

# The King's Dream

## Chapter 1

His Majesty King Gravon Balthor of Lasendell, Lord of the South Reaches, Keeper of the Crystal Star and Protector of the Durnal Straights sat upon his high throne surrounded by advisors, courtiers, servants and dogs, and sipped warm milk from a silver goblet and ate lemon sweetcakes from a crystal platter held by a pretty young girl with big brown eyes who was actually two years older than her King.

"I want a fountain," King Gravon said, licking the sticky residue of his latest sweetcake from his fingers.

Lord Eggart, a tall, thin man who had been King Gravon's advisor and companion for years, bowed to his King and added the latest request to the growing list of items to be included in the new castle that was being built in the King's honor. "And what would you like the fountain to look like?"

"Tall," His Majesty said. "Marble. I want it made out of marble. And I want a statue of my father on the top, holding his sword out like this," he said, standing and affecting a terrible pose. "He should be facing the Straights, like he's watching over them and daring any invading navies to attack. And mother should be beside him. They were always together, you said they were."

Lord Eggart nodded. "And so they were, Your Majesty."

"You have to be able to see it from the Straights," King Gravon added. "Anyone that sails through them has to see it."

Lord Eggart paused. "It would have to be on the outside of the wall, Your Majesty."

King Gravon frowned and snatched another lemon sweetcake from the platter. "No, on top." He stuffed the cake in his mouth and licked his fingers. "We have to see it from inside too."

"I see. We'll build a park," Lord Eggart suggested, "on top of the wall where all the people can honor your parents."

King Gravon smiled, obviously pleased. "Yes, that will do."

"A park upon the wall? With a fountain?" Master Builder Kale asked. "Your Majesty..."

"Yes," King Gravon interrupted, "a park. But I know you will have to make the wall really wide, so it does not have to be big."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Master Builder Kale sighed. "Was there anything else?"

King Gravon thought a moment then shook his head. "That's all for now."

Master Builder Kale bowed and departed, taking with him the list that Lord Eggart had been keeping and muttering to himself. Lord Eggart turned to the King. "General Baragin would like a word, Your Majesty."

King Gravon scowled. He did not like General Baragin. A mountain of a man, he was scarred from many years of battle, one in particular sliced down his face from the top of his head down to his left jawbone. It was an ugly scar, dark and thick and pulsed when the man got excited. He always seemed angry and he smelled as well, especially his breath, which came from a mouth filled with rotten teeth.

"Your Majesty," General Baragin began, barely bowing an inch. "The regiment in the Kaggen Mountains is in need of troops. The Wildings are attacking daily. They mean to take our land, Your Majesty."

King Gravon leaned back in his throne, covering his nose with his hand to ward off the General's breath and tried to pretend to be thinking like he had seen his father do. "Then send more men," King Gravon said.

"There are no more, Your Majesty."

King Gravon looked at Lord Eggart, who shrugged. "He's right. All the men and boys who are able to fight are already in the army."

King Gravon thought a moment then had a splendid idea. "The prisons are full."

"The prisons?" General Baragin huffed. "Traitors, barbarians, thieves, rapists and killers! I could not build an army from the likes of them!"

"They eat food but don't help at all," King Gravon thought out loud.

Lord Eggart raised an eyebrow. "Yes, your Majesty, so they do."

"We don't have enough food as it is. People are starving." King Gravon ran an idea through his head, played with it a moment, just like he had seen his father do. *Make no decision in haste*, his father had told him once. The court waited as he thought, all eyes turned on him, all eyes expecting his leadership though he was only a boy of eleven summers. Finally he stood. "I decree that all able bodied men in the prisons will be put to death immediately," he said in a clear, although squeaky voice. A murmur rose from the floor of the throne room. "Unless," King Gravon continued loudly so that he could be heard above the noise, "they agree to fight in the army. Any man that agrees to do this but does not do what he is told will be immediately executed. They should all wear a collar or something so we know who they are."

Lord Eggart pursed his lips, and nodded. "So it has been decreed." He turned to the General. "So it will be."

