Audric looked at them both confused. “What are you saying?”

“What he is saying, Audric, is that you are to be knighted,” said Keen with a faint smile. “Henceforth, you shall be a knight of my house. You shall be known in Lacamas as Audric of Camndon, until the war with Skamania has been won. I shall then grant you land in the town of Lakeridge, which resides west of the capital. You will be the town’s lord and your title shall be Audric of Lakeridge.”

Audric sat before them dumbfounded. Land ownership? Titles? *Knighthood*? “I do not know what to say, your highness. It is truly an honor!”

“It is all of course your choice to accept, Audric, but I do hope that you say yes,” said the King. “Know that I understand that you will one day become a Chivalrous Knight of Evergreen, holding allegiance to your King. I shall respect your commitment to Evergreen and release you from my service at that time, but know that you shall always remain a knight of my kingdom.”

Audric bowed his head. “Then I humbly accept this gracious offer, my lord.”

“Wonderful!” said Keen happily. “That brings me great joy to hear you say yes. I shall send word at once to King Geoffroi and to your father of your rise to knighthood in Lacamas.”

The three stood as Michael extended his hand to Audric. “I am proud of you, Audric. You have grown much since your arrival here. I am proud to have you serve as a knight of the kingdom.”

Audric shook his hand. “Thank you for pushing me hard enough to accomplish such growth.” The three retired for the night as Audric went to his bed chamber, feeling excited yet nervous about the next chapter of his stay in the Lake Kingdom.

“A knight of Lacamas?” said Sophie surprised as she walked with Audric and Jill in the castle courtyard. All around them the courtyard and castle’s torches and lamps were being lit as the sun finally set. The stars high above revealed in the dark violet sky, which blended with the brilliant orange and pink-colors streaking across the western horizon.

“It’s still hard for me to believe,” said Audric, walking in-between the sisters. “When I first learned I was coming to Lacamas, I thought it was merely to help in what ways I could in the coming war against Skamania. I believed that afterwards upon my return home, I would have proven worthy of knighthood in my own country. Never did I think that I would ever become a knight *here*. I am truly grateful for the honor.”

Jill smiled thoughtfully. “You have worked so hard these past months with us Audric. Sophie and I have seen how you’ve changed, the progress you have made in becoming a powerful, strategic...well...*knight* I suppose you should now be called! We are so proud of you, are we not, Sophie?”

Sophie shot a glance at Audric. “You have certainly proven your dedication and loyalty to us, for remaining here rather than returning to Evergreen to fight in their war with Cascadia. We are *all* proud of you.”

Audric stopped, a faint smile appearing on his face as the sisters, realizing he stopped walking with them, halted and turned to face him. “I just want to say to the both of you thank you. Thank you for your encouragement, for all of your advice throughout the long months of hard training.” He paused and laughed. “Also for rescuing me from the Skamania King’s dungeons.” The sisters smiled. They looked at each other as they remembered the night they freed Audric from King Darrin’s castle dungeons, then were nearly taken captive by the enemy outside Skamania’s capital. “Most of all,” began Audric again, “for befriending me so soon after my arrival when all others of the army viewed me as a nuisance, or simply the wrong man to have been sent here.”

Jill approached him, wrapping her arms around his waist as the two embraced. “We knew that you would be great,” she said. “We saw that spark of ambition, determination, and strive in your eyes that Sophie and I held when our King, after years of proving ourselves to the army, accepted us to protect and fight for Lacamas. I believe Keen when he says you were the right man for this task. Once again he did not disappoint us, and neither have you.” They released each other as Jill backed away, smiling faintly back at him.

Sophie then approached him, her clear blue eyes holding his image in them. “If only more men held chivalry so highly, perhaps there would be less of a need for kingdoms to war with each other.” She then stood upon her toes, reaching up to his cheek and kissed him. “Carina is lucky to be bound by love with someone so honorable.” She stepped back to her sister’s side.

“Well then,” said Audric with a shy grin. “Shall we find our way to the dining hall? Since King Keen has requested your presence as honored guests, we shouldn’t keep him waiting.” The sisters approached him on opposite sides, hooking their arms around his as he escorted them back into the castle.

“May I have your attention, please,” said King Keen, rising from his seat at the King’s table in the dining hall filled with his court and honored guests, including all of the knights of the county, as well as Sophie and Jill who sat to either side of Keen. “It is with great pleasure to announce the knighthood of Lacamas’ newest addition to the army’s growing, enhancing, and now *strengthened* forces. He is a squire of the Forest Kingdom of Evergreen, son of Sir Bruce of White Oak Woods, an honored Chivalrous Knight of Evergreen. Yet chivalry knows no borders, yielding one’s service to only his own country, but to all whom he has dedicated to help protect and fight for. Lords, Ladies, and honored guests, I present to you Audric, squire of Evergreen tonight, *knight* of my house in the morning!”

Great cheers erupted in the hall as all applauded, including the county knights who all had at first discredited Audric’s skills and future with Lacamas. Yet over the course of the hard-training months, they witnessed him become a strong, effective leader. Audric stood, gazing across the hall filled with finely-dressed court members, knights of the capital, Camndon Castle knights and those from across the surrounding county, all staring at him with encouragement, pride, and hope gleaming in their eyes.

Audric sat back down in his seat as the King spoke again, silencing the hall once more. “I have one final announcement this evening. It is with great pride that I announce Lacamas’ first ever title of ‘Shield Maiden’. All that the title of knight holds, so shall that of the Shield Maiden. Lords, Ladies, and honored guests, I present to you Lacamas’ *history*-making Shield Maidens, Sophie and Jill!”

With great surprise expressed upon their faces, the two sisters slowly stood as the hall erupted with cheers and thunderous applause. Captain Michael stood from his seat among the castle knights, applauding as he looked proudly upon the sisters. So did the knights stand at the captain’s table, following Michael’s decision to rise from his seat and applauded them. To Audric, Sophie and Jill had proven themselves most worthy among the army. Not only did they prove it through the grueling, and what seemed at times endless months of training, but for even a few years prior when they first were accepted into the army as part of the King’s special forces in Camndon. Jill gracefully curtsied in her blue and white evening gown as Sophie, donning a black and white evening gown, gave a respectful bow of her head to those at each table lining the joyous hall.

Audric walked into the candlelit castle chapel wearing long, clean white linens and approached the second of three tables standing atop the chapel’s dais. New plate-armor, chain hauberk, and helmet reflected the countless white candles flames off their polished surfaces. Laid behind the armor upon the table was a Lacamas castle-knight red and black kite-shield. In the center of the four-squared field of red and black, a white hawk-emblem of the kingdom spreading its wings was displayed. Finally, laid in front of the armor and shield was a newly-forged sword stowed in a new leather scabbard faceted with gold ends.

