

Chapter One

Riyan looked out over the landscape, his position on the ridge afforded him a commanding view of the valley. The moonlight overhead painted the world in shadows, among which who knew what sorts of beasts may lie. Undaunted, he turned to his companion and directed his attention to the castle nestled in against the peaks rising on the far side of the valley. “Look,” he said, “there across the valley.”

His companion, a man like himself who had seen many a battle, nodded. “We’ll find her in there for sure.”

The lady in question had been snatched from her home by person’s unknown. Her family contracted Riyan and Chadric to track down those responsible, rescue their daughter, and slay her captors. After several days of following their trail, it led them here.

“Let’s go,” Riyan said and then headed out. Chadric followed close behind.

They worked their way down from the ridge and soon found themselves in the shadowy darkness of the valley floor. Heavily forested, this area gave off a less than comforting feel as they made their way closer to the castle.

Howrrrrrrrr!

Not very far off a wolf’s howl split the night. Riyan and Chadric came to an abrupt stop as they turned their attention toward the direction from which the sound had originated. The moon’s light did little to dispel the shadows as it was unable to effectively reach this far below the forest’s canopy.

“What...?” began Chadric when Riyan held up his hand to silence him. Becoming silent once more, Chadric focused his attention on the shadowy boles of the trees before them.

Then all of a sudden, one of the mountain wolves that infested these parts launched itself out of the shadows. Moving straight for Chadric, it snarled and its teeth became pale shadows in the darkness.

Riyan pulled his sword from its scabbard just as his companion was bowled over by the beast. "Chadric!" he hollered.

On the ground, the wolf had one of Chadric's gauntleted forearms in its mouth and was shaking it furiously. "Ahhh!" he cried out. With his other fist, Chadric began hitting the beast alongside the head but the blows did little in persuading it to release his arm.

Then Riyan came to his aid. Striking out at the back of the wolf with his sword, he cleaved the beast almost in two by his thunderous blow. Kicking out with his foot, he knocked the wolf from off his friend.

"You okay?" he asked. Offering a hand, he helped his friend to his feet.

Chadric nodded. Then he took a look at the gauntlet covering his forearm and saw where the wolf's teeth had indented the metal. "Yeah," he replied.

"We better hurry and reach the castle," Riyan said. "Wolves never hunt alone." No sooner did he say that than another howl split the night not very far away. Wiping his sword off on the wolf's hide, he gave Chadric a hand up and then they were back on their way to the castle.

They passed among the trees much more quickly now, the howling of the wolves driving them onward. Despite the frequency and close proximity of the howls, no other wolf made an appearance.

At last they reached the far side of the valley. Here the forest became less dense and it wasn't long before the outer wall of the castle appeared through the trees. High on the upward slope of the valley where the mountains began, its dark edifice loomed hauntingly. The wall ringing the castle rose high from the valley's floor, beyond which climbed a spire even higher into the sky. A single light broke the darkness as it escaped from a window high in its upper reaches.

When they reached the edge of the forest across from the wall, they paused for a moment. "Something's not right," observed Chadric.

"I know," agreed Riyan. No guards were present upon the battlements and the gate stood open. "It can't be this easy."

"Could be they didn't expect anyone to have trailed them back here," suggested Chadric.

“You may be right.” But deep down inside, Riyan didn’t think so. “Come on,” he said. Moving quickly and quietly, he raced towards the open gate. Other than the normal sounds one would expect while in the forest, nothing else could be heard.

Upon reaching the gate, they pressed themselves against the wall and peered through its gaping maw. The inner courtyard looked clear. A courtyard stretched forty yards from where they stood to the door leading into the castle. The tower they saw with the light was but one of three that extended upwards from the main body of the castle. Two shorter ones extended upward at either end while the one with the lighted window towered to twice their height out of the castle’s central keep.

Riyan raised his hand which bore the Ring of Evil Detection. Calling upon its power, it took but a moment before a glow began surrounding a three foot statue that stood on a short column situated between them and the door leading into the castle. Exactly what the statue was couldn’t be readily determined in the moonlight from this distance. “I thought so,” stated Riyan. He glanced back to see if Chadric had seen the glow.

“Now what?” Chadric asked, he too had seen the glow.

“I’m all out of protection scrolls,” he replied. “The ring will afford me some protection against whatever it is.” He glanced back to the statue and drew his sword. “Stay here.” When he heard Chadric say, ‘Alright’, he moved into the courtyard.

Working his way around the statue, he kept one eye on it and another on the rest of the courtyard. As he came closer, he could tell the statue was of some demonic beast. There were wings on its back and a single spiraling horn protruded from out of its forehead. The head had a cruel visage with what looked like two dagger-sharp fangs extending upward from out of its lower jaw.

Then all of a sudden he felt a vibration in the ring, one he always felt when evil was near. The eyes of the statue flashed a dark red and the head slowly turned towards him. As the statue came to life, he now understood why there were no guards on the walls or in the courtyard. This was the castle’s guardian.

Coming out of its sitting position, the demonic creature stretched upright and raised its head. Then it gave out with an ear-piercing

screech. Growing silent, the creature launched itself off the column and towards Riyan.

With a war cry of his own, Riyan raised his shield to ward off the creature's attack. Bringing his sword into position, he waited.

Beating its wings, the creature flew through the air and struck out at Riyan with the claws of its feet. Riyan raised his shield and felt the creature strike it with jarring impact. Then he retaliated with his sword, striking out at the creature with a resounding blow.

The blade of his sword rebounded off the creature, doing little more than chipping away a small piece of the marble it was constructed of. The jarring impact of the sword on the marble left Riyan's arm tingling.

With wings flapping, it rose into the air only to turn and strike once more.

By this time, Chadric had reached his friend's side and used his mace. He smashed the creature as its attack was thwarted again by Riyan's shield. The mace did more damage, being a bashing weapon such as it was. But it still did not do enough to stop the creature.

As the creature made ready for another attack, Chadric came up with an idea. He reached into his pouch and pulled out a small crystal vial. Then as the creature again moved to attack Riyan, he threw it. When the vial struck, it shattered upon the hard marble surface and the fluid it had contained began burning the creature.

Shrieking, the creature fell to the ground and started thrashing about as dark smoke wafted from where the liquid had touched it. Chadric and Riyan move forward quickly and begin laying into it with sword and mace. They soon had it reduced to a pile of broken marble. When at last its movements stopped completely, Riyan stepped back and looked to his friend.

"What was in that?" he asked.

"Holy water," Chadric replied. "Got it before we left Rynwall."

Riyan nodded his head and grinned at his friend. "That was fortunate," he said.

"Turned out that way," agreed Chad.

Leaving the shattered remains of the creature behind, they ran toward the door leading into the castle. Upon reaching the door, Riyan flung it wide and strode fearlessly into the castle. Dark and ominous, the interior was full of shadows as the moonlight made its way in through the many windows.

The hall they now found themselves in had the appearance of having been left unattended for some time. Cloth covered many of the pieces of furniture, spider webs hung in the corners of the room, all in all the place gave the feeling that no one's been here for some time. If that was the case, then why did the trail of the woman's captors lead them here? And what can it mean that a light shone from the window at the top of the tower?