General Baragin huffed again, but kept silent and bowed. He turned with a flourish and left the throne room, his heavy boots pounding off the tile.

"I don't think he likes my idea," King Gravon said to Lord Eggart in a whisper.

"He does not have to, Gravon," Lord Eggart whispered back. "It was a good idea, afterall. At the very least we will rid ourselves of the leeches that drain our granaries."

King Gravon squinted up at the sun which was rising just past the top of the east wall of the throne room and stabbing down onto the King through the ruined roof. "Are we done? It's getting hot."

Lord Eggart took a step back and bellowed in a clear voice. "Are there any who would petition the King?" He looked about, but no one stepped forward. It was well known that the General of the armies was always the last to speak to the King. It was a tradition established by Gravon's father and General Baragin's father, who drank too much and was known to be a heavy sleeper. "This audience is ended!"

King Gravon hopped off of the throne and made his way to the north entrance, of which, only the door frame remained. The rest of the wall had been destroyed, rubble still lying in piles on the floor inside the throne room and in the hallway without, some of it strategically placed to hide large blood stains. The King and Lord Eggart, as well as the pretty girl who carried the tray of sweetcakes, made their way through the castle to the only remaining tower. They followed a winding path that was strewn with debris and detours before arriving at the Red Tower, a short, fat, tower with three floors and few windows that was usually reserved for visiting dignitaries that were not royalty. The Red Tower overlooked the Main Gate and the Servant's Village, the only part of the castle that had not been touched by the violence that had taken King Gravon's mother and father from him. That had been six months ago, and since then, General Baragin had skillfully repelled the invaders, but what remained was misery and despair and an eleven year old King.

"I think it's going to be hot today," King Gravon said as he pulled off his official robes and changed into a light cotton shirt.

"So it seems," Lord Eggart said, picking up the robes and hanging them neatly in the closet.

"Do I have to do anything today?" King Gravon whined, turning to look at Lord Eggart with a petulant face.

"No, Gravon, you have nothing on your schedule."

Gravon's face brightened. "Can I go riding, then?" he asked.

Lord Eggart chuckled. "Yes, Gravon, you may. Eliza, would you be so kind...?"

The pretty girl curtsied. "Of course, my lord," she said.

"Will you come riding with me?" Gravon asked Lord Eggart.

Lord Eggart ruffled his king's hair. "I wish I could, but I have to write up your decree to kill the prisoners!"

"Oh." Gravon turned to Eliza. "Will you ride with me? I don't want to ride with just my guards. They don't talk to me."

Eliza smiled sweetly. "If my King wishes it," she said, again with a curtsy.

"Hurray!" Gravon cheered and grabbed Eliza's wrist pulling her along behind him as he raced out of the tower.

The dungeon was indeed full. Each cell, originally designed to hold four men held at least eight and reeked of human waste and decay as some of the prisoners had actually died but had not been removed. Flies swarmed around the unfortunate men and laid eggs in the wounds of the war prisoners who had been injured but not treated before being tossed into the cells. Many burned with fever. Others were dead but just hadn't realized it yet, staring blankly into the gloom.

Aeyrik Haner sat with his back against the cell bars, listening to the moans from up and down the corridor and the whimpering of his own cell mates. Two were thieves that had been in the cell when he had been thrown into it. One of them was blind, both were thin, defeated men. Three others were barbarians from Galgustar in the North. Large, vicious, warriors normally, these three had been beat near senseless upon their capture. Large purple welts covered their bodies. Some of them had become infected and oozed yellow puss. Another man had been brought in a day before for cheating a customer at his cloth shop. Tall and balding, the man was thin and pale with a pronounced Adam's apple that bobbed as he swallowed nervously every few seconds. The last man was a fellow mercenary. Aeyrik did not know him, but knew his story. Like his own, he had been hired to help overthrow King Aldur Balthor by the Regent of Ailwynn, a small province under the protection of the King. Aeyrik had been paid half in advance in gold, most of which he had sent off to his sister for safe keeping, in case the war went badly.

Which it had.

