

Fantastica

The Complete Four Book Collection

M. R. Mathias

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Jack Hoyle of T-Rex Studios

Interior Artwork by:

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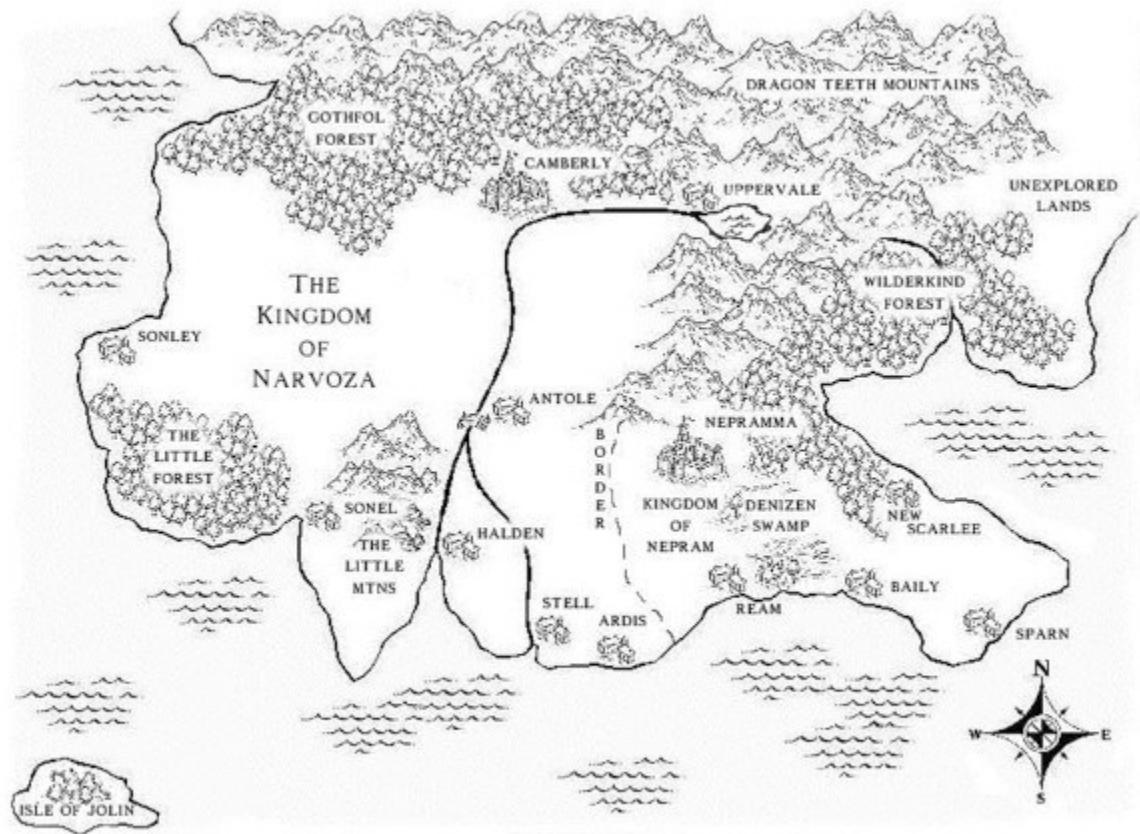
A very special thank you to Brooke Severson for typing the majority of the Fantastica series into word while I deciphered my own longhand chicken scrawl, and read it aloud. You did a wonderful job on the series, and I appreciate it. – MR