Riyan glanced around the hall for a brief moment before crossing over to the stairway leading up. Taking the steps quickly, he and Chadric ascended up to the landing on the second floor. "We have to find the entrance to the tower," Riyan said.

Chadric moved down to the entrance of a hallway that headed in the general direction of the tower. "Could be down here," he suggested. He saw that it extended further into the castle.

Riyan nodded and then moved to join him at the hallway. Taking the lead, he left the landing and headed quickly down the hallway with Chadric right behind.

The hallway itself was rather wide with several doors lining both sides. Moving past them, Riyan walked quickly towards the end of the hallway where he hoped to find the entrance to the tower. When he reached a little over halfway to the door at the end, his ring all of a sudden began vibrating to tell him evil was close. He no sooner paused and was about to tell Chadric to be on his guard than the doors lining the hallway opened. From out of the opened doors, skeletons bearing swords and shields rushed forward to attack.

Immediately, Riyan and Chadric formed up back to back to face the onslaught. Easily a dozen skeletons boiled from the adjacent rooms. Striking out, Riyan's sword removed the head from one only to see its body continue the attack. "We have to go for the arms!" he hollered to Chadric. His next swing severed the sword arm from the headless skeleton. Kicking out with his boot, he knocked the one armed headless stack of bones backwards. It broke apart when it struck the wall.

"Yeah!" Chadric yelled as his mace smashed through the ribcage of another.

Laying about them, they quickly destroyed the skeletons. Having only received a few minor cuts, they left the pile of bones behind and hurried to the door at the end of the hallway. So far, what they have faced hasn't been all that challenging.

Upon reaching the door, Riyan grabbed the handle and pushed it open. On the other side they found a room where the staircase leading up into the tower began. A roar filled the room as a fur covered creature leaped from the stairs. Taller than either of them, it must have stood over six and a half feet. Naked other than the covering of fur, it's only weapons appeared to be a pair of nasty looking claws and the razor sharp teeth filling its mouth.

Shouting his war cry, Riyan raced forward with sword drawn to meet the attack. He raised his shield as one of the creature's massive paws struck out at him. The force of the blow upon his shield knocked him backwards several steps. As he saw Chadric moving past him to engage, he yelled, "It's stronger than it looks."

Chadric nodded that he heard then attacked with his mace. Impacting the creature's side, the hit elicited a roar of pain. Then another of the creature's paws swung forward. Chadric raised his shield to block the blow and sailed backwards through the air when the blow connected. Slamming into the wall, he slid down and settled to the floor.

"Yaaaaa!" screamed Riyan as he thrust his sword toward the creature. The sword's point struck the creature's side and sank in several inches.

The creature tilted its head back and howled at the pain Riyan's sword inflicted. Then the creature struck the sword with one of its paws and knocked it from Riyan's grasp. As the sword flew across the room, the creature struck Riyan with its other paw and sent him sailing. He hit the wall with an 'oof' and settled to the floor.

From across the room, Chadric was getting back to his feet. He saw the creature moving toward where Riyan was lying on the ground and hollered, "Hey you!" When the creature turned, he threw his mace and smashed the creature right between the eyes. The force of the blow was such that it caved in the creature's skull, smashing the brain within. Falling backwards, it hit the floor and twitched for a few seconds before becoming still.

Chadric rushed to his friend's side and asked, "Are you okay?"

Riyan opened his eyes and nodded. "I think so." Glancing over to where the creature lay he said, "Hope there aren't many more like that one."

Offering his friend a hand up, Chadric helped him to his feet. Then he went over to the dead creature and recovered his mace.

“Hey, would you look at this?”

Turning around, he saw Riyan standing before a closed chest sitting against the wall. “Wonder what’s in it?” he asked.

Riyan shrugged then turned back to face the chest. “Only one way to find out,” he said. Grabbing hold of the lid, he lifted it up.

Chadric crossed the room and stood beside him as he swung the lid all the way up. Inside, the gleam of coins and gems could be seen. “Must be a fortune!” he exclaimed excitedly.

They both reached in and started removing the coins and gems. A few gold coins mixed in with a handful of silver, the majority of the coins the chest held were that of copper. They filled their pouches with the treasure and in so doing, discovered a secret compartment hidden in the bottom of the chest.

Riyan took out his knife and pried it open. Within they found a plain, brass key. He held it up and said, “This could be useful.”

“Better take it with us,” agreed Chadric.

Putting it within his belt pouch, Riyan then turned and headed towards the stairs leading up. The steps rose as they wound their way around the outer wall of the tower in a spiraling fashion until finally disappearing through the ceiling. With Chadric following closely, Riyan moved onto the stairs and quickly began moving to the next level.

“Wait a second,” Chadric said as he pulled one of his torches out of his pack. Once he had it lit, he indicated for Riyan to continue.

For a brief moment the stairs passed through a narrow section as it went from the first level to the second. Then it opened up again as it reached the second floor landing. Here they found boxes and crates stacked neatly in various spots across the second floor.

As it turned out, the tower itself wasn’t very wide and the light from Chadric’s torch was able to reveal it in its entirety. With nothing here other than boxes and crates, they continued following the stair as it wound its way along the outside wall up to the third floor.

Just as it had between the first and second floor, the stair entered a narrow area when it passed from the second floor to the third. When Riyan entered the narrow area between floors, his ring once more began to vibrate. He paused a moment as he informed Chadric that

something was ahead, then took the torch from him as he resumed his forward progress.

Now with the torch held before him, Riyan stepped cautiously as he neared where the stairs opened up onto the third floor. First the torch, then his head cleared the opening as he slowly crept his way forward. The light from the torch cast shadows in the room as he completely emerged from the opening.

The room as it turned out looked to be someone's bedroom. A bed, dresser, and table all gave this room a rather homey appearance. Another chest similar in nature to the one they found below sat at the foot of the bed. Riyan moved forward into the room toward it as Chadric began to emerge from the opening leading from the second floor.

"Be careful," he warned when he saw what Riyan was moving toward.

Riyan came to a stop before the chest and placed his hand upon the latch. Gripping it tightly, he pulled the lid open. Inside, he found another pile of coins. Nestled in among the coins were two bottles that were normally used in conjunction with potions. He moved his torch closer and saw that both bottles contained liquid.

He reached in and took one of the potion bottles out. "Hey, look what I found!" Always excited when finding potions, Riyan turned back to Chadric. "Wonder what they do?"

Chadric moved closer to the chest and reached inside to pull out the other one. Looking closely at it, he saw a feather inscribed upon a wax seal. "Maybe this is a flying potion?" he guessed.

"Possibly," stated Riyan. "Mine has the sign of the healer."

"A healing potion," nodded Chadric happily. "Can always use one of those."

"You got that right," replied Riyan.

They then removed their packs and set them on the floor. Once the potions were secured within their packs along with the coins from the chest, they slung them again across their backs.

"There can't be too many more floors remaining to this tower," observed Chadric.

"I know," replied Riyan. "Need to be extra careful from this point on. My ring indicated evil was present but there's nothing here."

“If what it sensed is on the next floor,” said Chad, “it must be powerful indeed.”

Riyan just nodded his head.

The two friends then went to the stair and began climbing up to the fourth floor. Before they reached the narrow area between floors, they saw light coming from above. “Better put that out,” Chadric told Riyan as he indicated the torch.

