

# A Single Step

A warm breeze swept along the plain. It stirred the grass that lay baking under a bright summer sun. The sky was a brilliant blue, dotted only by a few wispy clouds. Below, rich forestlands stretched out, broken only by a wide plain that divided it nearly in two. A narrow path stretched across this plain to the very foot of the distant mountains. A lone figure walked this trail. He stopped now, wiping his brow and adjusting his pack before, with staff firmly in hand, continuing onward. It had been much harder than he had originally thought. He found that the heat was oppressive once he left the protective shade of the woods. Only stubborn pride kept him from turning back. Nobody from his village ever traveled or explored or did anything else but farm. He always wanted to travel, to see the world outside. His desire to travel stemmed from the Light. It fascinated him. It called to him. Starting at dusk and continuing till dawn a bright blue light could be seen from the top of a hill near the village. It intrigued him. He had to see it.

He imagined it was the magic of a powerful sorcerer or the lights of an ancient civilization, like in the stories. Of course, the elders laughed at this, scoffed at his desire to see it.

He planned for months. He would sneak away after dark and head over the mountains, the Light guiding the way.

It had worked so far. He had to have made at least ten miles. He was still a little nervous. He needed to put more distance between him and any pursuit, but it was so hot.

His village lay in the perpetual shade of the Great Forest. It was never hot there, not like this. He paused again to wipe his forehead.

Ahead, the mountains first had appeared small and insignificant, but now they reared tall and mighty. Huge thunderheads roiled above the tall peaks.

Nightfall made the temperature more bearable. He walked on for a few hours enjoying the cooled air. Soon, though, the need for sleep forced him to stop.

He woke as the first traces of sunlight spilled over the mountains. The morning walk proved enjoyable, but the noon heat soon slowed his pace to a crawl. All the while, the mountains crept closer and closer. The cool relief of evening brought him to the foot of the mountains.

In the fading light, he saw a narrow, rocky trail wind steeply into the mountains. He started up the trail, struggling to keep his footing on the loose rocks. An hour after dark brought him only about fifty yards up the trail. Stumbling and slipping in the dark, he found a small ledge near the trail. He lay down on the ledge and slept.

He awoke the next morning, soaked to the skin. A steady rain fell from the dark sky. He shivered and pulled his cloak closer to guard against the chill wind that whistled

through the crags. Crashing thunder broke against the sky and bolts of lightning forked down to the earth. The trail was much worse than he had left it. The trail was a huge mass of mud, many of the smaller rocks having been washed down the trail.

The going was slow and hard. The rain increased and the wind gained speed. The higher he went, the more treacherous the footing became. By mid afternoon he managed to crest the ridge and began downwards. The rain had not let up and it had become bitterly cold. The trail had improved little and its downward slope made walking nearly impossible. As night approached, he searched in vain for a place to rest. The rain continued, reducing visibility even further. He started sliding downward. He put out his staff to stop himself. It slipped. He fell, tumbling down hill. He ricocheted off rocks, tumbled through underbrush, and splashed through the mud. He struck something and stars exploded in his head. He felt darkness start to close in on him. Suddenly, the breath was forced from his lungs. He heard his ribs creak and all became dark.

He awoke slowly and painfully. His vision focused and he found himself bent around a tree. The rain had subsided to a drizzle. It was still cold. He tried to rise up, but He put a hand to his head and felt dried blood matting his hair. His chest hurt and breath was extremely painful and he dropped his head back to the ground. He lay there for many minutes, trying to think. The tree that had stopped him leaned slightly over a small cliff. His pack had been smashed, its contents spilled across the moist, moss-covered ground. Small saplings dotted the hill. Many were bent and broken from his abrupt descent. The trail was nowhere in sight.

He again tried to stand, but he only got as far as his knees before weakness and pain drove him back to the ground. He was unbearably cold. His clothes were wet and provided little protection from the freezing ground or the occasional blast of chill wind. He was determined to stand. Grasping the tree, he slowly inched his way to his feet. Once on his feet, he lay back against the tree, exhausted by the effort to stand.

