

CHIVEIS TRILOGY



BOOK 1

THE
SWORD
A NOVEL

БРУАН М. ЛІТФІП

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“Theologian and scholar Bryan Litfin has accomplished a rare feat—he has fashioned a land and time unique to any reader’s experience.”

JERRY B. JENKINS, author, *Left Behind* and *Riven*

“Some fiction is mere entertainment and some fiction is like a mirror in which we see ourselves and our world reflected in challenging and instructive ways. *The Sword* is a mirror of who we are at the core and what we struggle with in our nonfiction lives. Don’t miss this one. It is a compelling read that is well beyond mere entertainment.”

JOE STOWELL, President, Cornerstone University

“Ever wonder about a world with an ‘almost-absence’ of God? Theologian turned ‘futurist’ Bryan Litfin provides us a compelling tale of the endurance of God’s amazing love—even to a distant remnant. Get your mind around *The Sword*. It could be the start of something big.”

MARK ELFSTRAND, Executive Producer/ Host, *Morning Ride*, Moody Radio, Chicago, Illinois

“Pulling us into the future to reveal the past, Bryan Litfin’s great what-if story discovers instead what is, laying bare the tendencies of the human soul, the strategies of our adversary, and the gentle sovereignty of the eternal God. In *The Sword* discovering truth is as exciting as discovering love, for as Litfin skillfully portrays, they are one and the same.”

AMY RACHEL PETERSON, author, *Perpetua: A Bride, A Martyr, A Passion*

“The one-of-a-kind concept for this novel mixes an apocalyptic near-future with an almost medieval past. The thrilling action and romance underscores the necessity of prayer and the power of God’s Word to awaken a people to have hope in a love that supersedes that which they have before known. It is refreshing to read about characters whose struggles are real and whose virtues are worthy of admiration. I cannot wait until the second book in the series hits the shelves next year.”

SETH PARRISH, High School Principal, Yongsan International School of Seoul, Seoul, Korea

“*The Sword*’s thrilling, fast-paced story line draws you in and won’t let you put it down. It’s a swashbuckling adventure that men will love. And the character development encourages your soul, making it well worth the read. I was fascinated to discover Christianity alongside the people of Chiveis and see them experience freedom and love for the first time. It gave me a new perspective on the privilege of choosing to give one’s self to God.”

STACIA JOHNSTON, Wife and mother of three

“*The Sword* has something to entice every reader: action, adventure, drama, mystery, discovery and romance. Through a commanding use of descriptive language and character development, Litfin engages his readers to the point that they will feel a part of the journey themselves. Seasoned and novice readers alike will benefit from Litfin’s ability to provide a thrilling adventure while at the same time giving the opportunity to ponder the theological implications and Biblical parallels he weaves within the Kingdom of Chiveis. Boasting of an original plot set in a unique era which beckons its reader into a new world vaguely familiar with fresh twists on life, *The Sword* will leave you begging for more.”

NARISSA MUIK, Vancouver, Canada

The Chiveis Trilogy:

Book 1: *The Sword*

Book 2: *The Gift*

Book 3: *The Kingdom*

CHIVEIS TRILOGY



THE
SWORD
A NOVEL

BRYAN M. LITFIN

 CROSSWAY
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Sword

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*Car je connais les projets que j'ai formés sur vous, dit l'Éternel,
projets de paix et non de malheur,
afin de vous donner un avenir et de l'espérance.*

Jérémie 29:11

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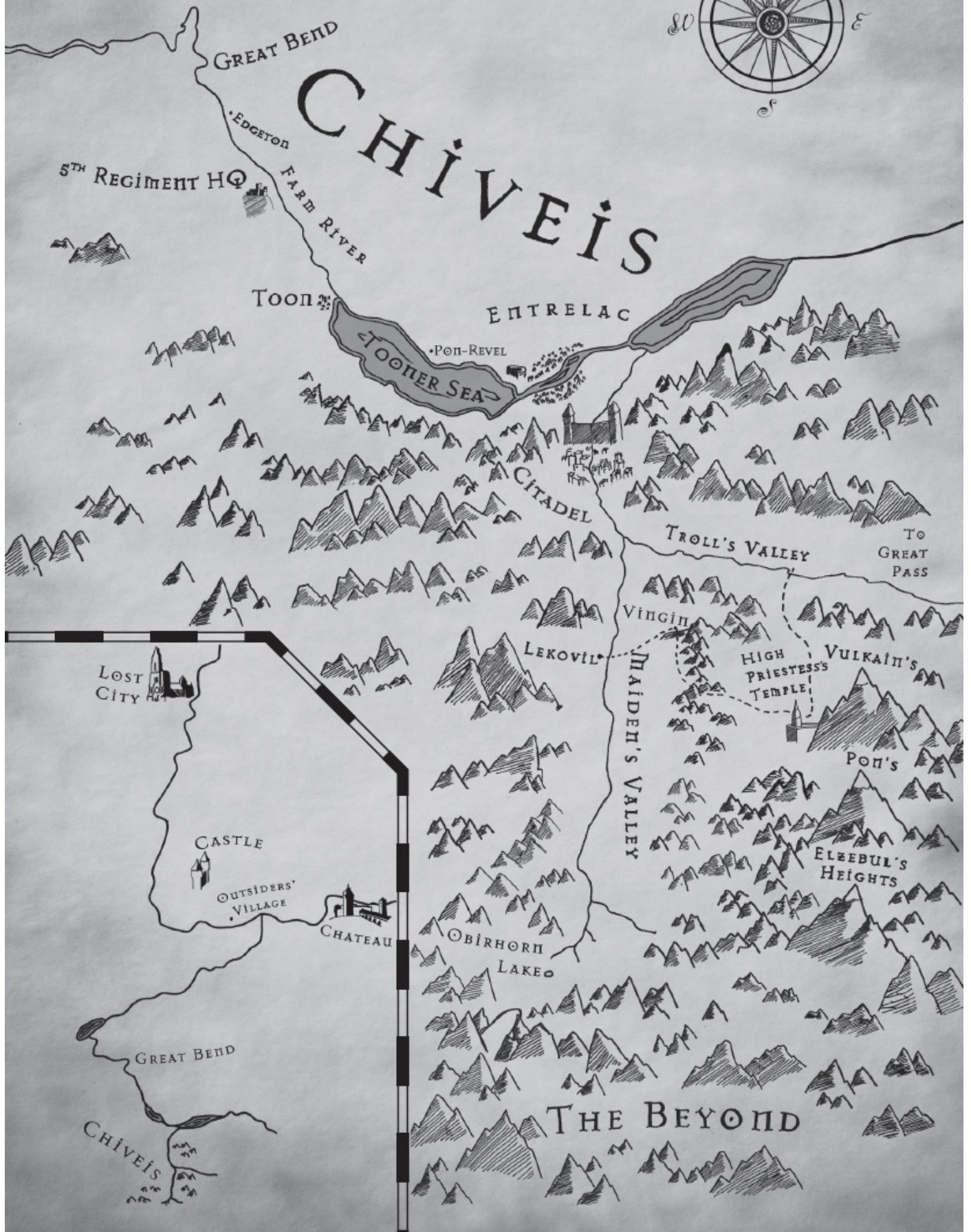
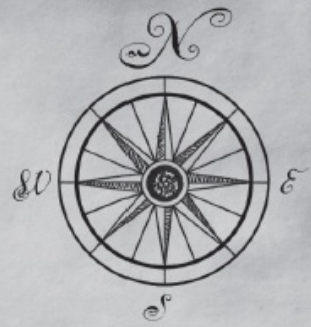
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THE BEYOND