“Good thinking,” he replied. Then putting the burning end against a step, he rolled it until the flame went out. Leaving it smoking on the step, Riyan looked up at the light coming from the fourth floor. Removing his sword from its scabbard, he resumed moving into the narrow area between the third and fourth floor. His ring began vibrating once more.

When he came to the end of the narrow area, he slowed down and continued until he was just able to gaze into the fourth floor.

“Come in gentlemen,” said a voice.

On the far side of the room sat a man hunched over a desk with his back to them. Over the desk were two shelves lined with books. Sitting at the right end of the lower shelf was a gilded cage containing a small creature. Upon closer examination, it was revealed that the creature within the cage was almost an exact duplicate to that of the statue creature they destroyed down in the courtyard below.

Riyan exited the narrow passage and entered the room. “We’ve come for the girl,” he said.

“I know,” the man replied. Turning around, the man looked to where Riyan stood with sword drawn. “But she’s mine.” He then glanced towards Chadric as he emerged from the narrow passage behind Riyan. Grinning he said “And now so are you.”

“I think we’ll be a bit more difficult to deal with than a girl,” countered Riyan.

The man scooted his chair back and stood up. Turning to face the pair, they saw that he was dressed in a robe of some sort. Could possibly be a magic user of some kind.

Moving his hands in arcane gestures, the man began speaking words neither of them could understand.

Realizing he was casting a spell, Chadric threw his mace in an attempt to disrupt the magic user’s concentration. Unfortunately the man finished his spell in time and bolts of reddish energy lanced from

his fingertips, striking both Riyan and Chadric. The man then easily dodged aside to avoid the mace.

When the bolts struck them, it felt like fire. Indeed, where one bolt had struck Riyan's ring mail armor, the rings in that area were slightly melted. Giving out with a cry, Riyan charged the man as another round of fiery bolts left his fingers. This time, the bolts were directed solely at Riyan. His shield bore the brunt of the attack though two made it through and knocked him back a step.

Then the magic user began chanting another series of magical words and a shadow formed before him. Roughly man-shaped, it began moving towards them.

"Get the magic user!" yelled Riyan as his sword lashed out at the oncoming shadow. His sword seemed to have minimal effect as it passed right through.

As the magic user began another chant, Chadric drew his knife and rushed him. He made it to within a couple feet before the man finished his spell and a green glob formed before him. Unable to stop, Chadric ran right into the acidic green glob. Pain flared as the green substance began eating his flesh away. "Riyan!" he cried out as his momentum carried him forward into the magic user.

Then the magic user began crying out in pain too as Chadric gripped him in a death grip. The green substance that covered Chadric was now beginning to eat away at the magic user.

With his concentration now broken from the pain of the green goo, the shadow that was moving on Riyan disappeared. Riyan ran forward to where Chadric gripped the magic user only to find both men were beyond his help.

Most of the exposed skin of Chadric's body had melted away to expose the bones underneath. The screams of the magic user continued to ring out as the green goo ate his flesh away.

Riyan knelt down by the side of his lifelong friend. He could see that his friend was still alive and in great pain. Chadric's eyes looked up at him beseechingly and he knew what he was asking.

With tears in his eyes, he took his sword and plunged it into the chest of his best friend to end his suffering. The magic user's suffering, he allowed to continue until the end came.

When he pulled his sword free from Chadric's body, he found the blade pitted by its brief contact with the goo covering Chadric. No

longer serviceable, he cast it aside. He collapsed on the floor for some time, grief over his friend's death heavy upon him. But then he remembered why they had come. The woman.

"Bye Chad," he said then moved to the stairs and hurried up to the top. The stairs ended at a locked door with a small window set into it. Going to the window, he put his mouth near it and said, "Hello?"

"Go away!" a woman's voice yelled at him from the other side.

"Lady," replied Riyan, "I've come to rescue you. Your father sent me."

Then he saw the face of a most beautiful woman appear in the window. "My father?" she asked.

"That's right," he said. He tried to open the door only to find it to be locked. Remembering the key he had found in the chest on the ground floor, he took it out of his pouch and placed it in the keyhole. Turning it, he nodded satisfactorily when the lock turned. Then he opened the door wide and stepped within the room.

Barely dressed in anything, and looking all the more sexy because of it, the woman rushed forward and clasped her arms around him. "Thank you gallant knight," she said. Then reaching her lips up to his, she gave him a most passionate kiss. Her breasts were rubbing into his chest and...

"Wait a second right now!"

"What?" asked Riyan.

"Here you have me dead on the floor below," Chad stated with dissatisfaction, "my skin eaten away by acid, and you're about to get it on with the woman?"

"So?" his friend said with a grin. "It's just a story."

"I know it's just a story," Chad remarked. "But I always seem to be the one to die."

The two friends were sitting upon a hillock under a bright sunny summer day. Down the hill a ways grazed the flock of sheep that Riyan was supposed to be keeping an eye on.

"You're one to talk," replied Riyan. "Don't you remember the time before last when you were telling the tale?" When he saw his friend get a grin on his face, he knew that he did. "You had me lying on a torture rack with an arm and a leg missing, hot lead being poured into my eye

socket and where were you? Off having a little fling with the daughter of the man who was torturing me!”

“Okay, okay,” he said. Then they both broke into laughter.

This was one of their favorite pastimes. On the days Chad could get away from his father’s mill, he was usually to be found out here with Riyan as he minded the flock. They would spend hours telling each other stories of adventures they wished they could have. Being stuck in a small town such as Quillim all their lives has allowed them little chance for such experiences.

For Riyan whose family was poor shepherds that barely made a living from their sheep, and Chad who detested being a miller’s son, life in this border town was dull and uneventful. The only time adventure came their way was when one of Riyan’s sheep managed to wander away and they had to go track it down, which was more often than not.

Baaaaaaa!

“Not again,” Chad moaned as Riyan got up and began scanning the area.

“Looks like Black Face got stuck in the thicket again,” Riyan told his friend.

“Isn’t that the third time this week?” asked Chad.

Nodding, Riyan began making his way down the hill as he replied, “Something like that. Give me a hand.”

Shaking his head, Chad pushed himself off the ground and went to help his friend. “Can’t wait until shearing time,” he said.

“You got that right,” agreed Riyan. “It’s his wool, it keeps getting snared by the thorns.” Sure enough, they found Black Face trapped within the thicket. Sometimes he wished that he could just leave him there for a day or two to teach him a lesson, but his mother would skin him alive if he did. So working very carefully, he and Chad spent the next half hour working the thorns from out of Black Face’s coat.

Chapter Two

Later that day when the sun began its trek to the horizon, Riyan and Chad gathered the flock and started the return journey to Riyan's home. It wasn't safe for the herd to be left out in the hills at night. Aside from wild animals, there's always the chance that the goblins might be in the area and would help themselves.

The village of Quillim, which both lads called home, sits on the border where the lands of Duke Yoric abuts that of the mountains whose other side marks the beginning of the goblin territories. Peace between the two races had lasted for over a century, ever since the goblins were pushed to the other side of the mountains during the War of the Three Clans. Now, it's only the occasional raid here and there by goblins that has the people in Quillim worried. Those living in the area have found that if you keep your flock in close to your home at night, there's less of a chance one would turn up missing in the morning.