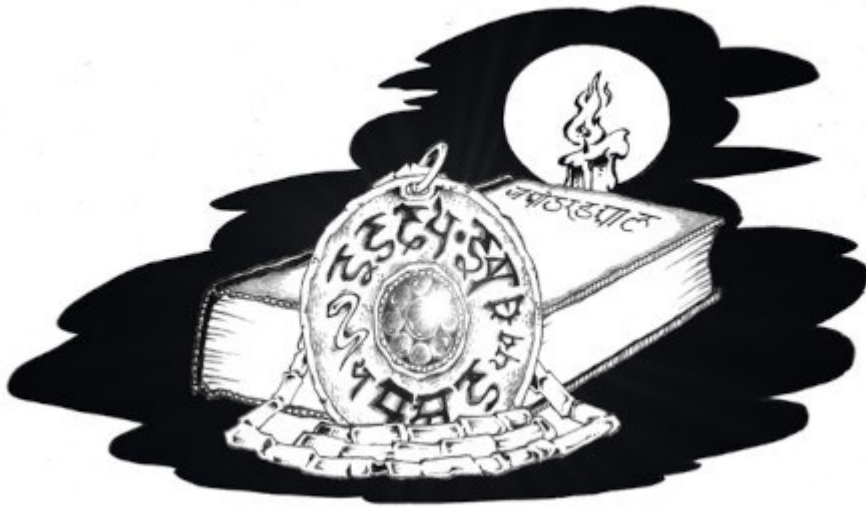
Taerak's Void

Fantastica, Book One

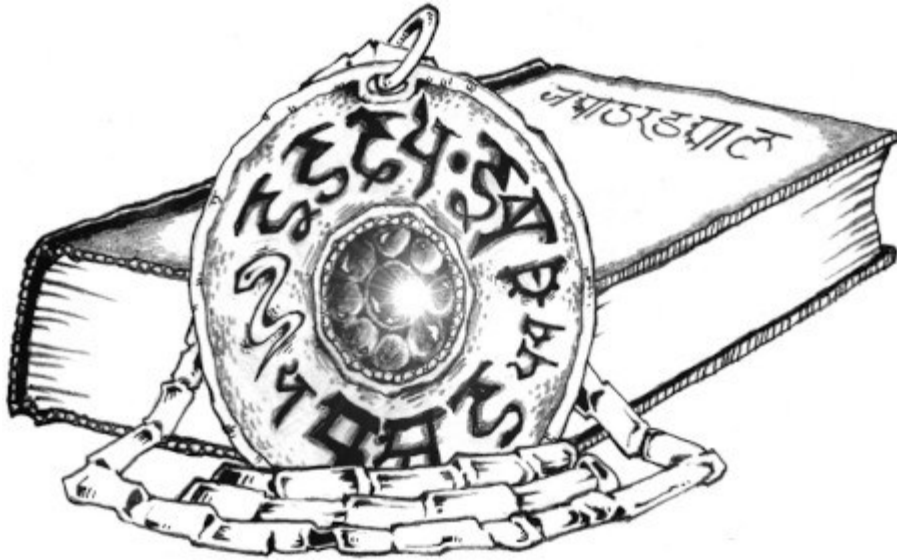
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MAP OF NARVOZA





Part I: Goodbye



Chapter One

Braxton Bray and his best friend, Davvy Flamus were fishing. They'd been at it all day but hadn't had so much as a single bite. The lake was big, and though they could have easily changed locations, they weren't really there to catch fish. They were there to spend a little time together before they had to say goodbye. Braxton was about to leave Uppervale for good, and as much as Davvy wanted to go with him, he had no choice but to stay behind.

Braxton was the third son of a farming father and, as such, he was in a position few in the valley ever had. Not needed to help with the work of the family farm, as his two older brothers were, he had the chance to seek out a future of his own. He was more than willing to go, too, for he had no desire to raise cattle and grow grain. His eldest brother, Parl, would take over the farm when their father retired, and his middle brother, Savit, would be there to help him. Their one sister, Kareen, was hoping to marry the son of a wealthy ship owner, and that left nothing for Braxton; nothing but opportunity.

Braxton wasn't sure what he was going to do. Camberly was the seat of the kingdom of Narvoza, and just a few days ride away, so he figured he would start his journey there, but he wasn't sure how long he would stay or if—

“Look, Brax.” Davvy stole his thoughts from him. He was pointing at something not so far across the water, and now Braxton stood to get a better vantage of what Davvy was trying to point out.

