

The Mastig

Chapter One

Despite the lateness of the afternoon, the sun's rays remained intense, burning into Amron's back. Distant objects danced and flickered in the haze. The hot air sapped his energy and dried his throat. Throughout the day, the breeze had been absent. For a moment, he stopped work. He leaned on his pitchfork. In contrast to the glorious weather, his sour expression was an ideal match for the darkness of his mood.

After another day's hard toil in his father's fields, the young man's resentment at the unfairness of his life was close to breaking point. While he laboured, others prepared to celebrate the end of harvest. That night, his friends would be having a riotous time in the tavern. He swore as he kicked the ground in frustration. For Amron, there would be many more days of labour before his harvesting was at an end — much longer if the period of settled weather ended.

Awareness of why Tamin, his father, refused to take on extra help, intensified Amron's temper. Tamin's interference in Amron's life was deliberate. Although unable to put a complete stop to Amron's association with his drinking companions, his father put as many difficulties in the boy's way as he could.

Had Tamin been capable of easing Amron's workload, the boy's grievance about the lack of seasonal help might have been less. Sometime before his son's birth, Tamin had suffered a serious injury. With age, his body had weakened. This affliction compelled him to leave most of the heavier work to Amron. His mother was little better. Her body, twisted by arthritis, meant she struggled now to move around the house.

An only child, Amron looked forward to his evenings away from the farm, drinking and womanising. He had no wish to spend his whole life tilling the soil, as had his parents, or so he believed them to have done. They had never mentioned any other former lifestyle. On an evening, his parents retired early to their bed, leaving him to sit alone. With only the fumes and dull light of a tallow lamp for company, such time alone afforded him little pleasure.

Amron yearned for companionship and excitement. He wanted a life, yet his parents insisted on putting obstacles in his way, the most recent of which was to ban his friends from visiting the farm. 'Idle troublemakers' was one of his father's more

repeatable descriptions of the gang of youths and young men, who, most evenings, used to ride to the door. It was Tamin's belief, several of these 'friends' were behind a spate of petty thefts in the area. Two, who were newcomers to the district and somewhat older than the others, always had a regular supply of gold and silver coins with which to impress his son. It was strange that, since the pair's arrival, neither of them had done a day's work.

Amron's father had great sympathy with his son's aspirations. The old man had come late to farming, only after an eventful earlier life. Trapped in the hills, working the land alone, while looking after infirm parents, was no life for a nineteen-year-old. Although it was doubtful Amron ever noticed, Tamin did what he could to help. He was aware his son needed the company of people his own age — apart from the group of wastrels who frequented the tavern.

Tamin was no fool. He knew why they sought-out his son. Over the years, rumours had spread that the family had hidden wealth. Stories persisted that, somewhere on their land, treasure lay buried. Denials did nothing to stop the gossip. Instead, to many, they served as confirmation. If he and his family maintained their simple life, Tamin hoped the tales would die. This was not because they were lies, rather because they had some foundation.

Despite his hoard, Tamin was no miser. Neither did the treasure consist, in its entirety, of the precious goods that others so desired. The reality was much more dangerous than most people could have imagined. This was not knowledge he was ready to entrust to his son. If there was one thing Tamin had in common with his son's friends, it was his belief that Amron, when drunk, was incapable of keeping a secret.

Amron stabbed a bale of hay with his pitchfork. He tossed it high onto the back of the wagon. This time, he misjudged the angle. The bale bounced off, to hit him full in the face. He went sprawling to the ground. In fury, he threw off the bundle. As he sat up, he spat out a mouthful of dried grass. His pride hurt more than his body. He stood, spluttering and coughing, the slight taste of blood salty on his tongue. Angered, he lashed out with his boot at the bale. He abandoned his task for the day, swearing and cursing; although few bales remained to stack on the wagon.