The rain began to pick up again. He knew he needed to find shelter. He tried stepping away from the tree, but weakly stumbled backwards, barely catching the tree before he plummeted over the cliff. Catching his breath, he tried to find a way up. The saplings looked promising, but were small and sporadic. He could not see his staff anywhere. His backpack still hung lopsidedly from his shoulder, one of the straps broken. All its contents, including his rope, lay scattered on the hill. He decided to try the saplings. He braced himself against the tree and pushed off toward the nearest sapling. He surged forward, reaching his arms outward. His fingers came closer and closer. He almost touched it, and then he was slipping, falling backwards and over the cliff.

He crashed through the underbrush below and into the ground. Pain flashed and stars danced before his eyes. He lay there, gasping for breath and desperately fighting for consciousness. Groaning, he turned over. He had found his staff; he had landed on it. With great care, he used the staff to stand up.

He reasoned that he must be near the base of the mountains because the land here was much less steep. Thick undergrowth covered the ground and many large trees helped provide some protection from the rain and wind. It was getting later or at least darker and a low fog was beginning to roll in. He was cold, wet, and very hungry. His head

ached furiously and breathing was still difficult. Shrugging off his empty pack, he slowly walked off in search of a shelter.

Darkness closed in quickly. He fell and stumbled as often as he stood. His breathing was ragged and shivered uncontrollably. His fingers were so numb, they barely gripped the staff and the fog and risen, obscuring his vision. He began to despair. He stumbled onwards in the darkness, hoping to find relief for his pain. He stumbled and fell. He lay on the ground, crying. He cursed the foolishness of this journey; he cursed any gods that may be listening for allowing him to die alone. Most of all, he cursed himself for lying down to die.

He rolled over on his side and tried to summon the energy to try again, he couldn't. He coughed; he coughed hard. Pain lanced across his torso and he tried to scream between coughs. He lay shuddering, gasping for breath. Then it caught his eye. It was a cave. It was set in a rocky outcropping about ten yards distant. Its entrance was small, but it would be dry and maybe a bit warmer. Instant relief filled him and he cried out with joy. He struggled quickly to his feet, stumbled and fell. He again struggled to his feet and stumbled forward. He staggered into the cave and slid down against one of its walls. It was much drier than the outside and even a bit warmer. He reveled in it. He edged farther and farther back into the cave, trying to get warmer and drier. Suddenly, he saw a light out of the corner of his eye.

"Whadja doin' in Grack's cave?" a high, whiny voice screeched.

Arem cowered as a small figure, carrying a torch, rounded a bend in the cave. The creature stood no more than four feet tall. It had grayish-blue skin, huge bulbous eyes and a small canine muzzle that was set with small, pointy teeth that resembled small ivory daggers. He was fascinated by its eyes. Each eye had thousands of facets that refracted the light of the torch into a multitude of tiny rainbows. The small, clawed feet made no noise as the thing approached. It stood very close and peered quizzically into his face.

"Who you an' whadja be doin' in Grack's cave?"

"I...I...I..." he stammered or shivered, "I'm...I'm Arem."

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, an' whadja be doin' in Grack's cave?"

"I...I...was on this...uhm...trip...you see an' I got lost...an' I fell down the mountain...an'...an' I needed shelter an' I found this cave," Arem explained frantically.

"Yes, yes, yes, traveler lost, find Grack's cave, needs Grack's cave, in Grack's cave be Arem's cave, yes, yes, yes, yes," the creature spoke so rapidly that it was hard to follow.

"I...I don't know what to say, who are you?" Arem asked, curiosity overcoming fear.

"Don't you be listening to Grack? I, Grack. Grack is me. Be Grack's cave, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes," Grack motioned for Arem to follow.

Arem got to his feet and struggled after Grack, who hurried down the tunnel occasionally adding "hurry, hurry, quickly hurry," when Arem fell behind. He followed Grack for what seemed like hours when the tunnel ended abruptly.

Arem stood in a huge cavern. The ceiling arced hundreds of feet above his head. The stone walls were well lit by torches that ringed its perimeter. Many other corridors led out of the cavern. In the center of the huge room stood a huge fire. Arem moved towards the fire as quickly as he could. He dropped down near the fire and soaked in the

welcome heat as he marveled at the rest of the cavern. The stone was richly layered with multitudes of colored bands and adorned with dozens of half finished sculptures.

Grack came and sat next to Arem, "This is all yours?" Arem asked.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, be Grack's, be Grack's now."

Arem managed to sit up, "Whose was this before you, Grack?"

"This belong to Grack's people, long ago, many colds have passed since Grack's people."

"What happened?"