Before he began to pray throughout the night to be a good and honorable knight, for his armor and sword were to be absorbed and blessed with the forces of good and righteous by the

heavens, Audric glanced at each of the other two tables on either side of his. Lying upon them both was new armor forged and designed for the future Shield Maidens. On the table to Audric's left, he saw Sophie's blade sheathed in its black-leather scabbard in front of the armor. To his right, he noticed Jill's long fighting knives sheathed in their red-leather scabbards lying before her new armor upon the table.

Holding his new sheathed sword in his hands, Audric bowed his head. He knelt upon a red ceremonious rug laid upon the dais steps before the table holding his armor. Closing his eyes, he began a long night of prayer before the knighting ceremony the following morning. Suddenly, Audric heard the sounds of two pairs of bare feet hurriedly crossing the chapel's stone floor. Opening one eye he turned to see Sophie, wearing the same white linens as he, stepping up to her table. She took her sword in her hands and quickly knelt upon her own ceremonious rug before her table. Closing her eyes, she bowed her head in prayer. To his right, donning the same linens as he and Sophie, Jill did the same as she held her fighting knives and began praying before her own table.

"I'm grateful you two are performing your prayer ceremony tonight as well," whispered Audric. "I felt it strange being here alone, praying in a foreign chapel to become a knight in a country other than my own."

"We felt it necessary to do this together," whispered Jill.

"*Shhh!*" expelled Sophie. "This is supposed to be a night of silent prayer, not prayer with casual conversation!" she whispered.

"I am sorry," whispered back Audric, closing his eyes once more and began to pray.

Not able to contain herself, Jill let out a soft giggle from her sister's sudden outburst. "Sorry, Sophie," she whispered, closing her eyes and began to pray in the now silent chapel.

"We prayed throughout the night," said Audric, staring lazily at the warm fire burning bright in the large, stone fireplace. Godfrey continued listening to his tale intently and poured him another cup of hot tea. "My father once told me about how certain ceremonial rituals had become part of knighthood. First, the night of prayer. You pray over your armor and sword that they may absorb the powers of the highest light and of the highest good, to protect me whenever I don them. Then, a grand ceremony where gifts are bestowed upon you from the King and temple priest, such as the well-known gift of a pair of gold spurs."

Godfrey chuckled. "I seem to recall long ago a knight from the county of Hearthwood. He mentioned casually that he was knighted after a great battle was fought against the savage wild-men of the western realm. Though he had not gone through any elaborate ceremonies, he was knighted by his captain upon the very battlefield they fought. The knight, whose name I believe was Adimar of Hearthwood, was merely a newly-trained swordsman soldier under the command of the Count of Hearthwood. But that day he fought valiantly, proving he had within him true courage and chivalry in the face of impossible odds to defeat the great onslaught of wild-men legions."

Audric nodded. "That was how men were knighted, before such ceremonies became important to kings and clergy. To this day, there are still times when soldiers of Evergreen are knighted upon the battlefield for their chivalrous actions. Yet there is something to be said about

such ceremonies that have been introduced into knighthood. I believe there is a great power of good that exists to bless its energy upon worthy knights.”

“There certainly seems to be enough belief and faith of it out there to have Kings create and spend vast amounts of money on such elaborate ceremonies,” said Godfrey.

The knight smiled faintly. “And elaborate certainly was the knighting ceremony that commenced the following morning. Knights from all across the Lake Kingdom were invited, along with King Keen’s entire court, and honored guests. As I knelt upon the throne dais in Camndon Castle’s great hall, with Sophie and Jill at my sides before the King and bishop of Camndon, I swear I saw at that moment the wizard, Farridan, standing inconspicuously off to the side amid the crowd. All came to witness the foreign squire of Evergreen, and the two maidens under the King’s command to be knighted.

“The three of us were each given, as I mentioned, two golden spurs. Honored knights of Lacamas, including Captain Michael, fastened them onto our feet. Donning our new armor, we were considered ‘complete’ as the knights handed me my new sword. Sophie was given her trusted blade, and Jill her cherished fighting knives. They then placed upon our armored shoulders black cloaks and hoods, with red silk sewn along the insides. The priest said to us then, ‘As the sword cuts on both sides of the blade, so you shall maintain and defend right, reason and justice on all sides without being false to all that is good in this world for anyone’. Captain Michael and the honored knights then kissed our foreheads as the bishop explained it signified that love and loyalty was within the three of us, that we strive to uphold order until our last breath wherever we can.

“King Keen finally approached us, tapping our shoulders with his broad sword, The Sword of the Lake, to which the priest explained that this signified that we always remember the order of knighthood and carry out all tasks, missions, and quests that may pertain to the order. Thus, we arose from our knees to our feet. I was now a knight of Lacamas under the command of the King himself, alongside Lacamas’ first Shield Maidens. When we proceeded to leave with Keen and honored knights as the packed hall erupted with thunderous applause, we were met outside the castle walls by a great sea of the people of Lacamas, ranging in all classes and walks of life from wealthy merchants to the poorest serfs, all cheering and applauding us as we stood before them.

“At that moment, I saw the great scope of my responsibility to Lacamas, to every man, woman, and child who stared and cheered at us with great joy. They were so loud one would suspect that surrounding kingdoms could hear the peoples’ excitement!”

Godfrey gazed at him thoughtfully. “You grew nervous again over your role there?”

Audric gave a slight nod. “I did, at the moment.”

“What of the wizard? Did he actually attend the ceremony?”

“It turned out that he had come,” replied Audric, shaking the memory of his paralyzing fear of the great sea of people out of his mind. “Yet there was more to his coming to Lacamas than witnessing my rise to knighthood.”



Chapter Seven On the Eve of Battle



After a celebratory feast honoring the knighting of Audric, Sophie, and Jill, Audric retired to his bedchamber in the castle. To his surprise, he discovered the wizard, Farridan, sitting casually in a chair beside the warm fire glowing in the chamber's fireplace.

"Farridan," said Audric, closing the door behind him and approached the wizard. "Is that you, or is it an image of you?" he said jokingly and reached out to touch the wizard's arm.

"Yes, yes I am here," said Farridan, batting away Audric's hand. "You did not think I would miss your knighting ceremony this morning? I wished to be there in person."

Audric raised an eyebrow and smirked. "I think having your presence in the Skamania King's dungeons would have been just as welcoming."

"*Um hrmm,*" expelled Farridan clearing his throat, "I do try to be present wherever and whenever I can. But I have come to Lacamas, Audric, for reasons other than witnessing your rise to knighthood. Have you received any news from your father or King Geoffroi?"

Audric shook his head, taking a seat across from him. "No, why? The war has been on my mind constantly. I had hoped for some news soon."

"Well, I have news to share with you," said Farridan. "Though what I have to report, I fear may provoke you into acting hastily."