Braxton saw it, too, a small rowing boat with two men in it. They looked to be fishing near a rocky prominence. Braxton started to sit back down, and just as he did, the bobber on his line finally went under, indicating he had a fish taking his bait.

He expected to feel the line pull when a turtlefish or maybe even a musker tightened the line, but instead, it kept pulling away from him to the point he had to dig his heels into the pebbly shore and let the string between his reeler and the hook stretch. Of course, the line snapped before he was dragged into the water, but what could have pulled that hard?

“It was huge,” Braxton said shaking his pole at whatever it was.

“Had to be to do that,” Davvy agreed as he tried to toss his line right where Braxton’s had gotten bit.

The men in the boat yelled, and then the water boiled under them.

“Your fish is about to get them,” Davvy half-joked.

“Maybe so,” Braxton couldn’t believe he was agreeing with such a notion, but he was. “What could have— What is happen—”

“Help!” one of the men yelled. “Help us!”

“What do they want us to do?” Davvy asked, his tone showing he sensed the same sort of fear Braxton was.

Oddly, the boat lurched a few yards closer to them. It happened all at once, and was more movement than the wind or a pull of the oars could have ever created. Beneath the craft, a knee-high wave rippled away.

Braxton saw something else then. It looked like a shiny green arm, reaching out of the lake. The boat flipped over and a roar resounded. A roar that shook Braxton to the

core and left him shivering. He couldn't see what made the sound, for the thing was on the other side of the men and their little rower.

He turned to see if Davvy was similarly terrified and saw his friend jump up, dancing in place as if he were trying to avoid a snake. Then Braxton saw why, and had to run backwards three steps to avoid the same fate as his friend.

Braxton grabbed the fish cleaning knife at his hip and made to stab the tentacle that had grasped his friend's leg. Davvy screamed and tried to avoid being pulled into the water. Braxton's blade dug into the thick, slimy skin of the thing, and he realized he could no longer hear the others.

A bubbling sound came then. It was followed by the gurgling scream of one of the men. Then Davvy was yanked off his feet and into the water.

Braxton didn't know what to do, and he found himself staring at his now bloody hands.

"It bleeds," he heard himself say, and then he dove after his friend.

This end of the lake was deep, and the water as clear as could be. The sun was bright and high in the sky, so he had no trouble making out the shapes of his friend and the multi-limbed creature that was thrice Davvy's size and pulling him away.

Braxton watched the direction the creature went but had to surface to get another breath. He dove again and swam down with all the strength he could muster. At the edge of his vision, he saw that one of the men thrashed on the surface. His blood looked like an inky cloud around him. The other man was in a predicament similar to Davvy's, but unlike Davvy who was wide-eyed and struggling to get his leg free, the other man was wrapped around the middle and had gone limp.

Braxton followed the creature out of the sunlight and into the deep. Soon, he found they'd gone under the edge of the rocky shore. He saw what he thought was the surface, and knew that it wasn't in the sunlight, but he needed a breath and went for it.

Gasping as soon as his head came out of the water, he sucked in stale, but welcome air, and then hit his crown so hard that it nearly brained him. There wasn't any light, but after a second of feeling with his hands, he found he was in a rocky underwater opening. He heard Davvy yell, and knew that his friend was above the surface, too.

Ducking back under, Braxton swam toward the sound. There was no pocket of air over him for a few dozen yards, but then he saw the dimly lit sheen of the surface again. He came up slow this time, trying his best not to make gasping noises or any splashes, and was rewarded by hearing Davvy grunting and coughing from not so far away.

There was a single streak of light slanting down from a crack in the caverns top, and it was enough for Braxton to see his friend struggling to get untangled from the creature's tentacle.

Braxton was terrified and, moving by instinct alone, he sloshed across the rocky cavern bottom. He saw the creature then. It had a toothy beak of all things, and the limp fisherman was hanging half out of it as the lake creature used two of its many appendages to continue eating its meal. Davvy was bleeding, and the snaking limb was no longer around his ankle. It was wrapped around Davvy's waist now.