Grack dropped his head and said in almost a whisper, "Grack's people, dead, their bodies became hot, red marks scarred and itched, now only Grack left."

Arem put a hand on Grack's shoulder, "I'm sorry."

Grack raised his head and put a scaly hand on Arem's soft one, "Long ago, Grack put past in past."

Suddenly, Arem's stomach rumbled. Grack broke out into an extra-toothy grin, "Arem hungry, yes, yes, yes, yes, Grack feed Arem, yes, yes, yes."

Grack leapt to his feet and charged down a corridor. He promptly returned carrying a large, steaming bowl. It was filled with a thick green liquid.

Arem looked at it doubtfully, "Is good," Grack said, "good, good. Is cave fish and mushroom, good, yes, yes, yes."

Arem gave it one last look and took a sip from the bowl. It tasted sweet and it was thick and hot. Arem quickly drank the entire bowl. Grack stood nearby with an intensely pleased grin on his face. Arem politely asked for more and Grack gladly raced off to get more.

When he returned he pronounced, "Grack, Arem, friends. Arem, Grack, friends."

Arem swallowed a little more of the soup, "Yes we are Grack, yes we are."

When Arem finished his soup, Grack insisted that he get some rest. Grack showed him down a corridor to a small room. The bed was a little too short, but was very comfortable. Grack told him that if he needed any help, just call and Grack would hear.

The next morning, or what Arem assumed was morning, Grack awoke him and lead him back to the main cavern.

"What Arem seek?" Grack asked.

Arem hurriedly swallowed a piece of breakfast, "Huh?"

"Last dark, Arem tell Grack that he traveler."

"Oh yes, that. I am traveling from my home to see a great Light."

"Light? What Light?"

"A blue light that shines brightly in the night sky."

"Why does Arem want to see light."

"It is beautiful and mysterious. It draws me."

"Grack want to see."

Arem looked at him, "You want to come?"

Grack looked at him seriously, "Yes, Grack want to come, Grack can show you way through mountains."

Arem laughed, "You don't need a reason, of course you can come."

Grack smiled, "Arem, Grack, friends."

"Yes, Grack, friends."

Later that day, Grack and Arem packed fresh provisions and Grack lead them down a series of tunnels that brought them out into the light.

The day outside was very bright, the sun high in the western sky. Ahead, a vast prairie stretched out, and in the distance, a large expanse of forest. Closer a huge walled structure rose up from the tall grass. From what he had heard in stories, Arem knew it had to be a city.

He turned to Grack, "We're off, my friend."

"To the Light?"

"Yes, Grack, to the Light."

## **New Wonders, New Dangers**

The sun beat down on the plains with an oppressive force; causing the two companion's movement to be slow and halting. Despite the heat, one wore a hood over his head.

Arem wiped sweat from his brow, "Does that feel any better?"

"Grak's eyes better, but Grack hot" he said glumly.

"Do you wanna go back?"

"No, no, no, no, Grack not go back, Grack stay."

Arem smiled down at his little friend. It was good to have someone along on this journey.

Up ahead, the distant city shimmered in the noonday heat. A long wall surrounded it. It was so high that Arem could only make out the tops of a few tall spires. Arem had always wanted to see a city. In the stories, they were always wondrous places full of rich palaces, dashing heroes and beautiful maidens.

Soon they came upon a path stretching across the plains. It was very wide and well traveled. There was a steady flow of people and wagons, all heading toward the city. There were many people on the trail, more than Arem had ever seen before. Wagons, great and small, moved slowly along, pulled by teams of oxen. All going towards the city. Arem wondered what a city would be like, all the people. He could imagine the grand rising palaces and quiet inns, smoke-filled taverns, and mysterious alleys. He could hardly wait.

Suddenly, it seemed, the city gate loomed before them. The gate stood open and a constant stream of men and wagons poured through it. On both sides of the gate stood men dressed in plate and mail armor that gleamed dully. Their helmets, which covered the top half of their faces, had two slits to provide for sight. One, who wore a red tabard over his armor, stopped each wagon as it passed through the gates. He would motion others forward and they would search through it.

As they passed through the gate, the loud noise that had been filtering through the gate became a loud roar. It filled Arem's ears and it was hard to hear Grak, who was rapidly talking next to him. He tried to stop and go back, but the crowd swept him along. He lost sight of Grack, but was powerless to stop and search. When he tried to stop, angry

people would curse at him and push him forward. He thought he would never escape from the crowd, but suddenly it began to thin out.