PROLOGUE

In the year 2042, the world as we know it came to an end. The edifice of civilization proved far more fragile than anyone ever realized. One hard blow, then another—that was enough to shatter it into a million pieces.

The collapse all began with the friendly exchange of a papaya for a photograph. Some Japanese ecotourists traveled to the Brazilian rain forest to get close to nature. Unfortunately, they got a little too close. On their fourth day in the jungle, a gregarious monkey, tamed by his daily interaction with tourists, scampered up to receive a juicy prize. A lawyer from Tokyo smiled for the cameras as the monkey ate the papaya from his hand. An open cut, a little saliva—who could have predicted the devastation about to be unleashed? The deadly moment would eventually be featured on the cover of *Time*. Six months after the story ran, the magazine, like all others, ceased publication.

What the world did not know was that a malignant virus had infected the monkey population of the rain forest. A few primatologists had begun to notice a problem, but before it could be studied and contained, it made the leap from simian to human, with disastrous results.

The virus was a fatal mutation, so virulent that only a head-to-toe hazmat suit would prevent infection. It could be transmitted by direct contact or through the air. Encapsulated in a protective coating, the virus was unusually hardy, able to survive for weeks on any surface until it could infect an unsuspecting passerby. To make matters worse, its incubation period was two weeks long and asymptomatic. While a carrier was infecting countless others, he didn't even know he had it—until the nosebleed started. Within three days, invariably, he was dead.

That was what happened to Ken Takahashi, who had mugged with the monkey for the cameras two weeks earlier. As he sat at his desk in a Tokyo high-rise on the morning of June 20, 2042, great drops of crimson blood from his nose splattered his keyboard. A few hours later, an unrelenting headache began pounding in his temples. The fever and chills started that night. Violent vomiting and cramps like medieval torture followed, making the next two days an agony. None of the ER docs knew what to do, and so the virus claimed its first victim. When the autopsy discovered massive internal hemorrhaging, the coroner was stumped as to the reason. He called in the epidemiologist.

Soon after the Japanese tourists fell prey to the virus's exorbitant appetite for human life, citizens in capitals around the globe began reporting similar symptoms, all ending in the same horrible way. In the United States, the CDC mobilized its forces, but to little effect. The new virus was its worst nightmare come true.

Such was the beginning of the X-Virus. Though the scientific community eventually gave it a formal name, the media gave it the name that became known throughout the world. "Biohazard level run from one to four," an epidemiologist said in a TV interview. "But this thing is just a big X to us. We have no idea how dangerous it really is."

The X-Virus fell like a spark on a dry forest. The travel boom of those days didn't help. So many people were moving around the planet that the risk of infection had multiplied exponentially. An exponential infection is exactly what occurred. People didn't know they had the virus until they had already infected thirty or forty or a hundred other people. Wherever they went during the two-week incubation period, the unwitting X-Virus carriers left a trail of invisible germs waiting for a new host to devour. It wasn't long until every doorknob, shopping cart, coin, and public handrail held

microscopic colony of death. Any breath might carry a fatal airborne pathogen.

The death toll mounted with alarming speed. In the cramped conditions of lesser-developed countries, the virus slaughtered the poor without mercy. Yet even the rich countries suffered. No one knew how to stop the viral rampage. It made its way to Aleutian natives of Alaska on supply planes. Remote African tribes picked it up from relief-agency workers. In the small world of 2042, nobody was beyond the X-Virus's reach.

Everywhere people mourned their losses. But in a twisted reprieve, their grief only lasted until their own nosebleed started, and then the mourners had something worse to think about. A macabre ritual developed that came to be called a "nose check." People habitually put their fingers to their nostrils to look for blood. When their finger came away red, they knew it was time to get right with God. Many chose suicide instead of the inevitable torment that would follow.

Global panic set in. Fear of the virus turned friends into enemies and neighbors into killers. Homes became fortresses guarded at gunpoint. Everyone hoarded food. Murder was often committed over a case of canned goods. And not without reason: food had indeed become scarce. The farmers who supplied the world's needs were being decimated along with all the rest. The means of production and distribution imploded. The wheels of industry churned to a halt as workers and executives alike abandoned their posts to run for the hills. It was a ruthless Darwinian age. But in the reign of the X-Virus, even the fittest might not survive.