Many of the village girls considered Amron handsome. Six feet in height, his tanned, muscular body carried no excess fat. His long flaxen hair, bleached paler by the summer's sun, had a covering of hay from the bale. He shook his head, then brushed away the debris. As usual, his face, flushed with anger, carried a petulant expression. Dust from the bale stung his blue eyes, making them water. He rubbed them, only to wince as he caught the bridge of his long nose, made tender by the blow.

Still swearing, Amron pulled on his tunic. The rough material chaffed against his broad back. The tavern beckoned him, as did the folk within. Amron blushed as a feeling of guilt came over him. Back at the farmhouse, his mother would be warming a meal over the coals. Tamin would be standing in the doorway, waiting for the first sight of his wayward son. Amron could picture the disappointment in his father's expression as, once more, he realised he was waiting in vain. His body would slump and his head appear to sink lower into his shoulders. Tamin needed no telling where his offspring might be.

The village glowed in the warm, reddish light, which emanated from the setting sun. Amron approached along the winding dirt track towards the tavern. He pushed hard against its weathered door. Leather hinges creaked. He ducked his head as he stepped through the low entrance, onto a straw-covered, stone-slabbed floor. Acrid smoke, rising from the many lamps placed at random round the room, filled the air. The fumes stung his eyes. The tavern was full. Inebriated, villagers and local farmers jostled, laughed and shouted over the clamour as they celebrated the bringing-in of the harvest.

Amron wove his way through the crowd, tables and packed benches. The floor was awash with beer and mead, spilt from a large array of overflowing drinking horns and glass vessels. Loud cheers erupted from his friends when they spotted him. Within minutes, he was quaffing from a horn filled to the brim with ale. He had let down his father again; the knowledge filled him with shame. This spurred on his drinking until, for the moment, he cared no longer. He became drunk, much drunker than anyone could remember. Urged on by his companions, he sang and drank away the evening. His tankard never seemed to be empty.

Much later, as the party became more raucous, Amron became unwell. He collapsed onto the end of a nearby bench. As he tried to steady himself, his free hand grabbed for the nearest tabletop. He missed. His balance gone, he crashed to the floor where he retched, much to the amusement of his friends. Their mocking laughter attracted the tavern-keeper's attention. His attempts to throw out Amron met with determined opposition from the boisterous group. Tonight, they wanted him near them.

Such intervention was unusual. Most nights, they would have relished his humiliation. They would embellish details of such an incident, then use them to embarrass him at every opportunity. Amron was too drunk to care. He passed out. The tavern-keeper shrugged his shoulders. His friends were spending good money, ordering flagons of beer by the dozen. To upset the group might have an adverse affect on his takings? Let the lad sleep it off under the table. The tavern-keeper sent a serving maid, with a bucket of water and another of sawdust, to clean up the mess.

After she forced her way back through the crowd, towards the bar, Amron regained consciousness. He was lying on the floor, his head beside a pool of foul smelling slime created by the mop. Now he did feel ill. He struggled to focus. The room revolved, ever faster. Underneath tables, benches and between people's legs, he crawled towards the edge of the room. Nearby, a stick propped open a small side-door.

Unnoticed, Amron crept along the wall-side towards the gap. Once outside, as the cool night air hit him, he vomited again and again as his body rejected the drink. This was worse than anything he had experienced. With the aid of a wall, Amron pulled himself to his feet. He staggered along the road, away from the tavern and its commotion. For the moment, nobody realised he had gone. A thin layer of cloud filled the sky. Without the stars to guide him, and his senses befuddled by drink, Amron lost all sense of direction. Confused, he took the wrong road.

Outside the village, Amron fell over a low hedge into a hayfield. He clutched his stomach. A spasm caused him to double-up in agony. The pain eased. He stood. With eyes half-closed, he wandered across the open ground. A dip in the land caused him to lose his balance. Head first, he stumbled into a hayrick. On hands and knees, he crawled round it. He made contact with a ladder that rested against its side. Somehow, without toppling, he clambered up the rungs.