He stood in the middle of a large square. An ornate fountain splashed merrily in its center. Buildings rose high in every direction. Smaller side streets branched off the main one like the spokes of a giant wheel. All about were masses of people. Some stood in front of shops, calling for people to come examine their goods. Others wandered about the square carrying large baskets and trying to sell people a fine knife or ribbon or some fresh fruit. Others flowed from street to street to some unknown destination. Grack was nowhere to be seen.

He tried calling for Grack, but his shouts were drowned out by the noise. In a panic, he set off down a side street, his eyes searching for Grack's small form. He wandered from street to street and passed many more squares with their ornate fountains hoping that he would be able to catch a glimpse of his friend. Once he saw a small figure disappear down an alley. He sprinted after him, only to discover that it was a dirty little boy.

Despondent, he sat down upon the edge of a fountain. He had passed so many fountains so many streets so many people. How was he ever to find Grack? The city was so big. Suddenly, Arem felt a tap on his shoulder and he jumped.

"Ey! Watch yerself there, ya almost wen' for a swim," A crusty voice said.

Arem looked up into an old, leathery face. Thin white hair sprouted from his head, and a wide strip of stained cloth covered one eye. His clothes were old and dirty and bathing did not seem to be one of his high priorities.

He spoke again, "Wha' ya up to, my boy, sittin' here all by yerself?"

"I've lost a friend and cannot find him," Arem replied.

"Ah, now that's a shame. Tell me, what'd he look like?"

Arem gestured, "Well, he's about this tall an' he was wearin' a leather shirt an' trousers...Oh ya! He had a hood over his head."

"A hood no...ya don't say...I saw me a short feller wearin' a hood not long ago and he was—"

"You did! Where!"

"Now calm yerself down, youngin'. I was getting' ta that."

"Sorry," Arem hung his head.

The old man smiled, "You're a goodun', my boy. Now jest follow me an' I'll show ya the way."

Arem followed the old man down and over several streets. He deftly guided Arem through the large crowds and into a small alleyway between two inns.

"This is where I saw the lil' feller," the old man said.

"Thank you, sir, you've been a big help to me."

Arem turned to search the alley when he felt a sharp point stick into his back.

"Now wait yerself jes' a minute there," the old man hissed.

"Wha...wha...what do you want!"

"I want yer gold, all of it! Right now!"

"I ...I don't have any gold."

The point pressed harder, "Do you take me for a fool, boy?"

"No, no," he wailed.

The old man grunted and Arem felt him take being taken away.

“Thank you, sir,” Arem said, relieved.

“No problem, chap,” an unfamiliar voice said.

Arem turned around slowly. The old man lay in a heap on the ground. Standing over him stood a young man holding a piece of cobblestone. He looked about the same age as Arem. He was tall and had a cocky grin. His clothes were well made, if worn. At his side he wore a slim bladed sword. Arem goggled at it.

“It belonged to me da’,” the youth said, “It’s mine now.”

Arem realized that he had been addressed and that he had been staring. He lowered his eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

The youth eyed him strangely, “Ah, that’s ok. Say, what’s your name. Mines Luther, though most people just call me Luth, an’ what ya doin’ with this vagabond?”

“Uhm...my name’s Arem, an’ he said that he could help me find a friend of mine, we got separated.”

“Well, ya got to watch yourself better. Ya never can tell what kind of people you’ll run into.”

“What’d he want?”

“Your gold.”

“Why?”

“Don’t know. Guess people like him believe they can take anything they want.”

“And he would’ve killed me for it?”

“Probably. Chaps like him don’t take much stock in other’s lives.

Arem stared at Luther. He led Arem out of the alley and toward a fountain.

“Now what happened to your friend?” Luther began.

“I lost him, I don’t know where he is.”

“Where?”

“Near the gate.”

“I don’t know,” Arem admitted.

“Well, we got a problem then, don’t we?”

Arem nodded his head, “What are we gonna do?”

Luther sat in silence, shaking his head. Suddenly he stood up and motioned for Arem to follow him. The sun was casting long shadows when Luther stopped at a door in a rapidly darkening alley. He knocked twice on the door and waited. The door opened a crack.

“Whadja want?” an oily voice hissed.