When the pandemic had claimed a quarter of the earth's population, fear turned into madness. Muslim radicals were the first to go nuclear. Demagogues in Iran, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan—all of which were nuclear countries in that era of proliferation—identified the plague as Allah's divine judgment on the infidels. Ideologies of hatred running in the veins of these societies coalesced into a new absolutism. The movement called itself Our Greatest Hour. Religious extremists claimed the moment in history had arrived when the superiority of Islam would be recognized. The servants of the Prophet would achieve world domination through conquest of the West. Several already tenuous Muslim governments were overthrown by mob violence and civil war. Now new fingers held the nuclear triggers.

The great powers of the world were in no position to respond with diplomatic restraint when their missiles fell from the sky. China with its Christians, India with its Hindus, the United States with its hedonists, and Europe with its neo-pagans—all were targets for Our Greatest Hour. Beijing. New York. Washington. Paris. New Delhi. The mushroom clouds rose on the horizons over these cities, and many others.

Western governments collapsed. The rule of law gave way to the law of the jungle. In all the upheaval, a few generals from the world's superpowers seized control with a ruthless will to survive. Their response was swift and violent. Now the Muslim countries, whether or not any missiles had originated there, bore the brunt of the new warlords' revenge. With the spasmodic fury of a cornered and dying animal, the vast nuclear arsenals of the world were unleashed. No one held anything back. Even the less powerful nations, many of which had pursued clandestine nuclear programs, turned whatever weapons they had on their regional enemies. While their missiles could not crisscross the globe, they could at least exact revenge on a neighbor in some long-simmering feud. In this way, the specter of war covered all the earth.

Many experts had warned that a five-thousand-megaton nuclear war would be sufficient to eradicate human life. But now unrestrained tyrants released more than ten thousand megatons in a global omnicide. The ozone layer was destroyed, vastly increasing ultraviolet radiation on the earth. Soot, smoke, and noxious fumes darkened the sky. A radioactive cloud soared into the jet stream and

snowed on the remote corners of the world. Nuclear winter descended on mankind.

Earth's temperate zones dropped below freezing for months at a time, while the cooler latitudes plunged into lethal cold. The earth fell silent under a suffocating blanket of snow. No plants could survive such extreme climatic change. Few animals did. Humanity received no new food production for two straight years. Mass starvation claimed those whom war and disease had not.

The survival of the human race was in doubt. Pregnant women, if they lived long enough to deliver, brought forth the stillborn or the deformed. Gangs of young men raped and pillaged at will. Survivors banded together to defend tribe and territory, using guns while ammunition could still be found, and clubs once bullets were no more. Genocide became the norm, spawned as it always is by unchecked power, hatred, and greed.

All the great advancements of the world fell into disuse, for who could think about such things when their bellies had been empty for days? No one was left to run the biomass power plants, or to maintain the communications networks, or to manage the companies that had seemed so necessary in the old civilized world of commerce and trade. Titans of business were helpless against the unemployed and desperate laborer, whose revenge was felt as the stab of a knife or the smash of a club.

The international power grid went down, plunging the earth into a new Dark Age. Night could no longer be chased away as man had done for all but two hundred years of his existence—by the scant comfort of a fire. Without electricity, the computers that ran the world crashed. Technological know-how was forgotten. The utopian future was not to be.

Even after the nuclear destruction ended, the X-Virus continued its murderous work for another decade or two. At last the earth's population fell so low and was isolated in such lonely clusters, that the virus could no longer spread easily. It died, fat and full, its hunger satiated.

A tiny fraction of the human race survived those evil days, but the forward march of progress had come to an end. Though the survivors carried memories of their past, the children born to them had no recollection of modern life before its collapse. Their world was an inferno of chaos and brutality and malformation. It was all they could do just to stay alive.

Nevertheless, as the years passed and the climate returned to normal, stable communities began to form. New societies arose, each with its own customs. A few visionaries even founded great kingdoms. The people of those days did not have to begin from square one, like Stone Age primitives inventing the wheel for the first time. Enough vestiges of the former world remained to give the pioneers a head start in the climb toward civilization.

The years turned into decades, and decades became centuries. Eventually the "modern" world came to be viewed as the ancient past. And so it was that in the twenty-four-hundredth year after Jesus Christ (though few on Earth knew it as such) a strange situation had emerged. The world of cars and guns and computers had become, once more, a world of horses and swords and scrolls. History had been rewound and was playing itself out all over again.

In this ancient-future world, one particular people united themselves under a king and called their realm Chiveis. It was a good and beautiful land whose snowcapped mountains provided protection and whose fields and livestock provided food. Safe in their natural stronghold, the people had everything they needed, so they didn't venture into the broader world beyond. The Chiveisi also had their own religion: they worshiped four main gods under the guidance of a high priestess. As for the gods the Ancients may have worshiped—well, who could recall such things? The books that spoke of those matters had been lost forever.

Or so it was believed.

Winter 2015

My nose has started to bleed, and so I am about to die. I am not afraid. I go into the arms of the Almighty. It isn't right for a Christian man to fear death, so I do not. I will join my beloved Yvette, whose head I cradled as she passed into eternal life a fortnight ago. Do I regret the comfort I gave her in those last hours? How could I? She gave me comfort for fifty two years. How could I withhold my love for fear of disease? O Heavenly Father, you know I have rejoiced in the wife of my youth!

All around me is death. The terrible sickness and murderous war have brought Europe to its knees. I doubt human life can continue in such carnage. The pagans hoard the food, those wicked ones! Though our beautiful city on the Rhine escaped the nuclear bombs, the dead lay on her streets, and the living flee her homes. We are so hungry! My body has wasted away. There is no sun, only the dirty skies and the icy cold. The demons laugh with wicked delight. But despite it all, hope remains!

Do not think, O finder, that I have given up my faith. Though man may perish, the Word of Dieu cannot die. I have hidden this Book in the church as a treasure for you. Only if you were led by Dieu himself could you have found it. O finder, may the Eternal One bless you. I give you a precious gift—the Sacred Scripture. Know this: the truth will set you free.

My name is Jacques Dalsace. Remember me! By the grace of Dieu, I have shared with you the gift of rebirth. Soli Deo Gloria. Amen.