"Whatever you must say, I pray you do so without hesitation," said Audric. "I swear I will not react so rashly."

Farridan gave a decisive nod. "Very well. As you know, war has begun between Cascadia and Evergreen. For some time now, the armies of Evergreen had been able to hold the invaders along the Serrin River, keeping the daily battles contained there. Now, Cascadian forces have breached Evergreen's defenses. The county of Hearthwood fell first, then Northrest, and finally in recent days Foxcroft County was lost to Cascadia. Burton, Foxcroft, and Fircrest counties have been strong in keeping the invaders at bay, but their forces can only hold back the Cascadians for so long. I fear for Evergreen's longevity in this war, Audric. If the central counties are invaded and the capital claimed by Cascadia, the kingdom will be lost."

Audric remained as still as a statue, paralyzed in disbelief that the southern counties had been overrun. "Who leads the invasion?" he said finally, his face looking as hard as stone.

"King Reynard led his army to war in the beginning. After invading and claiming lordship over the county of Hearthwood, he retired from the front and now Baron Vinn of Magilvary currently commands the army."

"Vinn," said Audric softly, scowling at the thought of the Baron. "That dishonorable knight who stole my beloved now leads the invasion of my country?"

"All is not lost, Audric," said Farridan, quick to quell any rash actions or words from Audric.

Audric held up his hand for silence. "Has my father or King Geoffroi spoken to you?"

"Both have asked me to ensure that you remain in Lacamas until the time comes when you can rally the army to Evergreen's aid," said the wizard. "Your father knows of your knighthood here. He spoke of how proud he is of your great accomplishment and efforts to defend Lacamas. Bruce now leads his men in the fight to defend Burton's southern borders from the Cascadians."

Audric once again remained silent for a moment, taking in the wizard's words. Finally, he spoke. "What would *you* have me do, Farridan? Carina is currently with Cascadia's Order of the Star, yes, but I still fear for her safety. My country is slowly being claimed under Cascadia's King, my home in Burton is under constant attack, and Lacamas, a kingdom I have pledged as a

knight of the Lake Kingdom to defend and protect, shall be at war soon with an old enemy that has become a strong rival in recent years.”

Farridan gave a comforting smile. “All of what you say is true, but let us examine the facts a little more. Carina is currently being held hostage in King Reynard’s castle in Blairmount, yet I have recently discovered that she has two knights of the Order of the Star as her personal guards. I find it strange that Captain Johnathan of the Order simply gave her to the Baron, but also that she was granted two escorts of the Order. I sense a plan of action between Carina and the knights of the Order is currently being hatched. As for the King’s rush to war with Evergreen, it has postponed Baron Vinn’s marriage to Carina while he is away at war. There is more going on here between Carina, the Order of the Star knights, and the King of Cascadia than we may yet know.”

“What do you think is happening between them?” said Audric.

Farridan stroked his fingers through his beard in thought. “It is my belief Carina is siphoning valuable information of King Reynard’s war plans and relaying it to the Order of the Star, a company of knights known to be rebellious towards their King. If this is true, Carina is playing an important role in this war for Evergreen’s survival.

“As for Evergreen in this war, they may have lost three counties, but they still control the north and central regions of the kingdom. Evergreen’s Chivalrous Knights, as you know, are a legendary fighting force. It will take more time than the Cascadia King anticipates to overthrow King Geoffroi.”

“It is a good thing that Evergreen has a wizard on their side as well,” said Audric.

Farridan smiled faintly. “Then, there is this business with you defending the Lake Kingdom against the pending war with Skamania. It is *here*, Audric, that all of your challenges begin.”

Audric’s gaze strayed towards the bright flames burning on the warm hearth. “Even now as a knight, I still feel fear over what is to come.”

The wizard gazed at him thoughtfully. “Even the bravest of warriors feel some fear. It is what you do with that fear that counts. Will you run in retreat from what fears you? Or will you confront them head-on, *challenging* your fears, and do what you must to overcome and conquer them?”

During the following days after Audric’s knighting ceremony, the armies of Lacamas began traveling from all across the Lake Kingdom to Camndon as the mounting threat of war from Skamania grew. Knights and soldiers from Lacamas’ cities, towns and villages all began arriving at the capital to assemble and march to war as one grand force to the battlefield. Much to Audric’s dismay from his talks with the King to create large companies of the army, each arriving to the battle in waves, throwing off the enemy’s strength and momentum during the course of the initial battle, Keen insisted his kingdom’s entire army be assembled and present before the walls of the capital to meet the enemy in a grand-scale battle.

Audric walked through the many encampments outside the city walls, watching the Lacamas soldiers from all over the kingdom meet and greet each other, had their blades sharpened, their bows restrung, their armor looked over by smiths to be repaired, and many

practicing their fighting and defensive skills with each other. The Lacamas knights from across the realm talked amongst themselves, remaining with each other in small cliques throughout the city as they were housed within the city walls in every available house, rooms at inns, and in the castle, which had soon filled to capacity.

Seeing all of this, Audric still couldn't help but continue to think about the news of Cascadia's invasion into Evergreen and the counties of Hearthwood, Northcrest and Foxcroft being overrun by the enemy. 'They *must* be stopped,' thought Audric. 'Cascadia must not get too strong a foothold in the war. Evergreen must repel the invasion, and soon.' His thoughts then went on to Carina, who Farridan believed was playing an important role in the war with the Order of the Star knights of Cascadia. 'I pray Carina remains safe, that she does not place herself in too deep of danger gathering information from within the walls of Blairmount Castle. I pray we become reunited soon.'

He walked through the rest of the encampments and returned back inside the city, passing by groups of Lacamas knights along the streets. Many looked curiously at the newest knight of the realm while others looked on with disdain and anger at Audric; the foreigner who their King decried to have knighted and be given land and title. He trudged on passed the sharp stares along the streets and headed towards the looming castle in the short distance.

From out of the crowds along the bustling streets, Sophie emerged and approached him. "There you are," she said, unaware of the surrounding stares of disapproval and anger from the by-standing knights, who had only just recently received word of the new 'Shield Maidens' of the army. "Keen has requested an audience with Camndon's knights. It seems he wants you, Jill, and me to help lead the army in the war."

"What's this?" spoke a knight who abruptly approached Audric and Sophie with a small band of knights from the realm. "Lacamas' knights, the entire army, are to be led by a couple of *maidens*? Has our good King gone mad?"

Sophie stared at the knight boldly. "And *you* are?"

"Piers of Green Mountain," replied the knight, exchanging snide smiles the other knights behind him.

"Are you not man enough to be led by a female?" said Sophie sternly.