"My father has me helping at the mill tomorrow," Chad informed his friend. "My brother is down in Wardean on business."

"Oh?" asked Riyan. "What takes him down there?"

"A friend of father has a mill there and may be interested in apprenticing Tye," he explained. "He wants Tye to stay a week so he may see what kind of person he is."

"If he gets apprenticed, won't that mean you'll have to help your father more?" Riyan asked.

Chad sighed. "Unfortunately, yes. As long as Tye was helping at the mill, he didn't need me. My whole family knows of my dissatisfaction with the life of a miller, and they are okay with me pursuing another trade. But if Tye gets apprenticed, there'll be no one to help out. At least not for a few years until Eryl gets a little older."

"Tough break," said Riyan with a pat on his friend's back.

“If I had settled on a trade by now,” Chad told his friend, “I wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Just then from up ahead, four young men who were a little bit older than Riyan and Chad appeared over the crest of the hill. “Great,” complained Riyan.

When Chad spied who was coming towards them, he too gave out with a groan.

“Well, well, well,” one of the approaching young men began to say as the two groups came together. “I thought I smelled the foul odor of sheep dung.”

Only two years older than Riyan and Chad, the one who spoke has been a thorn in their sides all their lives. Being the son of Quillim’s magistrate, not to mention the fact that his family holds title to most of the lands the local shepherds use to graze their flock, has given him the idea he’s better than everyone else. His father was a nice enough person, but the son is a right nasty piece of work.

“Good evening Rupert,” Riyan said.

“Didn’t I tell you not to use this area for your stinking sheep?” Rupert asked.

“We pay your father for the use of this land,” argued Riyan. “He’s the only one who can tell us not to use it.”

“Sounds pretty uppity for a sheep dung boy,” one of Rupert’s cronies said.

“I don’t care what you think you can and can’t do, sheep dung boy,” Rupert asserted with a scowl. “You aren’t to use this area.” He moved to stand in front of Riyan and poked him hard in the chest with his finger. “Do you understand me?”

When Riyan failed to respond quickly, Rupert slaps him across the face. “I asked you a question!”

“I understand you all too well,” replied Riyan. Face beginning to turn red, he stared at Rupert with undisguised hatred.

“Scatter ‘em boys,” he said to his cronies. As the three young men with him began scaring off the sheep, he added, “Maybe this will help you to remember.” Then he too started yelling and waving his arms to scatter Riyan’s flock.

Riyan and Chad stood there in the road and did nothing. They had long ago learned that if they tried to stop Rupert and his friends, that things would only get worse. So they stood there and waited for them

to stop. When at last Rupert and his cronies ceased chasing Riyan's sheep, they laughed and continued along their way.

"I hate him," Riyan said with great feeling.

"I know," replied Chad. "Everyone does. I don't know how a nice man such as his father, could spawn such a person."

From the surrounding area, the sound of bleating sheep rang out. "We better go find them before the sun goes down," Riyan said.

So while the sun sank further to the horizon, Riyan and Chad combed the neighboring hills until all the sheep were accounted for. Then they resumed their way to Riyan's home.

It was a small house with only three rooms; one for his mother, one for himself, and the outer living area. His father had died several years ago while out watching the flock. One of the mountain spiders had attacked and bit him. The venom quickly worked through his system and before he could return, had passed into unconsciousness. He was dead when they found him the next day.

Riyan still blamed himself for his father's death. Had he been with his father that day, he could have gone to Old Glia for one of her potions which would have cured the poison coursing through his father's veins. Instead, he and Chad had gone fishing.

Mountain spiders such as what attacked his father were rare in these parts. At most they were sighted once or twice a year. In the last five years, his father had been the only one to have encountered one.

"We better hurry, or my mother will be getting worried," said Riyan. Then with Chad's help, they herded the flock along the trail leading to Riyan's house. By the time Riyan's home came into view, the stars were already beginning to appear.

Chad helped him get the flock into the fenced area where they spend the night. Then he said, "I better hurry along too, or my father will get on me again about not being home on time."

Riyan patted him on the back and said, "Thanks for the help."

"You're welcome," he replied. "Don't know when I'll be able to join you in the hills again. With Tye gone for a week, I'll be stuck at the mill."

Riyan shrugged. "What is, must be," he waxed poetically. "Next time it'll be your turn to tell the tale."

"Already figured out how I'm going to kill you off," he replied with a grin.

Laughing, Riyan gave him another good natured slap on the back. "Can't wait." Then Chad hurried home.

Riyan turned toward the door just as it opened to reveal his mother. "Everything okay?" she asked, worried.

"Rupert again," he explained.

"I'm going to talk to his father in the morning," she said as she stepped aside to let him enter. "He has no right to do such things. We pay them good money to graze our flock on their land. We should not be treated in such a manner."

Riyan went to the table and sat down. "It'll do no good," he said. "The last time you went to his father after something like this, all that happened was that I got a beating the next day." He reached out for the ladle in the stew pot and began filling his bowl.

His mother sat across the table from him and looked at her son with sad eyes. She wanted something better for him than a life as a shepherd, especially one around here. It wasn't so bad before Rupert grew to adulthood, but now things for her son were not so good. But there was little hope of improving their lot in life.

"He can't do anything serious," he said to his mother between bites. "If he does, then his father would be forced to intervene. He'll not risk that."

Throughout the rest of the meal, they talked about more inconsequential things in an attempt to put Rupert out of their minds. Afterwards, Riyan headed off to bed as he must be up with the dawn to once again shepherd the flock.

The following morning he was up well before the sun crested the eastern horizon. The place where he planned to take the flock to graze was a bit further into the hills than where he took them yesterday. But as his father taught him, if the sheep were allowed to graze too long in one place, it would eventually ruin the area for grazing. His father once related an experience he had while a young man. He was just learning the art of shepherding and had allowed his flock to graze one area for several weeks in succession. Such constant grazing had left the area unusable for many weeks. So now Riyan always made sure that he rotated the flock between the various pastures among the hills.

It took him well over an hour to bring the flock to the desired pasture. Nestled in among the hills such as it was, it had always been

one of Riyan's favorite places to take them. The quiet and tranquility of this area of the hills was accentuated by a stream that worked its way from one end to the other.

Once the flock was situated where he wanted them, he made himself comfortable under a tree while he kept an eye on them. Off to the west rose the mountains that separate these lands from that of the goblins. He often wondered what they looked like. Oh sure, he heard tales of them all his life. Supposedly they were about half to two-thirds the size of the average human with a slight greenish hue to their skin. But he's never seen one and always wanted to. Though from a distance, as they're reputed to be rather antisocial creatures and prone to attacking anything that came near.

The day went by as every other day of his life has, boring and dull. Most of his time was spent simply doing nothing but sitting and watching his flock. Other times he took out his sling and pretended that he was a fighter in one of the stories he and Chad tell one another. He would run around the hill and 'kill' enemies with stones slung from his sling. Of course the plethora of enemies he killed was in actuality small plants, trees and the occasional rock. His aim has improved greatly over the years. Even at a run he could hit his target more often than not.