PART ONE

DISCOVERY



The lone man deep in the woods of the Beyond knew a good sword could make the difference between life and death. Now, as the massive brown bear approached, he gripped his sword hilt in his strong, sweaty hand and resolved to live. He had just dealt the death blow to a wild boar. Downed by heavy arrows, but still kicking and thrashing, the animal found relief in the finality of the sword's thrust. With a last squeal, the boar quit struggling and went limp. The hunter pulled his blade free of the carcass and was leaning on it to catch his breath when a rustling in the bushes signaled danger.

Turning toward the new threat, the man felt his heart jump as the enormous bear crept from the underbrush, its ears laid back, its eyes staring, its face contorted in a snarl. The hunter tightened his grip on his sword, discerning from the bear's aggressive behavior he might soon require the aid of steel. The weapon was decent, and the man was well versed in its use. All his skill at arms would be needed if the menacing bear charged.

The bear swatted the ground, huffing and barking, not backing off but steadily advancing. It was a young male, probably twice the man's weight, and its curved claws provided it with weapons it wasn't afraid to use. One swat from its paw could break a man's back or snap a limb. This animal was a predator—born to kill, to eat, to survive.

Yet for all the bear's magnificence, the man could see it wasn't in good shape. Its fur was tangled and dirty, its flanks thin despite its heavy frame—or at least thinner than they should have been in midsummer with the abundance of food. One look at the bear's face told the story: a beard of porcupine quills bristled from its cheek and eye socket. Bloody scratches framed the quills where the bear had rubbed them. The right side of its face was a festering sore oozing with pus. One eye was swollen into a bulbous lump. This bear clearly could not hunt. Yet, like the man in the forest, it, too, had resolved to live.

The man knew the bear didn't want him as prey. It wanted him to retreat, leaving behind the easy meat on the ground. *Let the bear have it!* Though pork ribs had sounded good to the man when he had taken down the boar, he had no intention of quibbling over cuisine with a wounded brown bear. Dried venison would do just fine in the campfire pot for one more night. The hunter relinquished his quarry and began to ease away, making no sudden movements or sounds.

But bears are unpredictable, especially a young male who has hardly eaten in weeks. The agonizingly barbed needles had driven the creature to madness. Cold fear seized the man when he realized the tormented bear intended to vent its frustration on him. It rumbled a low growl, popped its jaws, and bunched its muscles to charge.

The man readied himself for a battle to the death. There was no chance to outrun the bear, no trees with branches low enough to climb. It was fight now or die. In some subconscious way, he realized that a sword is a poor defense against the thunderous muscles, daggerlike claws, and crushing jaws of an enraged bear. Against such power, human beings will always fail. Yet the man refused to let fear overwhelm him. Audaciously, perhaps somewhat irrationally, he prepared to confront the bear's full weight with nothing but a standard-issue soldier's sword.

With unbelievable speed, the mountain of brown fur surged toward its enemy. Ragged yellow teeth gnashed in anticipation of the bones they would crush. The man sucked in his breath, feeling the sudden rush of ice water in his veins. His stomach dropped its floor. Time slowed. It was as if he could see each drop of slobber flying from the oncoming maw, each grizzled hair standing erect on the angry face, each divot of turf kicked up by the galloping paws. Death was on its way.

As the man braced his stance for a quick dodge and thrust, chance and his body both failed him. He stepped on a loose rock, which rolled underfoot. His knee buckled in an unnatural way, and he collapsed in agony. Now, at the moment when mobility was most important, he was flat on his back with the bear nearly upon him. From the ground, the man brought up his sword in defense. Yet he understood that his already slim odds of coming out of this encounter alive had dropped sharply.

What happened next was the most surprising thing to occur so far that day. Just as the great bear was about to make its final pounce, an arrow struck its infected face like some giant usurper, the new king of all the other quills. The bear arrested its charge and threw back its head, howling from deep within its chest at this unprecedented height of pain. It reared and turned broadside. With its paw, it swiped at the arrow, snapping off the shaft but only driving the arrowhead deeper into its skull.

Another arrow flew over the man's head, slamming into the bear's ribs under its shoulder. It was a perfectly placed lung shot that buried itself all the way to the fletching. The bear dropped to all fours and started coughing up wisps of foamy blood.

There was no time to wait. The man leaped to his feet, ignoring the searing pain in his left knee. With his own roar he put his full weight behind a sword thrust to the spot where he thought the bear's heart would be. The steel found its mark and slid in deep.

The bear reacted instinctively. The back of its paw sent the man sprawling in the dust. Too dazed to move, and with the wind knocked from him, he lay motionless on his belly, trying to recover. As his awareness of danger came flooding back, he rolled over and drew his knife from his boot, ready to meet his final battle with the dying bear. But what he saw brought him up short. The unexpected scene eclipsed his earlier astonishment, becoming the new most-surprising event of his day. He saw a girl—stunningly beautiful girl—with a broadhead arrow nocked in her longbow, standing over the body of the dead bear.



The woman drew her bowstring and held the arrow in place as she approached the bear on the ground. Though it lay still, danger of this magnitude had to be treated with caution. A little blood bubbled from the bear's chest wound, staining its fur bright red. No sooner had she looked than the bubbling stopped. The bear's flanks no longer heaved, and its paws no longer twitched. Satisfied that the creature was dead, the young bow-woman turned her attention to the officer of the Royal Guard lying to the side of the clearing.

“Are you hurt?”

Though the man was on the ground, she could see he was tall and lean, with dark hair that could use a trim. A stubble on his chin indicated he had been in the field for some time. She knew from his uniform he bore a high rank in the scout force of the Kingdom of Chiveis. Yet she had to admit, he looked a little ridiculous lying there on his back.

“I'm unhurt, and also in your debt,” the man answered. He made no attempt to get up, apparently content to rest on the ground after his close brush with death. “You're skilled in the use of a bow. And you have courage. The average woman would have faltered in such danger.”

She lifted her chin, bothered by his mixed compliment. "I'm not an average woman."

"Obviously." The man slowly got to his feet, wincing and standing on one leg, favoring his injured knee. "So, can I ask the name of such an exceptional woman? And what are you doing out here past the edge of civilization?"