The knight's smile faded as he approached and stood toe-to-toe with her. "One thing is certain to me, '*Shield Maiden*', you have not fought and survived the bloody battles I have. You have not saved towns and villages from being burned to the ground by greedy counts of Green Mountain's neighboring counties. It was said that you take orders directly from our King. Then why has he not sent you north to handle his war-mongering family members? King Keen believes the army is strong as a whole, he is greatly mistaken. Lacamas' counties are constantly at war with each other, all the while the counts tell him all is well throughout the region. His majesty remains unaware of their plundering and land-grabbing!" He stared sharply at Sophie, standing before her inches away from her face. "If the King believes his army is intact and can fight together, this war is already lost. But then, what would a silly girl from the comforts of the capital know of this?"

From out of the bustling streets, unsuspected by the group of knights gathered around Sir Piers, Jill stealthily placed her sharpened fighting knives across the knight's throat from behind him. "Call my sister 'girl' again, and you will *die* before the war even begins!"

Piers slowly raised his hands in the air in surrender. At once, the surrounding knights drew their swords and pointed them at Jill.

“*Enough!*” said Audric, standing in between Sophie and Sir Piers. “Is it not enough that Lacamas is readying for war that its own knights draw swords on each other? Jill, release this man!”

Surprised by his words, Jill slowly let go of the knight, removing her long knives from his throat. “Sir,” began Audric again to the knight, “you say you have been forced to fight against your own countrymen? You sounded angry over the matter that these events have happened, then why provoke more confrontation with more of your fellow countrymen? Because she is a maiden? I have seen these two Shield Maidens in combat, and I tell you now, I would much rather have them on my side of the battle than fight against them.”

“So says the foreigner from Evergreen,” said Piers. “King Keen may have knighted you, but you will never be part of the brotherhood of Lacamas knights. Your title means *nothing* to the rest of us across the Lake Kingdom,” he said, then looked at the sisters. “As well as those unfit to fight.” He led his fellow knights away from Audric and the sisters, disappearing into a nearby tavern.

“Not exactly the congratulations I thought I would receive in being knighted,” said Jill, sheathing her knives.

Sophie smirked. “Come on, the King awaits us. Never mind that brigand’s comments.” Yet to Audric, he began to wonder just how many more knights felt the same way about them.

“Your majesty,” said a messenger entering the great hall where King Keen was holding court in the late morning. “The armies of Skamania are on the march! They will be at the kingdom’s eastern borders by sundown!”

The entire hall fell silent, the court members looking at each other concernedly from the news. King Keen arose from his throne as all turned their attention upon him. “So be it then,” said Keen. “War from our oldest enemy looms over the peace and prosperity of this kingdom. This old, bitter, and vicious rivalry between Lacamas and Skamania spans generations. For it was during the days when the two kingdoms were conceived that the peoples of both realms were once united. Different ideals, different beliefs in who should lead, and how to lead others, split the people apart creating two feuding kingdoms that to this day have not settled their differences. And so, we are once again at war with our former kin. It is now that the King of Skamania and his strengthened army witness, nay *experience!* what Lacamas has done to its own army these past months.” Looking to Captain Michael, he stared boldly at him and the court. “Assemble the army! We march east to the border!”

The noise of rabble among the court filled the hall as all began to depart to begin their own duties in the war effort. ‘Let these invaders come,’ thought Keen, seeing his captain bow to him from the hall’s doorway and finally leave behind the rest of the court. ‘Let the armies of Skamania face what wrath and death my army awaits to unleash.’

“*To arms! To arms!*” called out a captain. “We march to join with our garrisons encamped at the east border by nightfall.”

Captain Michael approached Audric, who was talking with Sophie, Jill, and Captains Robert and Finley in the capital’s barracks. The entire city and encampments outside rounding the city walls were abuzz with activity as Lacamas’ army prepared to make their leave to war. “Audric I want you, Sophie, and Jill to ride at the front of the army with myself, Robert, Finley and King Keen. You have been granted the great honor of carrying the King’s banner! Congratulations.”

Audric blinked, taken aback by Keen’s request. “The King will be fighting alongside us?”

“He is,” said Michael. “His majesty wishes to help be a piece of what he prays will become a great impression, driving within each man to fight with greater desire and strength. Now be ready to ride out within the hour, all of you,” he said, noticing Sophie’s typical care-free blank stare and Jill’s excited grin as he left them.

“It’s about time this war finally started,” said Jill. “Skamania’s raiding parties terrorizing our country’s towns and villages these past few years have been nothing less than annoying to counter-attack.”

Captain Robert smirked. “I do not think those villagers and townspeople would consider the raiders simply as ‘annoying’ after having their homes burned and their livestock taken.”

Jill shrugged. “True, I know I would be upset if that were to happen to me or my sister.”

“Still,” said Sophie, “with all the raids that have occurred over the years, it will be good to just confront them all with their army in one confrontation.”

“You believe there shall be only one battle in this war?” said Captain Finley.

Sophie nodded. “If we do things the right way in the initial battle, then yes I believe we can end this war in one battle.”

Finley shook his head. “You are young and inexperienced in warfare, my lady. A great war such as the one we are about to face cannot simply be ended in just the first battle.” He looked to Audric and spoke again. “Audric, as a squire of Evergreen under your father, a well-renowned knight who has fought in many wars, enlighten us. Can a war be decided by just one battle?”

Audric looked back at the Captain, waiting for him to say no. “When I had accompanied my father in wars Evergreen fought during my childhood, never did any of them end after just one battle. If ill-prepared, an army could easily be destroyed by its opponent, thus the war would be won and over with. This is what concerns me now with Lacamas’ army. Are we truly prepared for this war?”

“What do you mean?” said Finley.

“Something Sir Piers of Green Mountain said,” said Audric, looking over at Sophie and Jill. “What did he mean when he said the armies of Lacamas are at odds with each other? Are Lacamas’ own counties conflicted with each other? Is information about their current state of fighting each other really being concealed from the King by the Counts?”

Robert shook his head. “I have heard of no such wars or conflicts concerning the kingdom’s counties.”

“It was the first time I have heard such news,” added Sophie. “The man is clearly a liar and trying to demoralize us because of his bloated ego.”

Audric gave a puzzled look. "I'm not convinced. I believe that the counts should be investigated to ensure that they won't sabotage the army due to their own interests in private wars with each other."

"It seems a little late for that now, don't you think?" said Jill.

"Maybe," said Audric. "But I believe the King should know of what Sir Piers had said to us, including his demeaning words towards you, Sophie. All knights, including Piers, should always be held accountable for their words and actions, for what is a knight without chivalry and honor?"

"All knights outside of the Evergreen kingdom?" said Sophie in a snide tone.

"All knights, Sophie?" said Robert.

Sophie's thin eyebrow rose. "My apologies, Captain, I mean *most* knights outside Evergreen." She looked back at Audric and gave a decisive nod. "If you truly wish to push this issue further, then let us go and speak with Keen. Then you shall see that Piers' words were nothing more than just that, words."