He always carried a staff with him as well as his sling while out watching his flock. There had been times over the years when between his staff and sling, he was able to fight off predators that tried to make off with one of his sheep. When not spending time 'killing monsters' with his sling, he worked on his staff. He's become pretty decent at twirling it, but not so good that it hummed when he spun it. In the stories the bards always tell, the great staffers could cause their staves to hum. There were times when he believed some of the tales the bards told were a bit overexaggerated.

Baaaaaaa!

"Now what?" he asked himself. He had been dozing under the tree, basking in the warmth of the morning sun. Looking over the flock, he tried to ascertain which one of them was bleating. Black Face, the trouble maker, was nowhere to be seen. "Of course." Leaving his staff leaning against the tree, he got to his feet and followed the sound of the bleating.

The sound was coming from over the far side of a nearby hill. He walked quickly towards it, dreaming of the time when they would sell

off some of the flock. He's going to make sure Black Face is one of the ones to go.

He hurried up the side of the hill and when he crested it, looked down the other side. "Black Face!" he cried out as he took his sling from his belt.

Baaaaaaa!

Black Face again cried out in fear as one of the predators of the mountains circled it. A small animal barely half Black Face's size, yet with a strong jaw and sharp teeth they were a constant threat in these parts.

Riyan placed a stone within the cup of the sling and quickly got it up to speed. Then he launched it at the animal just as it readied to attack. The stone flew straight and true towards the small dog like creature and struck it in the side of the head. The blow sent it reeling to the side before collapsing to the ground.

He raced down the hill and when he reached Black Face, shooed the sheep back up the hill towards the rest of the flock. Then he turned his attention back to the predator and saw that it was still breathing. Riyan stepped closer and pulled out his knife. With a quick strike, he killed it.

Quillim's city council has posted a two silver piece bounty on the animal due to the menace it posed to the community. Many sheep have been lost to them over the years. Riyan picked the animal up by the scruff of the neck and carried it back to where he's been keeping watch over the flock.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully and when he returned home with the flock later that night, showed the dead animal to his mother. "I'm going to go in early tomorrow and collect the bounty," he said. "Then I'll take the flock out in the afternoon."

His mother took the carcass and cut the animal's head off. That's all that was required by the Council in order to receive the bounty. The rest of it she dressed and began to prepare it for the next evening's dinner.

The following morning an hour or so after they finished their morning meal, Riyan walked into town with the sack containing the animal's head. Quillim's not much of a town. It has the essentials required of every town; a Chandler's shop, baker, butcher, etc. All the places the neighboring townsfolk needed in order to survive.

The building housing the Magistrate's Office and the Council's meeting hall sat prominently in the center of town. It was to this building that Riyan took the animal's head. He slowed down when he saw the three young men who were Rupert's cronies talking with one another near the town hall's front entrance. When they noticed Riyan approaching, they grew quiet and turned toward him. Just then, Freya and her father exited the building through the front door.

"Freya!" he exclaimed quite happily. He and Freya have been friends for as long as either one could remember. In his heart he has always cared deeply for her and even had thoughts that they may one day be married.

His mood quickly sobered when she failed to meet his eyes. Her father nodded his head in greeting and gave him a curt, "Riyan." Then they brushed past him without speaking. He turned to look at them as they left and Freya glanced over her shoulder back to him. Their eyes locked for a brief second before she broke the contact and turned her head forward once more.

He came to a stop as he watched her leave, puzzled by her reaction. Usually she was quite excited to see him. After all, with him out in the fields with the sheep most of the time, there was little opportunity for them to spend any time together.

"What's the matter?" one of Rupert's friends asked as the three of them came and surrounded him.

"Maybe she doesn't like him anymore?" another one quipped.

"Could be she found a better man, one that doesn't smell like sheep dung," the third one said. At that he and the others started laughing derisively.

Riyan ignored their taunts as he knew that to respond in any way would only egg them on. He tried to continue on to the town hall's entrance but was blocked when the first one stepped in front of him and put his hand on Riyan's chest.

His eyes went down to look at the sack Riyan held in his hand. "What do you have there?" he asked.

"Nothing you'd be interested in," replied Riyan.

"Oh yeah?" asked another of them. Then he snatched it out of his hand.

"Give it back!" demanded Riyan.

Holding the sack before him, the young man asked, "Or what?"

Before Riyan had the chance to reply, Rupert and his father the Magistrate exited the building. The Magistrate quickly grasped what was going on by the way the three young men had Riyan surrounded and how the one young man was holding the sack out before him.

“What’s going on here?” he asked.

The three young men turned toward him quickly, startled by his sudden appearance. “Uh, nothing.”

Riyan turned to face the Magistrate and said, “I killed a kidog. I was bringing it to collect the bounty when they took the sack containing its head from me.”

The Magistrate’s face darkened as he turned to face the one holding the sack.

“Was nothing like that your honor,” the young man explained. “Just having a little fun is all.”

“Give it back Girg,” the Magistrate ordered.

“Sure thing,” Girg replied. Then he handed the sack back to Riyan. “Here you go.”

Riyan snatched the sack out of his hand and then said to the Magistrate, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcomed my boy,” he replied to Riyan. “Go inside and Ceci will take care of it for you.”

Riyan nodded and as the young man stepped out of his way, he walked towards the door. Behind him he heard the Magistrate begin to berate his son about the conduct of his friends. Riyan doubted it would do any good, more than likely would cause him to get a beating the next time he and Rupert met.

He walked through the entrance and then entered the first door on his right. Within he found Ceci, the lady who looked after the town hall as well as paid for the bounties and various other duties. She looked up from her desk and saw him standing there just within her doorway. From the blood stains on the sack, she knew what he was here for.

He held up the sack and said, “Bagged a kidog yesterday.”

She motioned for him to come forward and then took the sack from him when he offered it to her. Opening it up, she saw the severed kidog head and then nodded. She set the sack on the floor behind her and then opened a strong box that was resting on the floor next to her desk. After removing two silver pieces, she handed them over to him. “Good work Riyan,” she praised.

“Thank you,” he replied as he took the coins.

“Did you hear?” she asked with a smile.

“I haven’t been in town lately,” he explained. “Something going on?”

“Oh yes,” she replied. “Rupert and Freya are to be married.”

“What?” he exclaimed loudly.

“Sometime last night Rupert asked her father for her hand and he said yes,” she explained. Then she saw the look in his eyes and realized something was amiss. “Are you okay?”

Dazed, his mind numb and heart breaking, Riyan paid her question no heed. Instead, he turned around and rushed from the building. Once outside, he searched for Freya and her father but they were no longer in sight. He then began running towards their home that set on the edge of town.

How could she be marrying Rupert? All his life he had thought that one day they would get together and be married. He just hadn’t worked up the courage to ask her father as yet. Now there was no longer any time, he had to state his intentions and get him to change his mind.

Several people hailed him as he ran through town, but so intent on his own inner turmoil was he, that he didn’t even know they were there. Finally, their house appeared down the street before him. He could see the front door was just closing. Running up to the door, he gave it three firm knocks.

When it opened, Freya’s father stood there before him. “I thought you might show up,” he said.

“You can’t let Freya marry Rupert,” he said. “He’s a terrible person.”

“I know you care for her,” her father replied. “But I have to think of what’s best for Freya. This marriage will assure her of never having to worry about what tomorrow will bring. His family is wealthy and well connected.”