“I want to speak to Kal, now be a good chap an let us in.”

The door opened wide to reveal a short, greasy-looking man. He eyed Arem with concern.

“He’s ok,” Luther said.

The greasy-looking man seemed unconvinced, but he showed them in. He led them through a labyrinth of hallways before he stopped before a large door. He knocked three times before opening the door.

The interior of the room was lavish to say the least. Every inch of the floor was covered with multi-colored rugs. Tapestries hung from every wall. Reclining on a sofa lay a woman of incredible beauty. Her youthful features were finely chiseled and dark hair flowed back over the sofa. She sipped from a golden wine cup, seemingly unaware of their entrance.

Luther stepped forward, “Kal?”

Slowly, she turned her head, “Oh, I didn’t hear you come in.”

Luther grimaced, “Enough with your games.”

Kal pouted, “And it’s good to see you, Luth,” she motioned them to take a seat, “And who’s your new friend?”

Arem started to open his mouth, but Luther cut in, “A friend.”

“Can’t he speak for himself?”

Luther rolled his eyes and motioned for Arem to continue, “I’m Arem, ma’am.”

Kal chuckled, “Such manners, did you train him yourself?”

“No...he needs your help.”

Kal smiled, “Is that so?”

Controlling himself, “Yes, Kal, he needs to find his friend.”

“Oh, what can I possibly do?”

Luther jumped to his feet, “Kal!”

Kal sat up and smiled, “Of course. Arem, tell me your problem.”

Arem, who had been diligently studying his feet, jumped, “Well...uh...me an’ my friend, we got separated an’ I don’t know where he is an’ I’m very worried about him.”

“Oh, how sweet, tell me, what does this friend look like?”

“Well, he’s about four feet tall an’ he wears this hood over his head.”

She chuckled, “That ugly is he. I’ll see what I can do.”

Luther got up and began to pull Arem toward the door.

“Are you sure you won’t think on my offer?”

“No,” Luther said without turning.

Outside, Arem turned to Luther, “Who was she?”

“A friend, an old friend.”

Luther began to walk off. Arem just stared at him. Luther turned, “Are you coming?”

Arem began to follow as Luther threaded his way through the dark alleys and finally out in front of an inn. They made their way through the crowded common room and up a flight of stairs. Luther produced a small key and let himself in.

The room was small, but clean. It had a low bed and a single candle on a small table.

Luther lit the candle and pulled some blankets off the bed.

“You can sleep over there.”

Arem laid the blankets down in a corner. Wondering how Grak was spending the night, he fell asleep.

Arem awoke with a start. Rays of light were coming in from the small window. Luther was nowhere to be seen. In a panic, he quickly got dressed and headed for the door. He opened the door and standing there was Luther; holding a platter piled high with slabs of meat and bread.

“Good morn! Sleep well?” he said cheerily.

Arem nodded and let Luther into the room. Over breakfast they discussed how they were going find Grak.

“I think he would try to stay hidden,” Arem said.

“Why?”

“Well...”

“What?”

“He’s not exactly human...”

“What! What the bloody hell is he?”

“I don’t know, but he’s not evil or anything.”

“Well...hmmm...this is gonna be harder than I first thought.”

An hour later they found themselves hunting through the alleys of the city. The alleys were dark and filled with refuse. They were making little progress and the heat of the day made the alleys smell.

They had searched for several hours when they heard a commotion coming from a nearby square. They looked over and saw a small figure sprint by, followed by an angry crowd of people.

“Grak!” Arem cried.

“Damn!” Luther cried.

Luther sprinted off down the alley. Arem quickly turned and followed. He led them down and across several alleys before taking them out into a large square. The square was crowded with people. Suddenly, Grak came speeding into the square.

“Grak!” they both cried.

“Arem, go, go, go, go, go!” Grak screamed.

A stone was hurled out of the crowd and struck him on the back of the head. He hit the ground and lay there, unmoving.

Arem cried out and ran forward. Stones were beginning to rain down. One struck Arem in the side and he grunted. Suddenly, Luther was there. Together they lifted Grak and sped off towards a nearby alley. A stone struck Luther in the head and he fell over. Arem almost dropped Grak, but managed to keep going. Blood streaming from his temple, Luther managed to sprint after Arem and into the relative shelter of the alley. Once there they reached the alley they looked frantically about for cover. All of sudden, they saw the greasy-looking man at the end of the alley. He was motioning them to follow. Lacking options, they hurried off after him. As they rounded the corner, they saw him disappear into a hole in a wall of a house. They quickly pushed Grak through the hole and then jumped in after him.