"I have heard of no such divisions and rivalries among the northern counties," said King Keen concernedly, sitting upon his throne in the castle's great hall before Audric, Sophie, Jill and captains' Finlay and Robert. "Who has spoken about these accusations regarding these counts and barons?"

"Sir Piers of Green Mountain, your highness" said Audric.

"Sir Piers, eh?" said the King. "He has been quite the rabble-rouser of late. Complaints of drunken brawls in the city's taverns, bullying soldiers who are not under his command have reached my halls since his arrival here." He paused, and then looked at Audric with an inquisitive look. "Tell me Audric, what are your thoughts of this particular knight's comments?"

Audric stared blankly back at the King. "I believe he is telling the truth. His emotions, in my opinion, got the best of him during our encounter on the streets, forcing him to reveal the truth of what has been happening between many of Lacamas' counties."

Keen sat back in his throne, his pale blue eyes trailing off into thought as they held a look of deep concern. "My lord," said Sophie, stepping forward beside Audric. "With all due respect to Sir Audric's opinion, Sir Piers is nothing more than an immature liar among Lacamas' knights. Sure, Piers has proven his quality and leadership in the past on the battlefield, yet he is well-known among the army as a man who will say anything to get his way. Whether it is to gain something he desires, or acquire vengeance over those he deems his rivals. He gets under people's skin like irritating briar-thorns with his words, as they are doing among us now."

"I agree," said Captain Finley. "There have been no reports of any battles, let alone full-scale wars between any counties of the kingdom."

"Is it not the slightest suspicious that a knight of Lacamas would openly accuse the kingdom's counts in waging secret wars against each other?" said Audric. "If Piers were to lie about anything, would he not avoid mentioning those of higher status than himself, counts who if word reached them that he was accusing them of such acts would come after him and punish him for his remarks? It all seems too real to be simply lies."

Jill stepped up before the throne dais steps beside Audric, opposite her sister. “I agree with Audric,” she said. “I think Sir Piers spoke the truth about the northern counties. For why lie about such a thing in the first place?”

“*Jill*,” Sophie said in a harsh whisper as Jill looked back at her sadly.

“I’m sorry, Sophie,” began Jill, “but what Audric has said makes sense.”

King Keen’s attention then went to Captain Robert, who since their arrival at the castle had remained silent. “Robert,” said the King, “you have kept your silence long enough. What have you to say on this matter?”

Robert frowned. “How could I possibly have any opinion or answer to an event I had not witnessed myself? In an occurrence such as this, do not all who were involved have their own interpretation as to what was said, how it was said, and what meaning it could possibly, if at all, have behind such remarks? Was what the knight said exactly what was spoken to Audric and the sisters? It seems to me that both sides of the argument have merit at this point. Though as I have been amongst the army since its assembly in the last few days, I can tell you the morale among the men is high.”

King Keen smirked. “No doubt each knight of my kingdom has in mind a knight, a baron or count of Skamania they wish to fight on the battlefield. Wealth, land, titles, *reputation*. These are what my knights care about. Time and again, I have seen this in them when we have been at war.”

He looked to Audric and spoke again. “And as for this business with feuding counties, I wish to investigate further into this matter. However, it cannot delay the army in fending off Skamania’s pending attack. We must reach the eastern borders by dawn so that we may meet the enemy head-on.”

Suddenly, Captain Michael hastily entered the hall. “What is *this*? Why haven’t you begun marching with the army to the eastern borders?!”

The King held up his hand for the Captain’s silence. “It is all right, Michael. I accepted a meeting with them over a serious matter concerning the war. Now, have my horse readied and my supplies packed. I want the seven of us to catch up to the army before nightfall.”


“You are to ride with us, my lord?” said Michael.

“Not just ride, lead you in this war as well. I am not too old yet to wield a sword and defend my kingdom. Now then, let us be off! War awaits us at dawn!”


“We rode east, beyond the Great Lake and its surrounding forest-hilled lands,” said Audric, seeing Godfrey watching him fully engaged as he listened to his story. “After catching up to the army near Lacamas’ eastern borders, a messenger found me and handed me a letter,” he said, pulling out a folded sheet of parchment from his pocket. “The letter was from Carina, which the Order of the Star had once again secretly smuggled out of Cascadia to send me. I was relieved and overwhelmed with joy to read my beloved’s words once again. In her letter, Carina explained that she had begun gaining valuable information regarding the war between Cascadia and Evergreen while being held captive in Blairmount Castle. King Reynard apparently had openly revealed much of his future plans of attack in Carina’s presence, as well as his plan to take the capital and claim the throne of Evergreen. At that time, the Order of the Star reached an

agreement to announce their parting from King Reynard and the Cascadia army, officially allying and supporting Evergreen in the war. But all still remained in secret as Carina mentions in her letter. She then wrote the following:

King Reynard and his loyal barons and knights will soon learn that not all of Cascadia is in favor of his rule, as well as the war he has waged against our country and home. For in the coming weeks, The Order of the Star shall see to the end of this terrible war as a friend and ally of Evergreen. My love, this may be my final letter to you as I am planning to escape from my imprisonment from Blairmount castle in the coming days. With the help of the knights of the Order, I shall make my way back to Evergreen and inform our good King of what I know about King Reynard's future plans for the war.



Chapter Eight
The Siege of Blairmount



My love, I miss you terribly and continue to patiently await the day I am back in your arms again, wrote Carina at her bedchamber's desk. From the tower window beside her, her gaze strayed from the island city of Blairmount sprawled far below her to the city's edge; the swift-moving waters of the Serrin River surrounded the isolated capital. Her eyes then focused across the River, far to the east of the Forest Kingdom of Evergreen onto the lands of Lacamas and Skamania. She began to write once again upon the parchment. *I have recently heard you were knighted in Lacamas. That is wonderful news! Long have you wished to become a knight, now that dream has come true for you. I am so happy for you but I pray that you be safe, for I also know that as I write this you ride to war in Lacamas. Your father taught you well while you were his squire your whole life, and I know that you will prove to be a valuable asset to the Lacamas army.*

Carina paused, dipping her quill in the stout vial of ink as she thought of her beloved amid the dangers and death of war. *With all my heart know that I love you, Audric. Wherever fate may take you, whatever encounters may come along your way until the day we finally are reunited, I will always be with you.* Signing her name with an overwhelming feeling of love for him flowing through her fingers into the quill as she wrote, Carina then rolled up the letter and sealed it with a wax stamp. She crossed the chamber where Sir Erec sat quietly in a chair examining and sharpening his sword and knives. "Can you have this sent to Lacamas tonight?" she asked.

Erec looked thoughtfully up at her. "I shall inform our chain of messengers at once," the knight said, taking the letter from her. "You truly love him, don't you? I can see it in your eyes."