"Help," he managed to say.

Braxton was there in three strides, and he began cutting the tentacle with his cleaning knife. It was slick and soft, but had strange circular growths on one side, and these adhered it to Davvy's skin. Swiftly, with a sawing motion, he cut the wrist thick appendage completely in two. He heard the creature gurgle out a scream of what had to be pain, then he was batted against the rocks hard enough to make his head spin.

He went stumbling, through a darkness full of white splotches for a moment, but ended up tripping over not one, but several sets of skeletal remains.

There was a loud splash, and then silence.

"Brax?" Davvy's voice trembled. "Braxy, answer me."

"I'm here," Braxton managed. "Are you alright?"

"I don't think so," his friend said. "It got me pretty good."

"Can you walk? Can you swim?"

"I don't know." Davvy's voice broke into frightful sobbing. "My chest feels crushed. I want to get out of here."

"I'm coming, Dav."

Braxton saw an old sword on a belt that was wrapped around one of the skeletons. As he grabbed it and buckled it around his own waist, he saw a shiny ring off to the side, and then a fancy shoulder pack on another human skeleton. There was more stuff there, but he didn't care about any of it. Besides, he didn't have time to grab anything. He only wanted to get he and Davvy out of there. The only reason he even took the sword was to use if the thing returned for them.

He started to get Davvy, but something pulled at his mind. It wasn't greed or even want, that made him go back. Something compelled him to take the pack, and even now in the midst of all the fear and confusion, its contents called to his curiosity.

"Come on, Davvy," he said as he gained his friend's side. He saw open wounds and exposed, meaty flesh around Davvy's lower back and buttocks, but didn't say anything because he didn't want to send him into a panic.

"It is a long swim out of here, so take some deep breaths and just hold onto this belt." Braxton led them out into black water that was thigh deep.

"I'm ready, Brax." Davvy sniffled and took three deep breaths of air, one right after the other.

"Here we go." Braxton drew in as deeply as he could, and then pushed off the bottom, letting momentum carry them as far as it would.

The part of the lake that was open to the sunlit sky was easy to make out, and Braxton had little trouble swimming the both of them there. When they surfaced, gasping and shaking with fright, Davvy saw just how much blood he was losing, and his eyes rolled back into his head.

It was harder getting to shore than it had been getting out of the cavern because now his friend was unconscious, and he had to keep Davvy's head above water. When he finally had Davvy dragged onto the rocks, he saw that the leg-long length of the creature he had severed was still attached to his friend.

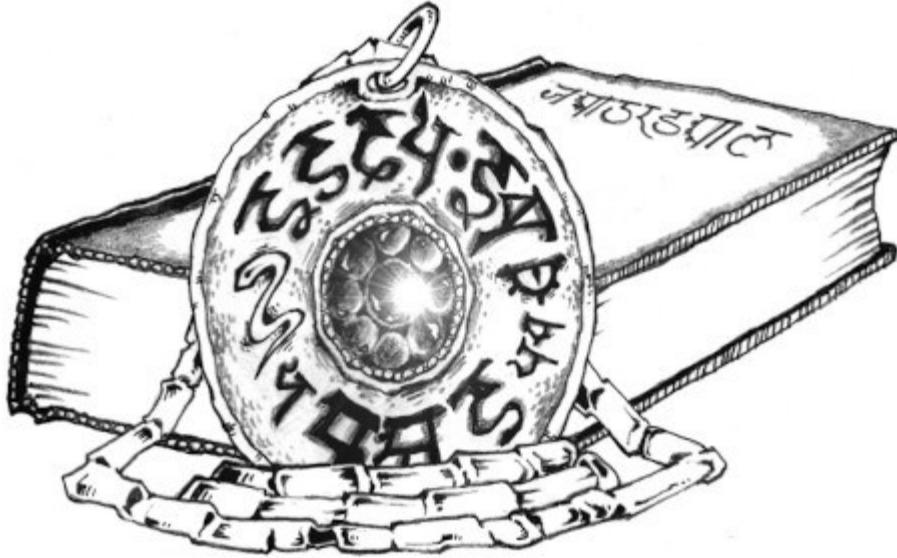
He saw the boat bobbing a few strides out and down the lake's edge, so he waded out and got ahold of its bow rope. The man who hadn't been eaten by the monster was in it and whimpering and bleeding as bad as Davvy was. Braxton knew neither of them could walk so he drug the small wooden craft ashore, heaved his friend, tentacle and all, in with the other man. Then, like a mule pulling a plow, he dragged the boat along the trail.