He climbed above the height of the stack. The balance of the ladder shifted. Its base slid away. Amron fell. As he landed on the mound, his legs knocked the ladder sideways. With a thud, it hit the ground. His body sank into the hay. He stretched-out. Within seconds, he was unconscious.

Sometime afterwards, a large party of horsemen rode by, on the road into the village. In the early hours of the morning, from the direction of the settlement, came sounds of a violent struggle. Frightful screams floated across the night air. Amron stirred but didn't waken. He slept, too, as the smell of burning drifted across the land.

Dawn broke. Still he slumbered. Mid-morning and the sound of horses, moving towards him, brought him to semi-consciousness. Amron tried to move. His head pounded as his hangover took hold. He sank back into his bed of hay. His stumbling gait of the night before was over sun-baked ground and stubble. He had left no tracks for anyone to find.

Bridles jingled as the noise of the hooves grew louder. The sound of voices reached Amron. He was too ill to pay attention. He wanted to be alone, allowed to die in peace. Nearby, the horses halted. A man spoke, his voice sharp and loud. The speaker was someone Amron knew, his friend Talon, the elder of the newcomers against whom Tamin had warned.

Before Amron could call out, something in the tone of the rider's voice cautioned him to stay silent. There was a chilling edge to the man's words. He spoke with an air of authority and command. Such traits, Amron had never associated with Talon. The man had worked hard to give everyone the impression he was a happy-go-lucky wastrel. An instinct for self-preservation caused Amron to bury himself deeper into the hay.

"Where the hell's that pathetic, drunken idiot gone?" Talon said in frustration.

"I don't know, Captain." The new speaker was on the defensive.

Since when had anyone addressed Talon as captain?

"We've accounted for everyone else," the speaker continued. "There's no-one left alive in the village, nor in the surrounding area. We've scoured the land around the village. In the state he was in when he disappeared, he can't have wandered far."

It was a moment before Amron realised the second speaker was Egesa, Talon's friend and fellow newcomer. He too had thrown off his casual persona.

"He's a loose end." Talon sounded angry. "I hate those. We've no idea how much he knows. I would prefer to be certain of the boy's death. The amount of poison I slipped into his last drink would have killed a horse, but he threw up most of it inside the tavern. Now we have what we came for, we can't stay here much longer. If the stupid oaf's father had told us where the object we sought was, he might have saved himself a few hours of grief.

"I still can't believe how big a fool the boy was. So eager to please and fit in, like a child, he fell for everything we said. He told us all we needed to know about his parents and their routines. His father! He showed true courage. His wife threw him a sword and, despite his lameness, he held three of our men at bay with it. He killed two of them, and would have done the same to the third if the rest of us had not arrived to overwhelm him. We questioned him for half the night, without learning anything useful. It's a pity the men killed his wife when she attacked them. We might have been able to use her to persuade him."

"Is he dead?" Egesa asked.

"He should be by now," Talon said. "Nobody could survive what we did to him. Once we found the casket, we left. I suppose, I should have killed him outright. With the courage he displayed, he'd earned a quick death, but, in the excitement, I forgot he was there."

"Where did you find the casket?" Egesa sounded excited. "I was elsewhere. By the time I arrived you were already leaving."

"We tore apart the house and outbuildings but found nothing. Then I remembered, years ago, soon after he'd taken flight, we traced the old man to

Sumrania. He'd lived there for a while, before he disappeared after a fight with our men. It's taken Betlic all these years to find him. There is a Sumranian trick, where they set loose stones into the linings of their wells, with a cut-out behind to store their treasures. We lowered Slean into the old man's well, where he found such a place, a few bricks above water level. The casket was inside the opening."

"Did you open it? Was the object there?" Egesa said, his voice rising with excitement.

"Yes, it was in the box. We can go home at last. Our master will reward us well for these past few months' work."

"Soon, Betlic will rule the world. He'll reward us well for our part. Everyone will acclaim us as the men who brought him the final piece. Because of our efforts, he will become Master of the Talisman of Grebarta."