Carina smiled faintly. "Yes, I do. And in these dark days of war and separation from each other, I sensed from Audric's letter to me that we're both living in torture from being parted from one-another."

The knight looked at her concernedly. "How then, Carina, can love be so *grand* if it becomes so tortuous to bear?"

Carina gave a loving smile as she thought of Audric. “Because a life without love is void of any true happiness. It is a divine gift from the heavens. Thus, we should not avoid it. This temporary pain you witness me bear is far less suffering than ignoring and shutting out love from your life.”

Erec gave a faint smile and made for the door. “Then to ignore it would not be wise. I shall see to your letter now, my lady,” he said and left the chamber.

‘Now,’ thought Carina, ‘let’s see what the King is up to at this hour.’

“My lord,” said Captain Casin. “If we are to break through the forces defending Evergreen’s counties of Foxcroft, Fircrest, and Burton, we *need* more men.”

King Reynard scowled back at his Captain. “Am I to understand that after I had led a successful invasion of Evergreen’s southern counties, winning every battle fought to claim them, that you and your men now cannot even penetrate through a single Evergreen battalion? I find that hard to believe. Perhaps they need a captain who can actually lead men to victory.”

The Captain stood before Reynard, unmoved by his words. “Your highness, the armies of Evergreen are picking apart our forces. With every strike we make at entering these counties, especially the county of Burton, we find ourselves completely outmatched and forced to retreat. My lord, we are beginning to lose ground.”

The King gave a wave of his hand in irritation. “I have heard enough. I will not sit here in my hall listening to one captain’s excuses. My victories over Evergreen will not be lost over you and your men’s failures! *Where* is Vinn?!”

“He is overseeing his new castle being constructed in the Evergreen county of Northcrest, your highness,” said Casin.

King Reynard slammed his fist upon the solid wood arm of his throne. “*Damn* his greed! The war is far from over, and Vinn is already claiming land for himself and building castles!”

“’Tis true, your highness,” came a voice from across the great hall. “I am constructing a castle in Northcrest, merely a stronghold for our troops to regroup and strike out against the enemy.” Baron Vinn strolled across the long, blue carpet towards the throne dais.

Reynard scowled at his Baron. “Do not lie to me in my hall, Vinn! I have known you nearly all of your life, any action you take is solely for your own self-gain.”

Vinn shrugged. “I may claim a castle or two with its surrounding lands as my own. Every baron of Cascadia at this hour is. In the end, isn’t all that we claim belong to you anyway? We are all merely caretakers of what belongs to you, enjoying what share of wealth you decide to bestow upon us.”

“And what you secretly pillage from the victims of war for yourself,” added Casin.

Vinn gave the Captain a threatening glare. “*That* being said, the spoils of war go to the victor. Something you seem to be lacking as of late.”

“So you have proven to be a valuable asset to the army and to this war, Vinn,” said Reynard. “But why have you returned to Blairmount? Why are you not with the armies in Evergreen at this hour?”

Vinn shoved past Casin and approached the throne dais. “Simply to come here to express my growing concern over capturing the next counties of Evergreen. As my men are ready to fight and await your command to do so, others are being led by *lesser* leaders.”

“How *dare* you!” said Captain Casin. “Your highness, if I may, the only way we can capture these next few counties is if we go around them, attacking Evergreen’s northern counties by storm and by surprise. Once they are captured, Evergreen’s armies will be surrounded and soon be worn down and defeated.”

“That is enough!” roared the King. “Your strategies in this war clearly have not worked in claiming the counties I have ordered you to take, Casin.”

“Casin raises a good point,” said Vinn. “We *have* taken Evergreen’s southern counties. If we attack the north counties by surprise, the noose will then be around our enemy’s neck and quickly tightened.”

“I would not count on that strategy working if I were you,” came a voice from the opposite end of the hall. Carina entered the great hall and strode hastily to the throne dais. “If you think you will take the northern counties by surprise, you are greatly mistaken. The counties of Burton, Fircrest and Foxcroft may have kept your army at bay, but the armies in the north will decimate your army.”

Vinn grinned. “Ah, if it isn’t my darling fiancée! This is a welcome surprise.”

The King leaned over to Casin and spoke quietly. “I am beginning to regret allowing her to roam freely in the castle. If anyone names me as some heartless jailor for holding these maidens from Evergreen captive for my noblemen to marry, this should at the very *least* be known and argued.”

“I am *not* your fiancée,” said Carina sternly. “Nor will I ever be anything to you but an illusion of fantasy.”

The Baron grabbed her arm and pulled her to him. “At some point, you may as well accept your fate with me. I have claimed you, and you *will* learn to obey me,” he said, drawing a dagger from his hip and pressed its tip against her abdomen. Carina gasped, feeling the razor-sharp blade pressing slowly against her stomach.

“*STOP!*” commanded the King. Vinn immediately withdrew his dagger, staring at Carina suddenly with kind eyes, brushing his fingers against her smooth, fair-skinned cheek. Carina frowned and with all her strength shoved the Baron with both hands against his chest. Vinn stumbled backwards in surprise, continuing to gaze back at her with fondness.

Reynard held his hand against his forehead. Closing his eyes, he shook his head. “My kingdom for just *one* meeting in my hall that does not involve infantile behavior!” He took a breath and spoke calmly. “Vinn, Casin, what do we know of Evergreen’s northern counties? Are they as protected as this maiden says?”

Vinn shrugged. “My scouts report that their cities are well protected, but so were the counties we took. As for how much of their army is reserved there, it is still unclear.”

“Evergreen’s strategy up to this point has been using the majority of their forces fight at the war fronts in order to outmatch our attacks, which they have along the borders of Fircrest, Foxcroft and Burton counties,” said the Captain. “At this point, the northern counties are vulnerable and weak. If we can attack them now, we can strike and conquer the central counties by the end of winter.”

“Yet you have not been nor seen the actual numbers of the armies in the northern counties,” said Carina. “The only chance you have of defeating and claiming the northern

counties is if you take the central counties first, which means defeating the armies you have continued to lose against in Burton, Fircrest and Foxcroft.”

The three then looked at the King, awaiting his response. Reynard’s eyes trailed off into thought for a moment then finally spoke. “This rush into war with Evergreen has placed me in a position of ignorance regarding Evergreen’s army posted within their kingdom. A mistake I am beginning to regret. And yet here we are. One-third of the Forest Kingdom now under my rule. Now, we must push on and break through our enemy’s defenses. I will not risk defeat by sending my men into the northern counties, not until my spy network can gather more intelligence from that region. We shall continue our pursuit into the heart of Evergreen, its central counties and its capital. Vinn, I entrust to you the command of the army in this next campaign.”

Vinn bowed. “As you wish, my lord.”