The woman considered her reply. The soldier was right: she wasn't where she was supposed to be. Royal law forbade anyone to leave the boundaries of the Kingdom of Chiveis. Though her family's fields were on the frontier, as far along the Farm River as anyone dared to live, she had journeyed even farther downstream today, where no civilian was allowed to go—into the Beyond.

"If you intend to reprimand me, remember, you'd be dead right now if not for me," she said evenly.

"Indeed, I'd be in the halls of the gods if not for your archery. But don't worry, I'm not going to report you to the authorities. I just want to know the name of the pretty girl who saved me." He raised his eyebrows and dared her to answer.

The woman decided to take him at his word. "My name is Anastasia of Edgeton. I'm the only daughter of farm folk who grow wheat along the river for the people of Chiveis." Though the guardsman had said he wouldn't report her, still, she felt defensive about violating the law and wanted to establish her family's patriotic credentials.

"What are you doing in the Beyond?"

"I left home at dawn and came here trailing a roebuck. In fact," she added defiantly, "I come here often."

"Well, Anastasia, it's a good thing you had a heavy bow with you today." He smiled, gesturing over her shoulder. "But I bet you didn't intend to take a bear for meat when you left Edgeton this morning."

The tension between them drained away. She looked at this silly figure, this handsome man on one leg, grinning at her. He was obviously accustomed to the hard ways of the wilderness. His leather jerkin was that of a man who not only ventured into the forest occasionally but lived in it for weeks at a time. Yet apparently he had a humorous side too. Her defensiveness broke, and she smiled back at him.

"It's true; I didn't expect to encounter such a fierce adversary today. But when I decide to take my quarry, I always get him. And now," she said, changing the subject, "may I have your name as well?"

"I'm Captain Teofil of the Royal Guard, the Fifth Regiment." He offered nothing else, and she knew not to inquire further.



Teofil assessed the situation. On the positive side, he was alone in a secluded forest with an attractive girl. He had always managed to make the most of that situation in the past, though he doubted he would be so fortunate this time, and not just because of his injured knee. On the negative side, he was far from his horse, which he had left with his gear in a meadow a league or two away. It wouldn't be easy to hobble that distance. The negatives in the situation seemed to outweigh the positives.

He and Anastasia stood atop a bluff that loomed over the great bend in the Farm River. The river bend lay outside the formal boundary of the kingdom, though the Royal Guard did patrol the area regularly. From here, the lands of the Chiveisi stretched upstream to the southeast, where the river emerged from a lake at the settlement of Toon.

A plan began to take shape in Teofil's mind. "Anastasia, how did you come to be here?" he asked.

"As I said, I was hunting the roe deer. My village has plenty of bread, but meat is harder to obtain for those of us on the frontier."

“Right. I know you were hunting, but what I mean is, how did you travel? On foot?”

“No, in a small boat. It’s at the bottom of this bluff.”

“Well, I’m afraid I’m going to have to commandeer your boat in the name of the king.” He meant to convey his request as a lighthearted joke, but it came out sounding more formal than he wished, like a direct order. *Teo, you always do that*, he chided himself. *You come off so cocky to people who have been nothing but kind to you.*

“My possessions are at the king’s command,” Anastasia replied, echoing Teo’s formal tone. The veil of tension assumed its place between them again. “If you wish to make your way down to my boat, you’ll have to lean on a crutch.”

“Perhaps I could lean on you?” He had intended it as a legitimate option, but now he kicked himself for how presumptuous he sounded.

“I believe a wooden crutch would be more receptive to your needs, Captain,” she answered with an unmistakable edge to her voice.

She moved swiftly into the forest and returned with a belt pouch, a hatchet, some hazel branches, and a handful of leather thongs. One of the sticks was in the shape of a Y, and to its top she lashed a crosspiece that could seat itself under Teo’s arm. He marveled at the woman’s resourcefulness. She was doing exactly what he would have done.

“How does your knee feel right now?” she asked.

“It’s throbbing, actually,” he said without thinking.

“You’re in pain?”

“No.”

“You said it was throbbing. What did you mean by that?”

“I suppose it’s sort of throbbing. But the pain is minor. It’s hardly worth mentioning.”

Anastasia frowned and shook her head, letting out a small sigh. “Let’s have a look at it.”

She loosened the laces of his high leather boots so she could untuck his breeches and roll them past his swollen knee. With her long fingers she gingerly explored the joint. Teo noticed how lovely her hands were. They were the smooth hands of a lady, not rough and callused like a peasant’s. Her probing touch was soft and light, except when she pressed into the tissues.

“Do any of these spots hurt?” she asked. It did, but he refused to jerk or make a sound.

Anastasia glanced up. “It seems you have something unique here, Captain—a serious injury that somehow doesn’t cause pain. I’m skilled in forest remedies and healing, but it’s hard to diagnose a stubborn man.”

“I’m not stubborn! It just doesn’t hurt that much. Not for a man like me.”

“Does this hurt?” She gave his knee a hard squeeze, and he grunted in surprise.

“Aha! It seems we’ve finally found the tender spot.” She opened her pouch and rummaged in it, then pulled out a small knife.

Teo eyed the blade in her hand. “Apparently the frontier remedies are more rigorous than those of the Citadel’s doctors.”

Anastasia turned up the corner of her mouth and rolled her eyes, then bent to the hem of her blue dress and began to slice off a ribbon of cloth. Teo was amazed. He realized instantly she was making bandage wrap from the only suitable material to be found nearby. Yet he also knew that farm girls in Edgeton didn’t come by their dresses easily, and they usually put great stock in such things. The garment had no doubt cost this girl several months of her earnings, with its embroidered pattern of Chiveis’s white mountain-star flowers. This was, he recognized, a sacrificial act.

She wound the strip of woolen cloth around his knee, compressing it to limit further swelling. When

she came to the end of the bandage, she held it with one hand, and with the other she reached to her head and loosened a hairpin. Teo noticed her hair for the first time. It was a light amber color with highlights of gold where it caught the morning sun. The style had been done up around her head in the way of girls who are engaged in some strenuous task. Now when she shook her head, her blonde hair came spilling down around her shoulders in a graceful cascade. Teo realized the person in front of him was not a girl at all, but a lovely young woman. She slid the hairpin into the bandage to hold it in place.