The Regent of Ailwynn had seriously underestimated the armies of the Crown and his own ability to control the barbarians from Galgustar, who, at the first sign of an enemy, had charged in against orders and been slaughtered. Others decided to attack villages and peasants rather than the armies of the crown. Ailwynn's catapults and trebuchet's were able to wreck havoc on the capital city of Lasendell, which sat near the border between Lasendell and Ailwynn, but that did not last long. The battle was fierce and bloody, but

relatively short. Aeyrik had surrendered only after he was surrounded by ten knights and a dozen archers with barely a scratch on him. His fellow mercenary was not so lucky and groaned continuously as his wounds festered.

Amid the sound of suffering, Aeyrik heard steel doors open and heavy booted feet stomping down the corridor. Prisoners begged as the guard passed, some for food, some for water, some to be released, some to be killed. The guard ignored them all. He stopped and unlocked the door of Aeyrik's cell and tossed in a skinny, runt of a boy of twelve summers. The boy stumbled and fell across the legs of one of the thieves who howled in pain, but did nothing more because the guard was too close. The boy jumped up and backed against the cell doors, taking in the scene of his new home with wide eyes that glimmered with large tears. He shook with fear and gulped down air, struggling with the stench. Shortly he lost that battle and vomited out into the corridor through the bars.

"Small favors," Aeyrik mumbled.

"What?" the boy blurted, suddenly wondering if he should have kept his mouth shut.

Aeyrik gestured to the corridor. "I appreciate you not throwing up on us."

The boy said nothing. He looked away and slid down to the floor, hugging his thin, dirty legs and trembling. Aeyrik knew his story as well. The boy probably lost his parents in the war and in a desperate attempt to survive he had stolen an apple off a vendor's cart, branding him a thief and sentencing him to the dungeons.

"What did you steal?" Aeyrik asked the boy.

"What? Nothin'! I swear!"

Aeyrik looked away. "Have it your way. It matters not down here. They've already sentenced you."

The boy lowered his head and sobbed. "A pear! It was just a pear, and a small one!"

From down the corridor a heavy metal door opened with a bang and the familiar squeaking wheels of the food cart could be heard. Then, just as familiar, was the begging, but it did no good. The only ones that got more than their small bowls of rice or gruel were those cells where one of the prisoners had died. The guards still shoved a bowl in for them. They seemed to find it amusing to watch the others fight over it, but they would not tolerate stealing from the living. Every breathing man would get his bowl or the guards would whip everyone in the cell.

As the cart drew nearer the thieves and barbarians crowded the door, shoving the boy aside. The shop keeper cringed to one side. The mercenary did not even realize the cart was there and continued groaning. Aeyrik waited.

The food cart was brought around by three guards and two prisoners. One prisoner poured the food in the bowl and slid the bowls through a gap at the bottom of the cell door. The other pushed a second cart because there were so many prisoners.

"How many?" one of the guards bellowed.

"Nine," Aeyrik answered.

The guard gestured at the other mercenary. "He still breathes?"

"He breathes."

"Nine, then," the guard said and the prisoner began to ladle out the food. It was soggy rice this time and by now it was cold.

The barbarians grabbed their bowls first, shoving past the thieves. The thieves snatched theirs next and shambled back to their corner. The shop keeper took up his and the other mercenary's. He placed the bowl next to the mercenary and then sat and devoured his own. Aeyrik took the next one. When the last slid under the door, the boy just stared at it.

"Take it," Aeyrik encouraged him.

"I'm not hungry," the boy whimpered.

The barbarians looked up and growled. Aeyrik shot the boy a hard look. "Take it and eat it or die," he hissed. The boy looked up at the barbarians and snatched the bowl up in a panic.

The guards laughed and moved on. One of the barbarians crawled over to the boy. "Give me bowl," he growled.

The boy cradled the bowl in his arms and stared at the barbarian, breathing heavily. "Leave him be," Aeyrik said.

"Not want it!" the barbarian snapped at Aeyrik.

"Yes I do!" the boy squealed.