“Go then, have the war sway back into our favor,” said the King as Captain Casin looked begrudgingly on.

“Now, my lord?” said Vinn, glancing at Carina. “But I have only just arrived! I thought perhaps some unfinished business could be completed.”

King Reynard looked over at Carina and nodded. “Ah, I see now your *true* intentions for returning here was for something, or should I say *someone*, else entirely. Very well, Vinn, I permit you to marry before your leave. Have your affairs in order and marry your bride tomorrow at sunset.”

“There is no chance that scoundrel is *ever* going to marry you!” said Thomas as both Carina’s Order of the Star-knight escorts spoke with her in her bedchamber. “Not if I can help it!”

“My lady,” said Erec in a more comforting tone than his worked-up fellow knight. “I would see you back at your home in Evergreen and Baron Vinn breathing his last breath at the end of my sword, even if it meant my own life be forfeit.”

Touched by the knights’ words, Carina spoke. “I would regret your life being forfeit on my behalf, both of yours. But there must be something that can be done, and soon. The wedding is to be held tomorrow at sunset!”

“There is,” said Erec. “Though it would mean implementing Captain Johnathan’s plan sooner than the Order expected.”

Carina looked at him confused. “What plan?”

“Captain Johnathan sent a secret message to us last night. The Order of the Star has unanimously agreed to assemble and lay siege to the city of Blairmount and the King’s castle. We will overthrow Reynard and put a stop to his war against Evergreen.”

Thomas stood abruptly from his seat by the fireplace. “But we must act quickly if the Order is to reach the city by sundown!”

“Agreed,” replied Erec. “Thomas, send word to Johnathan through our network of secret channels that the Order must begin our plans now.”

Thomas quickly left the bedchamber as Erec put another log on the fire in the chamber's fireplace. "Carina, have you gained enough information these past months from Reynard and his court about his war plans?"

Carina thought over what information she had overheard from meetings the King held. Private conversations between Reynard and his captains in the castle's corridors she secretly overheard, as well as meetings she had happened to wonder into and was allowed to stay by Vinn's strict insistence so that he may be around her. "I believe I have. King Reynard has revealed much about where he wants his armies positioned, which counties in Evergreen he wants to invade next, and his future plans of attacking the capital. There is much I can reveal to King Geoffroi that I believe can cripple the Cascadian invasion."

"With King Reynard overthrown, victory shall be even more achievable once Captain Johnathan orders the return of the Cascadian army from Evergreen," said Erec. "But first, we must get you safely across the border back to your home."

It was nearing sunset the following day as the last knight of the Order of the Star entered into the capital with little resistance. Captain Johnathan ordered his fellow knights to secure the gate and take out any who resisted. The three-thousand knights rode their armored steeds up the streets to the castle that loomed over the island city.

Approaching the castle's gate with a small band of his fellow knights, the gatekeeper called down to them from atop the arched gate doors. "Who goes there?" said the gatekeeper.

"Captain Johnathan of the Order of the Star," said Johnathan, feeling numerous suspicious stares peering from out of the gate guard towers and on the ramparts along the castle's outer walls. "I seek an audience with King Reynard. Would you tell him that I wish to speak with him?"

The gatekeeper smirked. "His majesty is not seeing anyone at this time."

"I am confident his highness will wish to speak to me now," said Johnathan boldly. "Simply give him the message, and that The Order is now at his service and reporting for duty in his war effort."

The gatekeeper's eyebrows rose. "Very well, I shall give him the message. If you would wait here for just a moment." Johnathan gave a slight nod and the gatekeeper disappeared behind the gate. The Captain glanced slightly to either side of the walls, seeing his fellow knights peering around the tall, thick stone awaiting his signal.

Finally, the gatekeeper returned and ordered the gate doors to be opened. The great arched doors of thick oak planks grumbled opened. The gatekeeper, along with two castle guards stood before the captain and his small host of men. "The King will see you now," said the gatekeeper, gesturing for them to enter. Johnathan winked at his fellow knight beside him, slapping his arm slightly against his left side, then his other arm against his right side. As Johnathan and his men began to pass through the gate, four lines of the three thousand Order of the Star knights suddenly raced around the castle walls, rushing through the gate to the guards' and gatekeeper's great surprise.

"What is this?!" exclaimed the gatekeeper, drawing his blade as did the guards. "*Fire at will!*"

Archers along the walls and posted in the gate towers aimed their crossbows at the knights rushing through the open gate. The archers open fired, raining swift darts and arrows at the plate-armored knights. The knights raced through the hail of arrows as many climbed the steps up the gate towers and stairs leading up to the top of the walls. Just as swiftly as they all had stormed through the castle gate, so too did the Order of the Star slay the archers and guards, securing the gate. As the gatekeeper, the sole-survivor of the Order's onslaught, tried to make his escape into the keep, an arrow whistled through the air, piercing into his back. The gatekeeper fell to his knees and collapsed dead to the ground. Johnathan waved up to the knight who had shot the arrow from on top of the wall as he and the rest of the Order rushed into the keep.

Carina sat sadly at the chamber's desk; beginning to lose confidence that the Order would stop the inevitable wedding she was now faced. Dressed in a long, white wedding gown, reality slowly began to sink in as she looked at her saddened face in a small mirror. There was nothing now that could stop Vinn from claiming her as his own.

Suddenly, the sounds of swords ringing and clashing outside her chamber door quickly got her attention. The door burst open. Standing panting in the doorway was Erec and Thomas. "We must go, *now*," said Erec. Carina quickly crossed the chamber's cold stone floor, grabbed her cloak, and ran to her escorts. They guided her quickly out of the castle's highest tower, its stairway strewn with slain castle guards and troops Erec and Thomas had fought to reach her.

"What is the *meaning* of this?!" roared King Reynard as Captain Johnathan entered the great hall, his fellow knights continuing to fight off the guards, troops, and castle knights outside the hall.

"The end of your tyranny," said Johnathan, staring sharply back at the King as he strode towards the throne.

"*YOU*," exclaimed Reynard, realizing who he was speaking to. "I knew that the Order of the Star could not be trusted!"

Johnathan approached the throne dais. "Surrender, your highness, and your life shall be spared."

A look of relief suddenly revealed in Reynard's dark eyes. "Surrender? I think not, *traitor!*" Johnathan jolted in surprise. A sharp blade stabbed upwards beneath his back-plate and through his mail-shirt into his back. The searing-hot and stinging pain raced through his entire body as he slowly turned around. Standing behind him holding onto the blade was Vinn.

"I wish it had not come to this, brother," said Vinn, slowly thrusting his sword upward into his brother's back. "But treason and disloyalty cannot be tolerated or unpunished." Slowly, Johnathan collapsed onto the stone floor before the throne as his life slipped away. The Baron stared blankly down at his brother's lifeless body. "Farewell, Johnathan. I shall remember you before you had turned your back on our King, and on me."