“But...” Riyan stammered. When Freya’s father looked questioningly at him, he blurted out, “But I love her and want to marry her!”

Her father’s eyes turned sad at that. “I know son,” he said. “I’ve known for awhile now that you’ve felt this way.”

Then behind her father Riyan saw Freya appear from the back room. “Freya!” he hollered to her. “You can’t marry Rupert!”

Her father turned around and said, "Get back in your room Freya. Riyan and I need to have a little talk."

She looked with deep sadness to Riyan and then replied, "Yes father." Then turning around, she went back into her room.

Freya's father stepped outside and joined Riyan before shutting the door. "I like you boy," he said. "I always have. But I can't let that get in the way of making the best match I can for my daughter."

When Riyan tried to break in, he held up his hand and stopped him. "You are a poor shepherd," he continued. "You don't even own the land on which your sheep graze. What life could you give her?"

"But I love her," he asserted.

"Son, in life, love simply isn't enough." He laid his hand on Riyan's shoulder. "My daughter cares for you, I would hate for her to lose your friendship because of this."

Riyan snapped his eyes to his and replied, "She'll never lose it. I just..."

"Go home Riyan," her father said. "Go home and work to get over it." He then turned and opened the door. He paused there a moment before saying, "It might be best for all concerned if you don't have any contact with my daughter until after the marriage." Without waiting for Riyan's response, he went back into the house and shut the door.

In the instant it took for her father to enter the house and shut the door, Riyan saw Freya there in the hallway. Their eyes locked for a moment before the door shut.

With the shutting of the door, his heart fell. Sadness overtook him and it was all he could do to simply keep his emotions under control. Then as he turned, he saw Rupert standing there across the street. Anger and hate burned in his heart when he saw the smug smile of satisfaction appear on Rupert's face.

Riyan almost crossed the street to wipe it off with a well placed blow, but then he realized that would solve nothing. So he turned his back on him and walked home.

Chapter Three

Once back home he told his mom what had happened. “How could her father agree to this union?” he asked with great emotion. Then he flopped down in a chair.

“I’m sure he’s doing what he thinks is best for her,” his mother replied.

He looked at his mother with hurt filled eyes. “Don’t tell me that you agree with this?”

She shook her head negatively then walked over to him. “Sometimes parents do the wrong thing for the right reason,” she explained as she wrapped her arms about him to offer comfort.

“Rupert is a swine,” he said. “Someone needs to do something about him.”

“But not you,” she insisted. “Respect her father’s wishes and do nothing.”

Riyan abruptly came to his feet and started pacing. “I can’t stay here,” he said as he came to a stop. “I need to get away for awhile.”

“That’s a good idea,” agreed his mother.

“I’ll take the flock out for a few days to the edge of the mountains,” he told her. “Chad will be working at the mill for the next week so this would be a good time for me to be alone.”

“Are you sure you want to go that far?” she asked. “There have been rumors of goblins.”

He turned his face towards hers and smiled. “There are always rumors of goblins,” he replied. “So far I have yet to come across one and we live as close as anyone.”

“Still, be careful,” she cautioned.

“I will,” he promised.

She insisted on cooking him a good lunch before he started off. Outside, the sheep have already begun their bleating. According to their schedule, they should have been heading out to greener pastures long before now.

They shared a meal of cooked mutton, potatoes, and bread. Then she packed enough food for him to last several days, even though he planned on using his sling to hunt for food while he was gone.

As he slung his pack over his shoulder and prepared to head out, she placed her arm on his. "Just think on this while you're out there," she began. "Freya has no choice in this, such is the fate of all girls. She'll need friends like you to lean on." When he turned his head to look at her, she added, "Lord knows being married to Rupert will not be an easy life."

He nodded and hung his head. "I will mother," he replied. "Why can't her father see that?" He then gave her a peck on the cheek.

His mother handed him his staff before he stepped out the door. She went with him to the sheep pen and gave a hand with removing the flock. As he herded the sheep away from the house, she waved goodbye to her son.

"See you in a few days," he hollered to her as he left.

"Be careful," she cautioned with another wave.

He then continued herding the flock away from the pen and towards the distant mountains. This wasn't the first time he had taken the flock towards the mountains on an overnight excursion, usually he would return a day or two later. But this time he planned to go further than he ever had before and didn't plan on being back for at least four days, maybe longer. He needed time to get over the hurt in his heart.

For the rest of the afternoon, he continued pushing deeper into the hills. When nightfall came, he stopped the flock near a small stream and settled in for the night. He made sure the flock was accounted for before darkness came. Then he spread out his bedroll and fixed himself a quick bite to eat.

Later that night as he laid there under the stars, he sobbed.

"Riyan!"

Early the following morning, Chad came running down the lane towards the home where Riyan and his mother lived. "Riyan!" he hollered again and then saw that the sheep were not in the pen.

The front door opened before he reached the house and Riyan's mother stepped out. "Good morning Chad," she said.

"Have you heard?" he asked as he came closer.

"About Freya and Rupert?" she asked in reply. When he nodded his head, she said, "Yes. Riyan told me about it yesterday."

"Was he upset?" he asked.

"You could say that," she replied sadly. "He's taken the flock up near the mountains for a few days. Said you were working at your father's mill."

"I am," he said. "When I heard about Freya getting married to that piece of trash, I got angry. So my father gave me an hour to come here and talk to him about it."

"Sorry you missed him," she said.

"So am I." He turned his gaze towards the mountains. "Tell him to come see me as soon as he gets back will you please?"

"The minute he gets back," she assured him.

"Thank you," he said then turned and headed back to the mill. Worry for his friend weighed heavily on his mind. So heavy in fact, that once he was back in town and moving down the main street, he failed to notice the individual coming towards him. He almost walked into him.

He looked up at the last minute and saw his and Riyan's friend Bart a scant foot in front of him. Bart was a recent arrival to their little town of Quillim. He showed up about a year and a half ago and has worked odd jobs at various farms in the area since. Currently he's out at old Rebecca's place helping with tilling her fields. Ever since her sons married and moved away, she's had a hard time making it.

At first when Bart had tried using that horse drawn plow of hers, it was a disaster. He couldn't get the horses to go in a straight line to save his life. But now that he's been doing it for about a week, he's started to gain a modicum of proficiency. From what he's told them, he could do a little bit of everything, the result of having no trade and forced to live on what work he could get here and there.

The one thing Bart could do that really impressed Chad was how well he threw darts. Now we're not talking about the darts people used for sport, no. These were the deadly darts that could do some serious damage if they hit you. A few inches longer than the regular darts, these had barbs at the end that became embedded in whatever they hit.

If you were to pull it out of your flesh, it would take a chunk of it with it.

Once when the three of them were out on an overnight camping excursion earlier this summer, he took down a rabbit with one. From that point on Chad's been calling him Bart the Dart off and on which has annoyed him to no end. Recently though, Rupert and his friends have begun to use the term and not in a friendly manner. Ever since they took to calling him 'Bart the Dart', it lost the friendly nuance it once held so he stopped using it.

Coming to an abrupt halt, he noticed the smile playing across Bart's face.

"Was wondering if you were going to see me," Bart said.

"Sorry," he apologized. "Just thinking about Riyan."

