

## Chapter 1

*As winter settles in, an old man sits down to write the tale of his youth. A sense of melancholy, of love lost, and the disappointment of labors performed in vain cloak his shoulders. He leans forward, the feather pen in the weathered knuckles of his hand hovering over parchment. Asking himself where it all began was unnecessary ... time could not erase the flames that leapt in his mind's eye.*

My first memory is that of my house burning down— of heat and blood and sweat— the things that would become the fruit of my life. A mere boy then, I am old now writing this tale, and my body bears the scars of Galin's plans.

I do not remember my mother or my father. Nor do I recall any brothers or sisters. Though I surely had them, they were seared from my mind along with all feelings from my heart. The flames licked at the dry whitewash planks of my home ... or perhaps it was a neighbor's home. Maybe I was staying the night with a friend. I do not even recall the name of where I lived. From my years in conversation with Galin, relating to him my memories of the countryside and certain little things, like the sassabrush blossoms that would blow in the wind and cover everything, he came to believe I was raised south of the Vis River near the trading town of Orlon but not the town itself. Orlon is too large and too well defended for the events that took place that night to have occurred.

I am convinced I will never know if he were right, but it's not a burden to be ignorant of that particular truth. After this much time, it no longer matters.

There was a hot wind that summer night, lending strength to the fires that were started by Baler's men during the raid. The air churned with smoke, desperation, and fear. People rushed by, running wild through the dirt-packed streets. Women carried babies and dragged children by the arm, and I remember a bug-eyed man pulling at a frightened cow. Homes burst into red and orange ... men working with useless buckets of water to put out a growing avenue of flames. A horse ran over someone. She looked right at me before her face slammed into the dirt. Odd, I cannot recall my own mother's face, but that woman's face is very vivid ... tangible even.

I was paralyzed, unable to move, watching everything that I must have cared for turn to ash because of Baler's cruelty and greed. There were sounds of fighting; of what I now know as swords being pulled from scabbards and the ring of metal on metal and then the sounds of dying. It was Baler himself, and not one of his men, that found me. He was a large man. One moment I was in the midst of an infernal chaos, and then the next, he was standing in front of me. His sweaty face was half in shadows and half glowing with raging firelight, his beard grimy and long hair tangled. He looked like he came from the Wildrun. That's the way I always remember him— a brute, a large and ugly abscess in my life.

I said *hello* to him and asked him who he was.

His beard split into a smile of rotten teeth. "Why, I'm the Old Man of the Woods come to steal you, boy!"

The *Old Man of the Woods* ... it's a name mothers use to frighten precocious children from straying too far from home. He will come and take you, like a lamb that escapes the shepherd's notice and is taken by a wolf. It was then that I realized all of *this* was my fault. The fire, the panic, the deaths ... *I* was the cause ... the Old Man of the Woods would not come unless you did something wrong. Something surged in my body and my rigid legs broke free of their hold. Two steps into my run I heard Baler laugh, and then there was a flash of pain in the back of my head and blackness.

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I woke gagging on the smell of moldy potatoes. I thought I opened my eyes, but it was black, like they were still closed. My ribs ached and my stomach felt hollow. I was laying on something, the weight of my own body stretching me out and my hands were tied behind my back. That *something* was moving ... ponderously like a plow horse.

I tried to turn my head and the pain in the base of my skull was like a dagger being shoved out of my eye. Something wet and sticky ran down the side of my face ... I licked my lips and tasted copper. It was then that I learned

there is no limit to the amount of fear a person can experience. The realization that it was blood I tasted energized my limbs. I bucked and twisted. It was a brief and futile attempt at freedom. My feet and hands were tied and numb. Floundering on the horse's back caused the potato sack to rub against my sweaty skin, burning my chin and shoulders. The horse neighed in protest and someone hit me on my backside. "Stop squirming, boy," a gruff voice said. So trapped in the heat, itching and hurting, I closed my eyes and waited.

From time to time during that long ride to Baler's camp I could hear his men talking. Their voices were weary, but they were pleased at the crimes they had accomplished. At that age, I didn't understand their lewd remarks about the women that had fallen victim to their lusts. Realization grew over time, but by then my life was ... horrible ... and their ill behavior normal fare. As the ride lengthened their conversation shifted to complaints and their language grew coarser. Listening to them, I wondered about my grievous errors in life. How many times was I told to go to bed *now* and not done it, or something else equally offensive ... something that would make the Old Man of the Woods notice me. I don't remember all of my jumbled thoughts then ... just regret at my perceived sins and fear of what was going to happen to me. I was convinced I was going to die, and so not being able to escape my fate, tied up and choking on my own body heat inside a sack, I did what was natural for a child to do. I cried.