The barbarian growled and snatched the bowl from the boy and shoved him hard against the cell wall causing him to cry out. The guards turned and pulled out their whips. The barbarians backed up into the cell, crouching like wild animals that were cornered.

"Stealing from the living, eh?" one of the guards taunted as he unlocked the cell door. But as he opened the door the barbarians rushed through, knocked the guard down and smashed his head against the floor causing a pool of blood to quickly spread across the stones. Shoving the prisoners aside and overturning their carts, the three barbarians attacked the other two guards who had spent too many years doing easy dungeon duty. The barbarians, despite being starved, soon overwhelmed the two guards and would have killed them had Aeyrik not come to their defense. He grabbed one from behind and twisted

his head violently to one side, breaking his neck. The next one he kicked in the side of the knee, causing it to snap and buckle. The barbarian howled and fell, giving the guard time to pull his dagger and sink it deep into the barbarian's chest. He then drove the blade into the third barbarian's back four times before he would release the strangle hold he had on the other guard.

Aeyrik quickly backed into his cell again, holding his hands up and shutting the cell door with his foot as he did so. The guard's, favoring their bruises, stood for a moment, trying to determine what they should do about Aeyrik. Finally, one of them locked the door. "Thanks," he said gruffly, and then turned his attention to the dead as the remainder of the cells that had not been fed yet bemoaned the overturned carts.

"Here," the shop keeper said, handing a bowl to Aeyrik. Aeyrik looked at the shop keeper suspiciously. "It's his," the shop keeper said, gesturing to the mercenary. "He doesn't need it anymore."

Aeyrik looked over at the man who had stopped moaning at last then regarded the bowl of rice. He held it out to the boy. "Eat. I still have mine."

The boy took the bowl and silently scooped the small amount of rice into his mouth.

The dark woods were perfect for hiding out in, if you knew where you were going, but running blindly through them was painful and dangerous. Twice he had smashed his head into a low hanging tree limb. Three times he had stumbled over a root or rock or it might even have been a corpse for all he knew. Another time he almost ran off the edge of a thirty foot drop. He had countless scratches from branches and bushes and rocks, and was covered in mud. He was hungry, thirsty and tired but there was no time for stopping. Surely they would be after him and if they caught him, he would be hanged.

Breathing heavily, he leaned against a tree, just for a moment, just to catch his breath. He was not certain where he was and if he was going in the right direction. He had been heading generally north which would get him out of Ailwynn, away from the death and the King's men who were sweeping the countryside looking for traitors to the crown. But time was slipping away. He was on foot, the King's men were certain to be riding for the borders.

Sucking in air, he pushed himself away from the tree and started up a low hill using the moon to guide him, his fine clothes in shambles.

## Chapter 2

Joffer Banks followed the sweaty, smelly guard down into the equally disgusting dungeon, a rolled up parchment in one hand, a perfumed handkerchief pressed against his nose in the other. He moved slowly and carefully, testing each step down the slippery, dimly lit stairway and making certain he did not touch the walls which wept a dark, oily liquid. What it was he could not say, but he certainly did not want to find out.

As they descended into the depths, Joffer silently cursed the poor luck that had given him the job of delivering the edict to execute the prisoners unless they joined the army. By law, prisoners were informed of their fate in person. Typically, the prisoner or prisoners were doused in perfumed water and then marched up to the Hall of Fate, a large, unadorned chamber with three doors. One led up to the civilized levels of the castle. Another led down to the dungeons. The third led out to the Blood Garden, so named because it was where the Executioner performed his task. But because there were so many prisoners and because many could not walk, it was decided that someone from the King's Council had to go down into the dungeon and deliver the edict. They had decided to draw lots.

Of the seven council members, one, the Regent of Ailwynn, was obviously not in attendance and probably dead. Two more were immediately excused because it would be unseemly to send women into the dungeons. That left four. Joffer, the new Regent of Moorish, taking the place of his uncle who had died in battle; Hagan Bordin, the ancient Regent of Selve; Paeter Alish, the Lord of the Treasury, a small, weasel of a man with long, oily, unkempt hair, a large nose and small eyes, and finally Adda Marcucious Moore, the High Priest of the Faith, who believed the gods controlled everything, so there was no need to make any decisions, it would all come out as the Gods wanted anyway.