"You fool, never mention that name again," Talon snapped, "not until the casket's back safe with Betlic. No-one must know what it contains. The men believe we've been seeking a trinket that Betlic covets. If they find out its true worth, they'd slit our throats and try to ransom it."

"Forgive me," Egesa said, chastened. "I won't mention it again."

"If you do, believe me, I'll be the one who slits your throat."

"Is it possible the boy tried to cross the river by the stepping-stones?" Egesa was quick to change the subject. "He's fallen in before, several times. He uses them most nights as a shortcut home from the tavern. The bridge is out of his way, it adds too much distance to his journey. Unlike here, the mountains have seen plenty of rain this past week. The water's running deep and the current's treacherous. There might have been too little poison left inside his body to kill, but, combined with the drink, it must have left him confused and unsteady. If he slipped, there's every chance the current swept him away. He has to have drowned."

"It might explain why we can't find him," Talon said. "Although I would have preferred to see a body, we don't have time to search downstream, it could take days before the remains come to the surface. We have to move out. Round up the men, we leave as soon as possible."

There was a moment's silence. Amron sank deeper into the hay. He struggled to comprehend everything he had heard. His stomach knotted in agony, the after effects of the night before combined with a deep sense of fear. He must have misheard them. The village, and everyone in it, could not have gone. The tavern had been full last night, filled with dozens of happy villagers as they celebrated another fine harvest.

This idiot boy they were talking about, who was he? From out of his addled senses, his random thoughts came together. A chill ran through Amron. It was he.

He was the target of their search. It was he they had tried to poison and now wanted to find and kill.

Everything became clear to Amron. The old man and woman Talon and Egesa had discussed were his parents. If Talon had spoken the truth, then his men had killed them both. His father tortured. For what? A casket, what casket? Amron had no memory of his father mentioning such an item. A hiding place in the lining of the well was news to Amron, too.

Guilt overtook him again. If only he had taken the time to listen to his father. In recent years, whenever Tamin tried to talk, Amron ignored him. Because he expected to receive another lecture on his lifestyle, he would turn away. It was sad, but Amron knew little about his father's past. He was a simple farmer. Yet, Talon had said, with a sword passed to him by his wife, Tamin killed two of his attackers. What sword? Amron had never seen one at his home. When did it come into his mother's possession and, of greater importance, when had his father learned to use it?

Amron felt a violent urge to leap from the hayrick and kill his murderous 'friends'. Self-preservation dictated he refrained from such action. He was no match for the pair. They talked in the manner of seasoned warriors, skilled fighting men. Amron had no experience of war and, apart from a small knife, neither did he carry a weapon.

The sound of horses, moving away, was a relief. He remained where he was, frightened and forlorn. Many times he was ill, until he could retch no more. This was much more than a hangover. The small amount of poison he had absorbed was still enough to affect Amron. It was fortunate for him that its symptoms were short-lived. Tears rolled down his face. Tormented by his thoughts and fears, he dared not make a move until nightfall.

The clouds cleared and, after a final flare of brilliance, the sun faded. Darkness spread over the land. It was time for Amron to leave his hiding place. Several hours earlier, a large party of horsemen had ridden along the roadway at the edge of the field. Since that event, apart from the overwhelming sound of carrion crows as they descended on the village, and the wind blowing through the hay, there had been little noise.

Amron clawed away the layer of stalks that concealed him. Moments later he slid down the side the hayrick, to land with some force on the warm earth. He stank of stale ale and vomit. Pain pounded behind his eyes, he felt dizzy and his mouth was dry. By the light of the three-quarter moon, he worked out his position. He headed towards a nearby spring. With cupped hands, he scooped the cold water. He splashed it over his face, then drank a capacious amount. After he had slaked his thirst, he stripped and washed before soaking his soiled garments. The wet clothes

were icy cold when he pulled them on again. He shivered. Hesitant and fearful at what he might find, he turned towards the road that led back to the village.