“Anastasia,” he ventured, “thank you.”

“I’m only doing the king’s business,” she said as she handed him the crutch. “The boat is in some rushes at the inside of the river bend. It’ll take you a while to make your way down the bluff. I’ll meet you there later, after I collect my things.” And then, like a fairy sprite, she disappeared into the forest.



Anastasia arched her back and wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, leaving a crimson smudge. She held a slimy red knife in her other hand. Bloodstains covered her dress down to its ripped hem.

The wild boar, a juvenile and not exceptionally large, had been easy to dress out. Anastasia had intended to hunt today, so she’d packed her rucksack with sharp knives and even a small bone saw. After she bled the carcass and removed the entrails, she set aside the liver, which her father especially enjoyed. When the field dressing was complete, she put the boar in a burlap sack. The hams, loins, and ribs would be welcome in her home, though she knew it would be hard work carrying the meat to her boat.

As she worked, an idea occurred to her. Perhaps Captain Teofil could stay for supper. After all, the boar was his. She should invite him to dine with her family. *What a silly idea! Ana, don’t let your notions run wild like a flighty milkmaid!* She dismissed the thought from her mind.

Now that the boar was ready to be transported, Ana turned to the bear. Although bear meat didn’t appeal to her palate, the young men of her village relished it. They considered it the highest cuisine, endlessly discussing how it ought to be cooked and with which spices and sauces. Ana suspected their enjoyment had less to do with the taste and more with the chance to sit around the grillfire and recount, over and over, the stories of their bear hunts. From their tall tales, one would think they had wrestled the poor beast into submission until it was hog-tied and whimpering. *Ha! What will the village boys think when I return with a load of bear steaks and a thick pelt?* It was close to three years since anyone had brought bear into Edgeton. She smiled at the thought of the stir she would cause.

Ana wasn’t sure how she was viewed by the young people in her hometown. Certainly she knew from the farm boys’ behavior they found her attractive. It seemed she had a strange effect on them. Though all the young men sought her out, they retreated into a snail shell in her presence, stammering and gulping like adolescents holding hands on a hayride. Because of this awkward social dynamic, Ana had never been in love. That fact didn’t bother her much. The boys of Edgeton were fun, and they served well enough as friends or partners to spin her in the barn dances. But she was attracted to none of them. Somehow they seemed beneath her. She frowned at this notion, for it sounded haughty as it flashed through her mind. *That’s not quite right*, she thought. *It’s just that I couldn’t put myself in their hands and trust where they would take me.*

Bending to the bear, Anastasia slit its belly lengthwise, then made incisions up each leg and around the neck. With practiced hands, she stripped the pelt from the carcass. The chestnut fur would make

fine winter cloak. She also took the choice cuts of meat, leaving the rest for the wolves.

Of her two loads of meat, the boar looked harder to transport, so she decided to begin with it. She encountered no small difficulty hoisting it to her back, for it probably equaled half her weight. Ana was considered tall among the Chiveisi, and she liked to think of herself as strong, but her frame was slight. She didn't have the broad shoulders that would have made this a much easier task for Captain Teofil.

Winding her way down the hillside, Ana came to a place where the trail skirted a cliff face. It was no massive drop-off, but the cliff was steep and rocky, and the trail was narrow here. She didn't like the thought of negotiating the ledge with the boar on her shoulders, but there was nothing else to do if she wanted to take home the meat. An image sprang to her mind: her father broiling ribs over a grill that evening, telling Teofil, who was holding an ale in his hand, how proud he was of his only daughter.

Ana sucked up her courage and began to ease ahead. As she slid along the cliff, her foot slipped on the uneven ground. She lurched too close to the edge, gasping as she regained her balance. "I hate heights!" she cried to no one in particular as she left the place behind.

The trail brought her to the bank of the Farm River. Ana was glad to arrive at the spot where her boat was moored so she could relieve her shoulders of the heavy burden. She dropped the burlap sack into the canoe. There was no sign that the guardsman had been here. Perhaps he was hobbling around in the woods somewhere or bathing his knee in cool water upstream.

As Ana turned to ascend the bluff and retrieve the bearskin, a footprint in the mud caught her eye. Apparently the captain had been here after all. She knelt to examine the imprint. It was a boot, yet something about it seemed unfamiliar. Was this the sort of boot Teofil had been wearing? She tried to picture it in her mind. *Yes, it must have been like this.* Obviously it was his footprint, for no stranger had been observed in Chiveis in anyone's recent memory. Of course, she wasn't exactly in Chiveis at this spot.

The men of Edgeton said loners and brigands roamed the wilderness wastes, a thought abhorrent to Ana. She couldn't imagine living a solitary life in the awful expanse beyond the known world. It was one thing to venture into it occasionally to hunt, but something else entirely to abandon family and hearthfire for the yawning abyss of the Beyond. Ana knew she was different from her peers in being willing to cross the line into the wilds. What gave her a thrill would have proved terrifying to the village girls she knew—and most of the boys as well. Nevertheless, she was like all Chiveisi in her high regard for communal life. When darkness fell, she wanted to be near the safety of her loved ones. Even frontier farmers like her parents, scattering to their fields along the Farm River each day, returned to the stockaded village at night for human companionship.

Without giving Captain Teofil's boot print another thought, Ana started up the hillside to fetch her hard-earned bearskin.



Rothgar fiddled with the braids in his black whiskers as he studied the actions of the girl on the opposite riverbank. Satisfied with what he had seen, he rejoined his companion, who was trying to coax the last drops of beer from a skin bag. A trickle fell on the man's chin and moistened his beard.

"Hey, sot! Enough with your grog! We're not here to get you drunk!" Rothgar shoved his partner, causing him to inhale his drink and drop the wineskin.

“Curse you!” Red-Beard sputtered after he stopped coughing.