The short straw had been plucked by Hagan Bordin, whose gnarled hand shook as he stared at it as if he had just snatched up a deadly snake rather than a piece of straw. The other members of the Council seemed content to let the old man walk all the way down into the dungeons, where he most likely would have died, but Joffer took the deadly straw from Hagan's weak grip and had received blessings upon blessings from the old man, whose bony hands squeezed Joffer's shoulders repeatedly. The others offered kind words about his chivalry, but in some eyes he saw something else, though he was not sure what. It occurred to him later that perhaps they wanted Bordin dead.

When they reached the first level of the dungeon, Joffer almost retched. His eyes watered and his head spun as the stench assailed his senses. He looked down the long



corridor with fifty cells on each side, all filled to overflowing. "Is this all of them?" he managed to ask the guard.

"There's six more levels, my lord," the man said through thick, cracked lips. "You'll have to yell loud to get them to hear you."

Joffer could barely open his mouth without feeling nauseous much less yell. This was folly, he thought to himself. Even if he could get them all to hear him, most were in no shape to fight anyway. Better to just kill them all and be done with it. But it was not his decision. He unrolled the scroll. "An edict from the King!" he yelled, finding that yelling actually seemed to help hide the stench. "All prisoners are to be executed immediately unless they agree to fight in the King's Army." The corridor erupted in screams and pleas, some to be taken immediately so that they could be fed, others lamenting their ill health and pending doom. But at least they heard him. "Take me to the next level," he yelled to the guard, who nodded and started to waddle off. Joffer followed, making a mental note to find whoever had written the decree and thank him for its brevity.

"You'll fight?" the guard asked through the cell bars.

"I'll fight," Aeyrik said, getting to his feet.

"Who else?" The boy sat staring wide eyed at the door not knowing what to do. The shopkeeper gulped air and trembled, his fear of fighting in a war equal to his fear of being executed. The thieves tried to get to their feet, but fell repeatedly.

"We'll fight!" they begged. "We will!"

Aeyrik grabbed the boy and the shopkeeper and hauled them to their feet. "They'll fight," he said.

"I...I...I..." was all the shopkeeper could manage.

The door was opened and Aeyrik dragged the boy and shopkeeper out with him. The thieves tried to get up again, but the guard pushed them back into the cell. They cried out, begging to be allowed to join the army, but the guard ignored them. He directed Aeyrik to follow the others to a door at the end of the cell block and moved to the next cell.

"I'm not much good with a weapon," the shopkeeper said nervously as he followed Aeyrik down the corridor.

"Neither am I," the boy said quickly.

"Not everyone in an army fights," Aeyrik said. "They need cooks, runners, people to mend and wash clothes. With any luck, you will both be one of them."

"Do you think that's possible?" the shopkeeper gushed with hope. "I could cook! I could. And you," he said to the boy, "a runner, yes?" The boy nodded eagerly. "Yes, that would be fine."

They followed the slow, steady procession of hungry and battered men through the corridor to the doors that led to the stairs that went up to the Hall of Fate. On the other side of the doors a squad of soldiers waited. A death squad, preparing to carry out the other half of the King's order.

"Oh my," the shopkeeper mumbled. "How barbaric," he whispered.

Barbaric, maybe, Aeyrik thought to himself, but it made sense. The realm was battered. Prisoners were just a drain on the King's resources. The death squad watched the men pass, sometimes making snide remarks, frequently referring to them as cannon fodder. Aeyrik ignored them and began the long climb to the Hall of Fate.

It was a slow climb. Many of the men were injured, most were starved. They rested often, slipped frequently and sometimes just collapsed. One man died on the way, his heart bursting in his chest. He lay on the stairs staring up at nothing as the line proceeded past him. Aeyrik reached down and closed his eyes as he passed.