“This way, my lady,” said Erec as he and Thomas escorted Carina out of the tower and into the keep. Commotion echoed throughout the corridors and hallways of the castle as the Order of the Star fought the oncoming castle knights and guards. Trying to find the safest way out of the castle without running into more guards, the two knights barged through a closed door. Instead, the three found themselves bursting into the castle’s chapel. The room was filled with flower arrangements before tall, stained glass windows letting in the sunset’s golden light onto the short ceremony platform. Honored guests, packed into the chapel’s pews, suddenly looked at Carina and the two knights in surprise as women gasped in shock and the men scowled in confusion.

“I thought you said this led door led down a stair to the castle entrance,” whispered Thomas to Erec as all in the chapel looked upon them in confusion.

“I said I thought it did,” replied Erec quietly back.

“Back there,” said Carina, spotting and pointing at a door at the end of the chapel. The knights and Carina raced across the long aisle littered with rose petals.

As Carina ran, her gown’s train flapping wildly behind her, the ancient and confused-looking clergyman who stood idly at the ceremony podium spoke. “I see the bride has now arrived, where is the groom?”

Outside the keep, Carina and the two knights sprinted to the castle gate where the Order of the Star knights watched for them.

“Erec! Thomas!” spoke one knight who approached them at the now open gate doors.

“Henry,” said Thomas. “Where is Johnathan?”

“He did not return with the rest of us.”

Erec approached him. “Where *is* he then?”

“He was attacked,” said another of their fellow knights. “Killed by his own brother in the great hall.”

Carina’s mouth slowly opened in shock, her eyes welling with shimmering tears. “Dead, by his own brother?” said Erec softly in disbelief.

Henry nodded. “He was about to detain the King when Baron Vinn stabbed him from behind. He and his men overran us in the corridors and got to Johnathan before we could. We barely escaped the keep with our lives.” Thomas placed a hand upon Erec’s shoulder as if needing help to balance himself from the terrible news.

“Well,” said Erec finally, taking Carina’s hand in his. “We must get Carina out of here and back to Evergreen, for she has valuable information about the war that King Geoffroi must know about.”

“And what of the castle, the city?” said Thomas. “Was this mission not to overthrow the King and claim the throne and city for the Order, for our people?”

“Did you not *hear* me, Thomas,” said the knight. “The keep is overrun with Baron Vinn’s men, along with those loyal to Reynard. We must fall back if we are not to be destroyed as more come to the King’s aid!”

Erec nodded. “He is right. We must retreat and regroup back at Briarwood. Make the call to our men, Henry. Thomas and I shall meet with you and the Order back at Briarwood castle. For now, we must take Carina to the borders of Evergreen.”

As night fell upon the lands of Cascadia and Evergreen, the full moon’s pale light helped show Erec, Thomas, and Carina across the River by boat and to Evergreen’s southern borders. Not a word was spoken between the three as each still could not fathom Johnathan’s death. They reached the edge of a vast forest lining Evergreen’s borders as the three said their farewells.

“I truly hope the information you gained will alter the course of this terrible war,” said Erec to Carina.

“Me too,” replied Carina, still feeling melancholy over Johnathan’s death. “I cannot thank you two enough for your protection. Without you, I could not have accomplished what I had within the castle. Without you and the Order, without Johnathan...” she paused, taking a moment to compose herself over his death. “I would have been forced into marriage with Vinn. I still shutter at the thought of what he would have made me do for him.” She gave Erec a tight embrace for a moment, then turned to Thomas.

“You do look beautiful this night, my lady,” said Thomas, looking at her wedding gown and her silky golden locks draped around her shoulders and arms.

Carina smiled faintly and gave the knight a tight embrace. “Thank you, but I feel ugly for what this gown represents. I cannot wait to remove it!” She looked one last time at the two knights, smiling thoughtfully back at them. “Farewell and thank you for all you have done.” The two knights watched her as she quickly slipped into the vast dank forest, disappearing within the tall firs.

“It is only that I know all of this because of my meeting later on with King Geoffroi after returning from Lacamas,” said Audric, taking a sip of the remaining tea from his cup. He gazed out the chalet’s triangular-wall of soaring windows, noticing that night had fallen upon them long ago. “It seems the rain has stopped and night is upon us. Forgive me, I did not mean to overstay my welcome.”

Godfrey looked back at him, his aged eyes looking as if hurt by the knight’s words. “It is I who must apologize, for I fear I have held you captive by having you regale your story to me.” He then leaned towards Audric slightly from his seat across from him; the fire beside them illuminated his wrinkled face in the intimate lighting of the candlelit room. “You truly loved Carina, didn’t you?”

The sudden question took Audric by surprise. He felt a rush of emotion flow through him as he kept his composure. “Never has love felt to me so truly special and intimate, so powerful of affection and devotion as the love I have for Carina. Since the day I first laid eyes upon her, never had I felt such love before, *true* love, nor shall I ever again.”

Godfrey smiled thoughtfully at him, sitting back in his high-backed chair. “‘Tis been a long time, but I do remember seeing the two of you as children between my journeys across the

continent. You both played happily together along the soft grassed-plains and the cool-watered marshes nearby. I remember too when you both grew into adolescence, the picnics you had under the shade of the oak during warm summer afternoons. It was when Carina was with you, she was happiest.” He paused, staring with kind eyes into Audric’s. “I saw the way you looked upon her when the two of you would converse under the tree. You looked upon her the way all young maidens wish to be looked at. In your eyes, I saw deep devotion for my daughter. I saw your everlasting amazement of being in the company of someone you truly considered to be the fairest, the most beautiful both inside and out of the entire world. *True love*, that is what I witness the days I caught sight of you two. A love undimmed by all evils the world may hold around you both, and anything that you two would have to confront in the future.”

“Well,” said Audric softly, taken aback once again by the old man’s words. “I would not have guessed a retired, prospered merchant to be such a romantic.”

Godfrey chuckled. “I too was in love once, long ago. But we are talking about *your* story. Have you any plans or places to be this night?”

“No, sir,” replied Audric, still feeling a calm and relaxing nostalgia of the house and his host.

“Then I ask that you please continue your story, Audric, for I very much wish to know what happened to the boy-turned well-renowned Chivalrous Knight of Evergreen. Did the wizard, Farridan, ever return to you to aid in Lacamas’ war against Skamania? What about the counts of Lacamas? Did they ever quarrel against each other during the war? And what of my beloved daughter? Would you two ever see each other again? Did the wars only draw the two of you further apart, or did they bring you closer together? Long has it been since I last seen or spoken to my dear daughter.”

“Well,” began Audric, interrupting the old man before he could ask another question. “If I may trouble you for some water, I shall answer all of those questions and more.”