"You heard?" Bart asked.

Nodding, Chad said, "Yeah. His mother said he took it rather rough."

"I can imagine," replied Bart.

"He's taking the flock up into the hills at the base of the mountains for a few days," he told him. "I think he needed time to come to grips with it."

"Will do him good," stated Bart.

Chad looked up the street and groaned, "Oh no."

"What?" Bart asked as he turned to look. Coming toward them down the street was Rupert, alone this time. Dressed in his fine clothes, he appeared to be strutting down the street as if he owned it. Which, truth be told, isn't too far from the truth as his family owned quite a bit of the town.

He came directly to them and stopped a few feet away. "Either of you seen Riyan this morning?" he asked.

They both shook their heads and Chad said, "No."

"Well if you do, tell him I'm looking for him," he said.

"We'll do that," Bart assured him.

"Did you hear I'm getting married?" he asked. When he saw their faces turn into scowls, he grinned. "Guess so. Lovely girl Freya."

"You've never been interested in her before," said Chad. "This seems rather sudden."

He shrugged. "My father pestered me to pick a bride," he explained. "So I chose her. One's as good as another if you know what I mean." Then he laughed and moved past them as he continued on his way.

"He doesn't even care for her," Bart said with barely controlled anger.

"Six will get you ten that he's doing it more to anger Riyan than anything else," Chad said.

Bart turned and gave him a mischievous grin. "What say we do Riyan a favor then?" he suggested.

"What do you have in mind?" Chad asked hesitantly. He saw the twinkle in Bart's eye that always foretold that what he had on his mind would usually land them in trouble. Once when just such a twinkle came to him, the three of them had wound up spending a whole week working in Bocker's shop. The details leading up to it were far too embarrassing for him to dwell on.

Bart simply turned and gazed at Rupert's departing back and smiled. "Can you meet me back here after sundown?" he asked.

"I think so," Chad replied. "Need to finish my chores, but I shouldn't be too long after sundown."

"Good," he nodded. "Riyan's going to be gone the better part of a week." Turning back to Chad he continued. "That should give us plenty of time."

"Plenty of time for what?" Chad asked.

"To make life for Rupert a merry hell," he replied with finality.

That night after the mill closed, Chad had raced home and flew through his chores. Then after a quick meal with his family, he was out the door on his way into town. He found Bart already at the town square waiting for him. "Sorry I'm late," he said as he approached his friend.

"You're not that late," he replied. "Didn't really expect you for another half hour."

Chad noticed the bag Bart had slung over his shoulder and asked, "So what are we going to do?"

Bart directed his gaze to the Sterling Sheep, the only inn and eatery Quillim has. "Rupert and his father are in there having dinner with Freya and her father," he explained. "They just sat down, so with any

luck will remain in there for some time.” Patting the bag slung over his shoulder he added, “Now let’s get to it.”

“What’s in there?” asked Chad.

“Just some things I borrowed from a friend of mine,” he replied.

Chad had thought they were going to the Sterling Sheep, but instead Bart headed off in another direction. It didn’t take him long to realize where he was headed when the estate Rupert called home came into view. “Are you crazy?” he asked.

“Don’t worry,” Bart assured him. “This will only take a minute or two.”

The estate was one the largest in the area, three stories tall and the envy of the entire community. It had been in Rupert’s family for years, each generation adding their own touch. The grounds that surrounded it were meticulously kept by a score of servants whose combined wage was more than some families earn in a year or more.

Upon reaching the lane leading up to the manor house, Bart stopped for a brief moment while he made sure there was no one about. When he saw the coast was clear, he gestured for Chad to follow.

They ran across the lawn as two shadows in the moonlight. Bart angled towards a vine covered lattice that extended from the ground all the way to the roof’s edge on one end of the house. Once they reached the base he paused and scanned the area one more time. Not seeing anyone, he whispered to Chad as he pointed to the window near the top of the lattice. “That’s Rupert’s room,” he explained.

Chad nodded and then Bart stepped to the lattice and began to climb. “Be careful,” he warned, “this isn’t very strong.” After he had climbed up several feet, Chad followed.

He worked his way up to the window and when he came abreast of it, pulled out his knife. Then while gripping the lattice with his left hand, he leaned over and slid the knife blade between the two halves of the window before gently sliding it up. The blade moved up along the crack between the two sections until it met resistance. Pushing harder, he felt the latch that was locking the window from the inside come free.

He then used his knife to pry the window open. When it swung open, he replaced his knife in its sheath and used his hand to swing the two sections of the window wide. “Come on,” he said as he climbed in through the window. Once inside, he turned and helped Chad through.

Just as Bart had said, Chad found himself in Rupert's bedroom. "Now what?" he asked.

Bart set his bag down on a chair and opened it. "Now we make it look like he's got a girlfriend," he replied. From within the bag, he pulled out two pieces of clothing no betrothed man should have in his possession. Rather intimate articles that women wear beneath their clothes.

"Rumple the bed a little," he told Chad. "Make it look like he and a girl had a tumble before he left for dinner."

Chad grinned and nodded. While he was doing that, Bart laid one of the pieces of clothing on the floor just under the bed. He situated it in such a place that a casual look wouldn't immediately reveal it. But when the servants came in to clean the room, they would most assuredly discover it. The other he put at the very foot of his bed under the sheets.

"Toss me his pillow," he said to Chad.

Chad took it off the bed and tossed it over to him. "What do you want that for?" he asked.

Bart grinned and went back over to his bag. He pulled out a small vial with a stopper. Setting the pillow on the table, he opened the vial and rubbed the stopper across the pillowcase.

From where Chad was standing, he could smell the unmistakable odor of perfume. "That smells like what Mirriam wears," he observed. Mirriam of course was a very beautiful girl here in Quillim who's had her sights on Rupert for some time. It's well known that she's been after him for years.

"I know," he replied with a chuckle. "Let him explain this." After putting the vial of perfume back in the bag, he pulled out a small jar of rouge, the type girls put on their lips to make them look rosy. Unscrewing the top, he set it on the table next to the pillow.

Chad came to stand next to him as Bart flipped the pillow over and ever so carefully dipped his finger into the rouge. He watched as Bart used great care in drawing what looks like two lips on Rupert's pillowcase with the rouge. Once he was done, it looked just like a woman with rouge on her lips had made the mark.

"What do you think?" Bart asked as he wiped his finger off on a cloth that he had in his bag.

“He could find all this and get rid of it before someone else discovered it,” Chad said.

“We’re not done yet,” he replied. After replacing the pillow back on Rupert’s bed with the imprinted lips’ side down, he walked over to a chest of drawers sitting against the wall. There he pulled open the top drawer and began rummaging through it.

Chad came over with him and saw him take something out of the drawer and place it in the bag. “We’re not thieves!” he insisted quietly.

“Relax,” Bart replied as he put another item in his bag. “I’m not taking anything of any great value, and I’m sure not going to keep it.”

“What do you plan to do then?” Chad asked.

He took one more item then closed the drawer. “Mirriam is going to receive a present from a secret admirer,” he explained with a grin.

Suddenly, footsteps from the hall beyond the bedroom door came to them. They both froze as they listened to the footsteps draw closer. Only after the footsteps passed by the door and continued down the hallway did they relax.