"How horrible," the shopkeeper said, edging as far away from the body as possible. The boy did not even look, keeping his eyes on the stairs in front of him, concentrating on ignoring the burning in his legs and lungs as he took each step.

An eternity later they found themselves in the Hall of Fate. The shopkeeper was wheezing and sweating heavily. His legs were weak and he stumbled and fell to the cold floor. The boy was in no better shape and retched bile. Aeyrik picked his way through the men that had either collapsed onto the floor or stood bewildered in the middle of the room. The boy nudged the shopkeeper and pointed at Aeyrik. The two of them struggled after that tall warrior.

At the far end of the room, soldiers were evaluating their new recruits, picking the strongest and healthiest and separating them from the weak and sick. Groups of men were then herded out into the Blood Garden. Soon after those in the Hall of Fate heard each of them scream.

"You will each be branded!" a tall soldier yelled as he paced back and forth. "So we know you were a prisoner. If you try to run away, we will kill you. If you disobey, we will kill you. If you are insolent, we will kill you. If you don't want to be branded, say so now, and we will kill you instead."

The other soldiers chuckled.

The soldier stopped in front of Aeyrik. "You picked the wrong employer this time, my friend," he said.

"It happens," Aeyrik said.

The soldier leaned closer to Aeyrik and spoke in hushed tones. "Why, Aeyrik? Why choose against the crown?"

Aeyrik shrugged. "I needed work."

"Work?" the soldier half yelled then lowered his voice again. "The King brought peace and prosperity."

"Exactly. No more disputes between Barons, no more need for mercenaries." Aeyrik looked at the soldier. "Truth be told, I did not think we would win, Gren. But I didn't think I would be captured either."

The soldier named Gren stepped back a bit. "I was surprised as well. What happened?"

"Some of my fellow mercenaries preferred to attack innocent women and children."

Gren nodded knowingly. "And you had to stop them, and in the meantime got yourself surrounded. Well, you look none the worse for wear."

Aeyrik smiled. "Not enough to eat in the dungeons, though."

"I can imagine. Come, you'll go with this group. We'll have to brand you."

Aeyrik nodded to the other group, the one with the weaker and older men. "What will happen to them? Will they become dishwashers and cooks?"

"Them? No, they go in first, soften up the Wildings, make them tired and overconfident."

"That's not very efficient."

Gren shrugged. "They're the dregs of society, Aeyrik, not worth saving." Gren glanced behind Aeyrik, Aeyrik turned to see the shopkeeper and the boy standing behind him, breathing heavily. "Friends of yours?"

"Cell mates. They don't deserve this sentence, Gren," Aeyrik whispered, knowing that they would be placed with the other group.

"They're prisoners, my hands are tied."

"Leave them with me. Brand them, send them to war, but give them a chance."

Gren thought about it then shrugged. "It matters not to me. It's your skin that's on the line. Let's go."

Aeyrik turned to the shopkeeper and the boy. "Stay close to me," he said and turned to follow Gren out to the Blood Garden. The shopkeeper and the boy were right on his heels.

"Wait! These two don't belong here!" a guard in the Blood Garden yelled when he saw the shopkeeper and the boy.

"Let them go," Gren answered. "These three are family."

"Family?" the shopkeeper said out loud.

"Sst!" Aeyrik hissed.

The shopkeeper ducked his head and lowered his eyes.

"Let them all die together," Gren added and laughed.

The other guard grumbled and pushed them on into the garden.

The Blood Garden was a large open area with thick green grass and roses planted along its edge. It was circled by the castle wall on three sides and on the fourth a low wall separated the garden from a hundred foot drop into the churning waters of the Durnal Straights. In the center of the garden was a large, square, stone platform where the Executioner would behead the unfortunate, their remains then thrown over the low wall, but instead of the Executioners block, there was a low bench and a kettle of glowing coals with two branding irons. Presiding over the whole affair was the Executioner himself, a mountain of a man with thick black hair and arms and legs like tree trunks.

"Next!" the Executioner bellowed.