Rothgar ignored his partner’s curse. “Listen up! That girl I saw last time is hunting in the forest again. She’s making this too easy for us! And what a scrumptious piece of meat she is. Our king’s gonna enjoy having her as a wife.”

“What about the guardsman? He’s probably still around somewhere. He had the look of a warrior.”

“So what? He’s on the other side of the river from us. You can take him out with your bow, and then we’ll snatch the girl. He’ll be no problem.”

“A man like that is always a problem.”

Rothgar’s face contorted into a look of scorn. “Coward!”

The red-bearded man bared his teeth and cursed again. Rothgar lunged out and grabbed his partner’s throat in his fist. He maintained a choking grip for several seconds, until the man’s eyes bulged and his face turned purple. Finally Rothgar let go. Red-Beard leaned against a tree, gasping for breath.

“Don’t you cross me,” Rothgar warned with a steady gaze. “This mission is too important. The king put me in charge of the deal this time. He wants that girl bad. I don’t need you messing things up.”

Red-Beard gingerly rubbed his throat and winced. “I ain’t meanin’ to cross you. I just don’t know what we’re trying to do here.”

“You don’t need to know. Just shoot where I tell you.”

“It would help if I knew more.”

Rothgar frowned. “Alright, listen—I spotted that girl in the woods the last time we traded for weapons with the Chiveisi priests. When I got home, I was telling the king about her, and he got all worked up. Told me to trade for her when we returned on the summer solstice, to pay as much brimstone as it takes.”

“I didn’t know the Chiveisi were into the slave trade.”

“They’re not. They said this has to be secret. Has to look like a random kidnapping. But they want our brimstone, so they’re willing to deal.”

“What’s so great about that stuff? It’s just a useless yellow rock.”

“Not to them. There’s a witch who rules their land. Brimstone is sacred to her, but they don’t have any hot springs to get it.”

“A witch?”

“She’s their High Priestess. Black hair, pure white skin. Deadly beautiful. They say every man wants her, but she wants no man.”

Red-Beard guffawed. “That’s ’cause she’s never met me.”

“Yeah, right. You can’t even get a woman of your own back home.” Rothgar’s sneer was a challenge, but Red-Beard didn’t answer.

A squirrel chattered at the two men from a branch above. It was hot. No breeze stirred the trees. Rothgar picked up the empty wineskin and pitched it at his partner. “Let’s move out,” he said. “We have a queen to capture.”



Teo picked his way down the bluff with the aid of the makeshift crutch. He had chosen a longer trail along the riverbank because it was less steep. Even so, the going was difficult. The day had warmed now, and exertion made sweat run from his forehead into his chin stubble. It had been a hot summer; in fact, the farmers were beginning to talk about drought. Teo progressed slowly under the intense midsummer sun.

He found himself getting frustrated. He was used to being in control of his environment, but with his knee swollen like a melon, he couldn't move at the pace to which he was accustomed. To make matters worse, he'd been forced to leave behind the pork ribs he wanted for dinner. Teo had nearly died defending his prey from a competing predator, like a wolf guarding the haunch of meat it had snatched from the pack's kill. For what? Only to leave it on a hilltop for scavengers.

Teo also hated to leave the bear steaks—they would have made good eating. He thought back to the six bears he'd taken in his twenty-eight years. The third bear had been the hardest. It moved at the last moment, so the kill shot went off mark. Wounded but still mobile, the old sow charged. That time Teo didn't fall to the ground. With a yell he charged the bear in return, driving his hunting spear into its shoulder to stop the onslaught. In the split second the bear hesitated, Teo drew his ax and severed the creature's spine. Yes, that one was definitely a tough kill. *Speaking of tough kills—how about today's?* *It would have been your last, Teo, if not for the girl!* He leaned on a tree to catch his breath, laughing at the absurdity of the morning's events.

Teo's mind went to Anastasia. What must she think of him? He didn't exactly cut a dashing figure lying there on the ground as helpless as a baby. Then his attempts to banter with her had gone astray. Usually he was able to charm the women with his words, but this woman was different. She had a aloof, self-confident way about her. And she was so beautiful! Who would have guessed backward little Edgeton could produce such loveliness? Most of the farm girls Teo had seen were squat and stocky, with plain faces and dull hair—born to milk cows, not to recite lyric poetry in the aristocratic competitions back at the Citadel. In comparison to the local milkmaids, Anastasia was a goddess. Actually, she was a goddess even in comparison to the blue-blooded princesses he had known. And he had known a few of those.

Well, Teo, he said to himself, if you had any intention of catching the girl's eye, you've ruined already. You should put the whole affair behind you. He resolved to do so.

Teo reached the water's edge. The little boat floated in the reeds where Anastasia had said it would be, at the inside of the great bend in the Farm River. It wasn't properly hidden, but then, its owner wasn't an army scout trained in stealth. Probably it wouldn't matter. Yet out here past the edge of civilization, in the Beyond, one ought to be watchful in all things.

The craft was a lapstrake canoe, well fashioned by some boatwright in Edgeton. The frontier people always had good boatwrights in their villages. The Farm River was their highway back to Toon at the mouth of the Tooner Sea. From there, if the need should ever arise, they could cross the sea and take refuge behind the secure walls of the Citadel. Even the courageous frontier folk, who served the Kingdom of Chiveis by raising crops out on the river where the fields were more fertile, liked to know they could escape to safety when necessary. In the mountain valleys behind the Citadel's mighty rampart, surrounded on all sides by unscalable peaks, no intruder could break in.

Teo glanced at the bluffs above the Farm River. This particular site at the river bend always struck him as odd. He couldn't comprehend what had happened here. He understood that the Chiveisi weren't the first inhabitants of these lands. Long ago the Ancients had fought their Great War of Destruction. The remains of that ancient society could still be seen in many places—even more so in the Beyond than in Chiveis itself. A collapsed bridge here, a crumbling road there, pieces of their steel carriages left to rust over the centuries. The forest had encroached around them; hungry vines had enveloped them. Still, the shards of that long-gone civilization could often be found.