Inside was a small, bare room. A small torch provided illumination. The greasy-looking man was pushing the secret opening shut. Luther collapsed against a wall. He put his hand to his head to try to stem the flow of blood. Arem eased himself to the ground, trying to take the pressure off his rapidly swelling ankle. Blood oozed from the back of Grak’s head, but he was still breathing. Nobody spoke for many minutes.

“I guess I owe you one, Artur.” Luther said suddenly.

Artur didn’t say anything. More time passed.

“Well, Kal said I should watch out for you.”

“Oh, she did?”

“You know she still cares—”

“But why now?”

“Don’t know.”

“How’d she know we were gonna run into trouble?”

“Don’t know.”

“C’mon, mate, don’t give me that—”

“Uh...guys,” they both turned and started at Arem and he flinched, “he’s wakin’ up.”

Luther hurried over to Grak. Grak’s eyes fluttered open.

“Arem,” Grack smiled, “Grak feel good to see Arem.”

Arem smiled, “It’s good to see you too.”

“You ok, chap? You took quite a bang to the head.”

“Grak, ok, who you?”

“I’m Luther, Arem’s mate.”

“Huh?” Grak said puzzled.

“Friend.”

“Oh, Grak understand.”

“I hate to break up this little reunion, but we gotta figure a way to get you two outta town.” Artur said.

“Who says they want to leave town.” Luther said.

“Well, they can’t stay here.”

“That’s ok, Luther, we are just passing through.”

Luther nodded, but stared at Artur. Artur just went over and reopened the hole in the wall.

An hour later they found themselves in Kal’s room.

“Yes, I can offer them passage out of the city.” Kal said slowly.

“But...?” Luther said.

“You know.”

“No.”

“But—” Kal began.

“I want no part of you, or your organization.” Luther spat.

“Ok, they can stay, or at least until the next mob gets a hold of the little one.”

Luther hung his head in defeat, “Ok, I agree.”

Kal smiled, “At least you can see sense, Luth.”

In silence, Luther took them to the inn, Grak hidden in a long cloak.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Arem asked when they got to the room.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, Luther be sure? Grak will be ok.”

“Yes, I’m sure, now will you both leave me alone?”

They went to sleep in silence. The next morning Luther was gone. there came a knock at the door, it was Artur. He had their “travel arrangements” ready.

The “travel arrangements” turned out to be hiding in under a load of hay in a cart that Artur was taking out of the city. As they dug their way down under the hay they found someone else.

It was Luther.

Grak and Arem began to open their mouths, but he put a finger to his.

“I decided that this would be a good time to leave the city myself.” He whispered, smiling.  
Smiling to himself, Arem made himself comfortable in the hay as it began its journey out of the city.

## Everything that Glitters...

A mile outside the city the wagon stopped and Arem and Grak clambered out of the wagon. As soon as they did, Artur turned the wagon around and sped off back towards the city.

Luther slipped off of the back of the wagon and landed with a grunt. Arem and Grak ran over to him. He stood up laughing.

“Now that was a fun trip, wasn’t it chaps?”

They smiled at Luther as they began to walk down the road.

“By the way, were we headed?”

“The Light.” Grak said.

“Eh?”

“We’re trying to find the blue light that can be seen at night. Haven’t you ever seen it?” said Arem.

“Yes I think I did once.”

“Know what it is?”

“No can’t say that I do.”

“Can we go now? Grak get hot.”

“Yes, let’s” Arem said.

The gently rolling plains stretched before them, seemingly endless. It’s vast openness offered little protection as the relentless sun rose higher into the summer sky.

The road was nearly deserted. Only a few wagons could be seen lumbering their way to their destination. The only other people that could be seen were patrols of soldiers, their armor gleaming in the sunlight. Arem wondered how they could stand the heat in all that metal.

As dusk approached, they saw a large party of travelers camped near the ruins of an old tower. As they neared them they were greeted with cheery welcomes.

“Where you from?” Arem called.

A gray haired man called back, “We be from the great city of South Port, where you be headed?”

“Wherever this road leads us,” Luther replied.

“Then you be headed for South Port,” the gray hair replied.