“Let’s get out of here,” urged Chad.

“Alright,” agreed Bart. He took but a moment to make sure everything inside the drawer was exactly like he found it before pushing it closed. When he turned for the window he found Chad already climbing out to the lattice. Moving to join him, Bart swung the bag across his back and reached within his tunic. He pulled forth a thick piece of rolled leather and untied the leather thong that bound it closed.

He unrolled the piece of leather and then removed one of the small tools secured within the leather. The tool in question was three inches long with a curved hook at the end. Placing the tool between his teeth, he rolled the leather back up and tied it closed once more with the leather thong. He then replaced the rolled leather within his tunic and began making his way through the window.

Once out on the lattice, he looked down and found that Chad had already made it to the bottom and was standing there waiting for him. Turning his attention back to the window, he closed it almost all the way. But before it completely shut, he took the tool he held in his mouth and hooked the end around the arm of the latch used in locking the window.

He moved the latch upward until it was above the eye ring it latched into. Then he carefully closed the window the rest of the way. Once closed, he lowered the arm of the latch until he felt the end touch the eye ring. With just a quick yank, he sank the latch into the eye ring, thus securing the window from the inside.

Placing the tool once more between his teeth, he started climbing down the lattice. At the bottom he removed the tool from between his teeth and set it once more within the rolled piece of leather.

“What’s that?” Chad asked when he saw the tool as Bart was putting it back with the others.

“Just something my father gave me some time ago,” he replied. “I’ve found they come in useful every now and then.”

“I’ve never seen anything like them before,” he said.

Bart nodded at that. “Not too surprising. Now, let’s head back to the Sterling Sheep.”

“You mean we’re not through yet?” asked Chad.

“Good heavens no,” replied Bart with a grin.

Chad followed Bart as he again ran across the lawn to the lane leading back to town. He wondered about his friend. Bart had never gone into very much detail about his life before coming to Quillim, though of course he and Riyan hadn’t been all that curious in the first place. But now he wondered who this Bart could be and what had driven him to choose this area to live in. He was pretty sure he knew what those tools in the piece of leather meant. Though he had never seen their like before, he would bet anything that they were lockpicks.

Back at the lane leading into town, Bart picked up speed. “Have to get there before they leave,” he said.

Not understanding the hurry, Chad didn’t really care. This was the most adventure he had ever been a part of. They made their way through the darkened streets until the inn appeared ahead of them.

When they drew close, Bart had Chad stay back as he went to the window and looked in to the dining area of the Sterling Sheep. He stood there a moment peering inside before turning around and rejoining Chad. “They’re still in there,” he said. “Wait here.” Then without an explanation, Bart returned to the window. While he stood there, Chad saw him remove the jar of rouge and do something with it. In the dark he couldn’t see just what he did. After a few minutes Bart closed the jar and replaced it within the bag.

Another five minutes passed as he stood there looking in through the window. Then he abruptly turned towards the back of the inn and signaled for Chad to join him. "Whatever you do, don't make a sound," he said in a hushed whisper when Chad joined him. "Understand?"

Chad nodded and then followed him to the rear of the inn. They reached the rear courtyard just as a figure exited from the back door. Even in the shadows of the courtyard, Chad recognized Rupert's silhouette. He was walking across the courtyard to the jakes along the rear wall.

Bart motioned for Chad to stop while he continued toward Rupert. Chad was amazed at how silently Bart was able to move. Other than Rupert's footsteps and the music coming from the inn, no other sound disturbed the quiet of the courtyard. Then just as Rupert opened the door to the jakes, Bart grabbed him. Putting one hand alongside his throat and the other on his back, Bart pushed him into the jakes and shut the door.

Chad saw Bart motioning for him to hurry and join him. He hurried over and Bart indicated for him to keep the door closed.

Bang!

Rupert struck the door from the inside and Chad almost failed to keep it closed. "Let me out!" he hollered.

Chad looked to Bart who was now on his knees before the door and looked to be sliding something between the door jamb and the door about a third of the way up from the ground.

Bang!

Again Rupert hit the door and the force of the blow knocked out whatever Bart had been sliding into place. Picking it up off the ground, he again worked to get it into place.

"Help!" yelled Rupert. "I'm being attacked!"

Then all of a sudden, Bart stood up. In the moonlight Chad could see he was holding a string that was attached to whatever it was he placed within the crack between the door and the door jamb.

"Come on," Bart whispered as he began moving away from the jakes.

Bang!

As they hurried to the side of the courtyard that was deep in shadows, Rupert again hit the door in an attempt to get out. And to Chad's amazement, the door held.

Bart brought them to a stop as soon as the string he held had reached its end. They stood there in the darkness as Rupert continued hollering for help and trying to break his way out. Fortunately the music within the dining area of the inn was loud enough to drown out his cries.

They waited for at least five minutes before another person left the inn on their way to the jakes. When Bart saw the man leaving the inn, he pulled the string. The wedge he had keeping the door to the jakes' closed came free and the door swung open.

Chad about laughed when Rupert came stumbling out and crashed down into the dirt before the jakes. The man who was leaving the inn rushed over to help him but Rupert knocked away his hand and got to his feet. What he said to the man couldn't be heard, but they saw the way he stalked back to the inn.

The following morning when Chad was at the mill working the giant grinding stones that turned grain into flour, his younger brother Eryl came running in all excited. "Did you hear?" he asked his brother.

"Hear what?" replied Chad.

"Last night at the Sterling Sheep..." his brother began but was forced to stop and catch his breath. Obviously he felt that what he had to say was so good that he ran the whole way to tell him. By this time their father had moved closer to hear.

"The magistrate and his son Rupert were dining with Freya and her father," he continued. "Apparently Rupert had gone out back and dallied with some girl." He turned to his father. "And with his betrothed there waiting for his return." His eyes gleamed, every kid in Quillim hated Rupert and any story that showed him in a bad light was like gold.

"He claimed someone locked him in the jakes," Eryl said in a tone that said he didn't believe it. "But when he returned to the inn, there was rouge on his neck that people say looked just like a woman kissed him." He laughed. "As it turned out, Freya wasn't wearing any that night."

Their father smiled as he too didn't care much for Rupert. He did feel sorry for Freya though, it must have been a humiliation.

"Rupert is still saying he didn't do anything and is sticking to his story," Eryl explained. "But really papa, who is going to believe such a story?"

Chad grinned to himself as the grinding wheel continued to turn grain into flour. *Who indeed?* Bart had explained to him last night after they left the vicinity of the Sterling Sheep how he had put rouge on his hand in the shape of a girl's lips. So that when he grabbed Rupert by the neck and threw him in the jakes, it would come off and leave the tell-tale mark.

"Are they still betrothed?" asked Chad.

"I hadn't heard," his brother replied. "But her father took it hard."

"I can imagine," their father said. Then to Eryl he added, "Don't you have chores at home you should be doing?"

"Yes papa," he replied and turned to head out the door.

"Another hour or two and the flour will be ready," Chad's father said before he too left.

Chad nodded in reply. The rest of the afternoon was spent in grinding flour. How he hated doing this. Last night when he and Bart were, as Bart said 'making Rupert's life a merry hell', he had felt more alive than ever before. But all in all, he'd rather be doing this than be in Rupert's shoes right about now.