Aeyrik stepped up to the platform and was pushed down to his knees in front of the bench by two soldiers. The back of his left arm was bared and placed on the bench. The Executioner plucked a branding iron out of the coals and quickly pressed it against Aeyrik's arm. His skin sizzled and smoked for a moment and Aeyrik gasped at the pain, but then it was over and he was led to one side.

"Next!" the Executioner bellowed again. The shopkeeper was next, but he did not move, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he swallowed and licked his lips. "You!" the Executioner yelled, pointing at the shopkeeper.

"I'm sorry!" the shopkeeper yelled. "I'm innocent! I didn't cheat anyone! Please don't do this to me!"

One of the guards grabbed the shopkeeper and dragged him up onto the platform and threw him to the ground. "Best cooperate," the soldier hissed, "or he'll burn you longer!"

"Please! I'm sorry!" the shopkeeper pleaded as they forced his arm onto the bench. "Please don't! Please!"

The Executioner laughed, and true to the guard's word, he left the brand on longer than necessary. The shopkeeper cried out in pain and promptly fainted, sliding unceremoniously to the ground. The Executioner laughed and tossed the branding iron

back into the kettle. The guards dragged the unconscious shopkeeper off to one side and dropped him in the grass.

"Next!" the Executioner yelled.

The boy was next and timidly made his way up to the bench, his lips quivering and large tears welling up in his eyes. He tripped once over his own feet and stumbled into the guard, who pushed him down in front of the bench and bared his arm. The Executioner turned with branding iron in hand, but when he saw the boy, he tossed the iron back into the fire and plucked the boy out of the grasp of the guards. "What's this? A child! I'll not brand a child!"

"He's a prisoner!" one of the guards said. "It's the King's order."

"The King's no older than this one!" the Executioner spat. "Look, he's not got flesh enough to take a brand. All sticks and bones is all he is!"

"It's the King's..."

"I'll not brand a child!" The executioner nearly tossed the boy to one side. "Take him to war if you must, but I'll not brand him, understands me?"

The guards shrugged and grabbed the next man to be branded. The Executioner stared at the boy for a moment then plucked an iron out of the fire.

Aeyrik pulled the boy aside and the two of them revived the shopkeeper, who immediately started wailing about the burn on his arm. "Quiet, or they're like to give you another one!" Aeyrik hissed. "Be thankful you're alive."

"Yes," the shopkeeper sniffled, "but for how long? I'm no warrior. I thought you said we would be cooks!"

"If it were me making the decisions, you would be."

"I've never carried a weapon. I've never been in a fight. Oh, just kill me now! Put me out of my misery."

Aeyrik pushed away from the man in disgust. "I saved your life, shopkeeper. But if you want to die, just say so. They'll be sure to accommodate you." Aeyrik walked off to stand by the other branded men. The boy glanced at the shopkeeper and then ran after Aeyrik. The shopkeeper lowered his head and sighed, then struggled to his feet and joined them.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I...I don't..."

"Forget it," Aeyrik said. "But your life depends on you doing what you're told."

The shopkeeper nodded. "My name is Blain," he said. "Blain Crastin. I make pots, or I did. Nice clay pots. Big ones, little ones, all painted beautifully. The Queen bought my

pots. Yes, one day she came by my shop. Told me how beautiful they were. She bought three."

Aeyrik stared off into the distance, watching gulls float on the wind and envied their freedom. He ignored the shopkeeper and wondered where they would be sent. The Wildings were not very organized, they did not fight in ranks and file or in predictable patterns. They were like animals, like a hunting pack, vicious and efficient. What they lacked in military strategy they made up for in cleverness, skill and heart. Theirs was not a battle for money or land. Theirs was a fight for survival.

The shopkeeper, realizing no one was listening to him, had stopped talking and leaned against the wall sniffing. Aeyrik sighed. "What did she use them for?" he asked.

"Beg pardon?"

"The Queen, what did she use the pots for?"

"Oh, well, I don't know, actually. She never said and of course, I was never in the castle." Aeyrik nodded just as a soldier shouted at them to march up the steps out of the Hall of Fate. "More steps!" the shopkeeper groaned.