“Why you be goin’ there?” another shouted.

“The Light,” Arem said.

“To see the world,” Luther said.

“Guess they no be sure.” still another shouted and the others laughed.

“Why no you bunk with us for the night,” the gray hair said, “the lads will make room. By the way, my names Orwith.”

“I’m Arem.”

“I’m Luther.”

“And who be your little friend?” Orwith asked.

“Grak,” they both said.

“Can he no speak?”

“No,” Arem said.

“Why do he wear a hood?”

“The light, it hurts his eyes.” Luther said quickly.

“Even at night?”

“Yes, even the tinniest light.” Arem added.

“Oh,” Orwith got to his feet, “Listen up lads! This be Arem and this be Luther. The little one here be Grak, he be mute and he no be fond of light. They be joinin’ us for the night,” he turned to Arem and Luther, “The lads will get you some proper beddin’ and you can bed down over there, away from the fire. If you no have grub we can share some of ours.”

“Thank you,” Arem said.

“Thanks, Orwith,” Luther said.

Orwith chuckled, “You both be welcome, now you both get yourselves bedded down.”

They moved away from the fire and bedded down for the night. After they were they had all laid down Grak whispered to Arem, “Why people fear Grak?”

Arem lay there for a long moment, “I don’t know, Grak, because you’re different, I guess.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know.”

Arem woke to the sounds of men shouting and to the clash of steel. He looked over towards the fire and saw Orwith’s men locked in a desperate struggle. Arem called over to Luther, who had already drew his slim blade, “What’s going on!”

“Looks like bloody bandits!” he shouted.

“What can Grak do!”

“I don’t know what any of us can do, little friend!” Luther shouted.

“We’ve got to do something!”

“That we do,” Luther said, determined, “I think it’s time to fight or die.”

Everything else was a blur to Arem. The roar of battle filled his ears and he could hear nothing else. He leapt upon the back of one of the intruders, but was thrown to the ground. He rolled, avoided a stabbing blade. He stood and dodged around his opponent. Someone fell at his feet. He grabbed their sword, but it was unwieldy in his unpracticed hands. He swung wildly at someone he hoped was a foe, but was overbalanced and he spun about.

Someone brought his sword down at him and he managed to bring his weapon up in time. The impact jarred his arm and he nearly dropped it. He brought his sword across and felt it hit with a sickening sound. His eyes locked with the dying man’s. They were

wide open with shock and pain. Blood began to run from his mouth as he slid from the blade and onto the ground.

Arem stood there in shocked horror. It was never like this in the stories. He wanted to run. He wanted to scream. He lost all thought as he another blade swung toward him. He spun to the side and again brought his sword to bear. The killing was easier this time, but inside he cried for it to stop. He saw something out of the corner of his eye and he ducked. Pain exploded in his head and he fell to the ground. Dizzy with pain, he saw a shadowed figure loom above him. Suddenly the man jerked and fell down upon him. The glazed eyes of the dead man met with Arem's and he screamed. He felt the man's warm blood soak his shirt. He pushed the dead man off of him and tried to stand, but was knocked down. He finally stood only to dodge another sword. He turned and ran blindly. Away. He had to get away. He ran, but his escape was blocked by another sword. He screamed and swung his sword and the man fell. He ran on. Another figure stood in his way and he began to swing.

"Arem it's me!" Luther screamed.

Arem heaved himself to the side, landing hard; he lay there, half gasping for breath, half sobbing. His friend came over to him and helped him to his feet.

"Arem! Arem, it's over!"

His friend's face was covered with blood and some of it, his own. Arem hugged him and they stood there for silence for several moments. Then they turned to survey the carnage.

Bodies lay scattered about. Some were trying to stop a few of the fires that had been started by the campfire. Grak sat near one of Orwith's wagons, nursing his arm. He found Orwith. His eyes unseeing eyes gazed at the brightening sky. A long slash crossed his torso and his face was twisted in agony. Arem wretched. Luther had to support him the rest of the way to the wagons. When Arem got to the wagons he discovered that he had not been wounded badly. Aside from a few minor cuts, his only injury was a gash on his temple. Aside from a few slashes, Luther had escaped unscathed. Grak had a large gash on the forearm, but was otherwise unhurt. Fifteen of Orwith's men had been killed. A blond headed man in his middle years came and sat down near them. A large bandage had been wrapped around his torso.