But Teo's current location seemed to be an exception. It was as if some colossal hand had eradicated the Ancients' ruins. Teo could see no remnants of their society in the vicinity. No decaying buildings protruded from the forests. And even more strange, the closer one got to the high bluff inside the river

bend, the more “erased” was the evidence of the departed people. Whenever Teo came here on patrol he marveled at how the vestiges of the past grew increasingly scarce as one approached the bluff. What would have been an obvious location for a great city, it appeared the Ancients had left no mark. Teo knew this was unlikely. The Ancients had been far more numerous in these lands than the Chiveisi. People had no doubt lived here. What could have caused such total destruction? He would probably never know.

The long downhill hike had taken its toll on his knee, so Teo sat on the ground with his legs outstretched. While he waited for the throbbing to abate, he idly scratched the earth with a stick, loosening the soil, sifting it through his fingers. Something caught on his thumb—a rusty fishhook, its barbed point still sharp despite the intervening centuries. Teo held it up in the sun. What ancient fisherman had brought it here long ago? Did he seek to pass a lazy summer day in his favorite recreation? Was he desperate to feed his family with the day’s meager catch? By what name did he call the river that Teo now called the Farm? Who was this man of the ancient past?

Looking downstream toward the Beyond, Teo let his mind imagine what was out there. He had never been that way, for he had no reason to go. Yet he couldn’t help wondering what secrets lay beyond the boundaries of the known world. *Foolish thoughts! Such questions have no relevance today!* Teo shook his head. Though curiosity might be useful in his duties as a Royal Guard who patrolled the frontier, it didn’t advance his other career as an ambitious young scholar at the University in Lekovil. The purpose of education, Teo had been told, was to discover utilitarian insights that could be put to good use. Leave it to the priests and monks to delve into the bigger questions of life. Scholars must avoid metaphysical speculations.

With a sigh, Teo flicked aside the fishhook. *Keep your curiosity out of sight*, he told himself. *It won’t provide what you need most right now—a way home.* Perhaps practical knowledge was best after all.

Teo turned his attention to the canoe in the reeds along the riverbank. He knew it would be unwise to rush up to it as if he were on some homey stream behind the Citadel’s great wall. As a guardsman of the Fifth Regiment, deployed on the outermost borders of Chiveis, he always had to be careful. Danger lurked in the Beyond. It was his job to watch for it at all times and to alert the citizenry in case of evacuation to the Citadel was ever needed.

From the bushes, Teo surveyed the scene. He could see a bulky sack in the bottom of the canoe, though Anastasia wasn’t in sight. When all seemed clear, he scrambled to his feet with the aid of the crutch and moved closer to the boat, keeping under cover as much as possible. As he approached the little craft, he examined Anastasia’s tracks in the wet mud. And then he spotted something that changed everything.

Another footprint!

Teo’s mind sprang into action. The print was fresh—indubitable evidence that at least one outsider was nearby! He could only be regarded as an enemy. The Chiveisi rarely interacted with outsiders and considered all strangers hostile.

Where was Anastasia? She should have collected her belongings and arrived at the riverbank long ago now. Teo realized he would have to get her into the boat and out of here fast. Hand-to-hand combat was out of the question with his knee injury. If the stranger attacked, the only recourse would be to escape.

“By Astrebril’s beard,” he muttered under his breath, “where is that girl?”

Teo assessed the situation from a strategic point of view. The safest action would be to withdraw and let the events unfold. He reminded himself he was one of the best archers in the kingdom. In fact,

he was probably *the* best, though he would find out for sure at the tournament in a few months. Now in his injured state, Teo decided he could best defend himself, if necessary, at a distance. The hunting bow over his shoulder was his only useful weapon. He retreated to a rock that provided a wide angle view, yet was protected by cover. It had direct sight lines on the approaches to his position at the tip of the peninsula created by the U-shaped river bend. A bee buzzed near Teo's head as he settled onto the rock in the dappled sun. If outsiders were roaming nearby, he would force them to make the first move.



The red-bearded archer grunted in surprise. "The man just disappeared! I saw him at the boat, then lost him." He stared down at the opposite riverbank, where the canoe floated at the peninsula tip. The tall Chiveisi guardsman with the dark hair was nowhere to be seen.

"Fool! I told you to mark where he went." Rothgar cuffed his partner on the back of the head.

"We'd know exactly where he was if we had stayed on that side of the river, like I suggested."

Rothgar glared at Red-Beard. "What do you know about tactics? I suppose you think we should have tied our boat alongside theirs! What's the matter? Can't you hit a target across a river?"

"I can hit anything I can see. But that soldier moves like a lynx among the trees. He's hard to follow, that one."

"How hard can it be? Didn't you just see he has a lame leg? By the gods, that's what you'll have from me if you botch this mission!"

Red-Beard scowled and uttered a profanity. The two watchers sat down to wait as the sun beat on the dry forest. Finally something moved below.

"Here comes the girl again," Rothgar said. "Let's see if she draws out the man. Ready your bows. Now we'll see if you're as skilled as they say."

"I am, and more."

The two men with braided beards watched the girl across the river bring her second load. This sack appeared to be lighter than her earlier burden. She dumped it into the canoe next to the first, slipped off her small rucksack, and bent to the water to rinse her hands.

"There's the guardsman!" Rothgar hissed. "Be ready. If you have a clean shot, take it!"

The red-bearded man nocked an arrow in his thick yew bow. Holding it lightly, he gripped the string in three fingers and drew it in a single, smooth motion. The arrow's yellow and black feathers nearly touched his lips.

On the far bank, the guardsman beckoned the woman to his side. She turned to go to him. They were still several paces apart.

"She can't be injured!" Rothgar reminded his partner. "Take the shot, quick! Take it now!" In his excitement, his feet danced, and he shook his fists.

"You're no archer, Rothgar." Red-Beard drew a breath and let the string slip from his fingers.



It happened all at once. Teo caught a glimpse of jerky movement on the bluff across the river. In a flash of recognition, he realized it didn't belong to the natural world, but to the human. He recoiled instinctively. With a solid *thunk!* an arrow buried its head in a rotten stump where he had been standing, its yellow and black feathers quivering with the impact.

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