"I be Marcus, Orwith's first mate," he grimaced, "I guess that do make me captain now."

"Who were they?" Arem asked.

"Pirates," he said and he spat.

"What?" Arem asked, confused.

Luther leaned over and whispered, "Bandits."

"They were after me cargo."

"Of course," Luther said.

"I do wish to thank you for you help," Marcus said, "I'll send o'er one of the lads to look after your injuries."

He stood and walked over to a young man and spoke to him. He stood and walked over to the wagon.

"The Cap'n told me to see if you do need anything."

They each pointed out their wounds and he began to bandage them.

“We be powerful grateful for your help. Especially the little one over there,” he smiled at Grak, “he was runnin’ around and stabbin’ the pirates with a tiny dagger. They did have a whale o’ a time with him.”

Arem and Luther looked over at Grak and grinned. Grak tried to look modest.

Eventually, the talking died down as they all fell into an exhausted sleep.

Arem awoke to the smell of bacon frying. The sun was high in the sky and it was starting to get hot. Arem tried to sit up and groaned. His head felt like it had swelled and all his muscled felt sore. He managed to stand and wobble his way over to the cook fire. He was greeted by all and was handed plate of food. It appeared that he was a late riser by the freshly dug graves. He turned quickly from the graves and took a seat by Luther and Grak. Marcus stood up.

“Lads! Let’s give a cheer for our three heroes!”

Arem felt his face flush as they cheered, but inside, he couldn’t figure out what they had to cheer about.

After breaking fast, they broke camp. Amid sincere good-byes, they parted company.

“You do visit us when we return to South Port!” Marcus called to them.

“You can count on it!” Arem shouted back.

The heat of the day was made worse by their exertions of the previous night. Their legs ached as they walked, but they found a bit of comfort in each other’s presence. As nightfall came near, they crested a hill to find the seacoast city of South Port stretched out before them.

The city shone brightly in the coming darkness. And many tall palaces soared high.

Farther out lay the harbor and a veritable forest of masts attached to hundreds of ships of every size and description. Beyond the harbor lay the sea. In the moonlight, it shone as brightly as the city. Then they saw it.

The Light. It shone from a tall tower that dominated the harbor. Despite their aching legs, they pressed on towards their goal. As they neared the tower Arem broke into a run. The tower towered a hundred feet into the air. A door lay at its base. Arem opened it and they dashed inside. The interior was bathed in a deep blue glow. A spiraling staircase was set against the wall. They began to climb it. At the top there was a huge blue crystal, the source of the glow. The all stood there in awe.

“What are you kids doing?” a voice said.

An old man came from around the crystal.

“Do you own this tower?” Arem asked reverently.

“Me? No, its Lord Hamption’s tower.”

“Whose that?” Luther asked.

The old man peered at them, “Lord Hamption? He’s the ruler of South Port.”

“What’s the power of this crystal?” Arem asked eagerly.

The old man look at them even more quizzically, “Crystal? It’s nothin’ more than a fancy piece of glass. You see here,” he pointed at the crystal, “every night I lift this here thing up and I light the torch under it. It shines out a light that tells ships they’re getting too close to shore.”

Arem could feel the enthusiasm draining from him and he felt suddenly tired, “Oh, well, it was nice to meet you, we must be going.” Arem took off down the stairs.

The old man gazed at them as they left, “Kids these days...”  
When Arem got to the bottom of the tower he broke out into laughter.  
“What’s got into him?” Luther asked.  
Grak shrugged his shoulders.  
“I came all this way,” Arem said between wails of laughter, “for a piece of glass!”  
He fell to the ground and started sobbing.  
“C’mon mate—” Luther began.  
“Don’t you understand? A piece of glass! I almost got us killed over a piece of glass!”  
“Arem, listen to Grak. Arem meet Grak on trip. Arem meet Luther on trip. We follow Arem because Arem, Luther, Grak, friends. Arem not make Grak follow. Arem not make Luther follow. We Arem’s friends.”  
Arem looked at his friends and he did not see resentment, he saw concern and friendship.  
“But, what are we goin’ to do now?” Arem asked.  
“I think we’ll wait around and find Marcus when he gets back, then we’ll see what happens next.”  
“Grak agree.”  
Arem smiled at his friends, “Sounds good to me!”  
“Friends?” Luther asked.  
“Friends.”



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