He pulled until he was overtaken by exhaustion, and then he pulled some more. He didn't remember collapsing, but he must have, for he opened his eyes to a night sky and several worried faces. One of them was Master Finn, and since he was Uppervale's Herb Master, as well as the area's Lesson and Lore Master, the feeling of relief that washed over Braxton was palpable.

It wasn't until the next morning, after he was sure Davvy and the other man wouldn't die, that he snuck away and chanced a look in the pack he'd taken.

In it there was a medallion on a chain, an oilcloth wrapped tightly around a book and a bunch of maps and a sizable pouch full of coins. The medallion had a thumb-sized clear gem in its center and had to be as valuable as it was strange. All the items, save for the sword, were marked with unfamiliar runes. That made sense because the sword had come from a different skeleton than the pack.

Braxton decided he would split the coins with Davvy, but not tell his friend about the rest. It was just maps and a book he couldn't even read. The medallion, he decided, was his reward for saving the others, and he didn't think he would tell anyone about it, at least not anyone in Uppervale.



Chapter Two

Davy was taking Braxton's impending departure better than Braxton thought he would. It had been a few weeks since their encounter at the lake, and though his friend limped, his terrible wounds had healed far better than Braxton figured they ever would. Davvy insisted on accompanying him on his search for a horse and all the aspects of his other preparations. As an excuse, he said he had to strengthen his wounded body for harvest so that his father wouldn't have to hire help. Braxton reminded him he could afford to pay two seasons worth of help with what was stashed in the pouch he'd given him. Davvy ignored this with a purpose and set to finding Braxton the best horse in town.

Stable after stable they searched. Braxton had seen half a dozen horses he would have loved to own, but Davvy hadn't been satisfied with any of them. Finally, on the evening of the second full day of farm hopping, they met a young lady who had a beautiful black stallion, boasting a white, almost perfect triangle on its forehead. The steed was young and proud and very moody, but perfectly built, with muscles that rippled streaks of glare across its shiny coat. Braxton took an immediate liking to him, and Davvy approved. The girl fetched her father after telling them the horse's name was Prism. Davvy negotiated for the beautiful creature, and had the man down to two gold

and eight silver, but Braxton stepped in and told him they'd give three gold if he would throw in the saddle the girl had been using earlier.

The man, clearly realizing he would be getting five times the saddle's worth, agreed quickly. After a few sad moments shared between the girl and the horse, Braxton and Davvy led Prism back the Flamus family's barn where Davvy insisted he remain until time for Braxton to leave.

The coins they'd paid with, and several more that they had taken from the stash to use for equipping Braxton, had been hammered into oblivion. They'd placed them on a flat rock and hit them with another stone until any trace of the ancient runes on their faces were gone. Now they looked like long mistreated kingdom coins. They were slightly heavier and therefore worth a little more, but no one seemed to notice, and neither of the boys really cared if they had. They were more concerned with passing them off as kingdom currency than their actual value.

They spent the whole afternoon buying other supplies such as a large oil cloth, a bedroll, rope, several water skins, and flasks. They got new blankets, both for Braxton, and for padding Prism's back to protect him from the saddle. Braxton bought a new skinning knife that looked more like a caravaneer's dagger, and some leather britches, two heavy woolen shirts, and also two lighter, softer shirts for the hotter days. Davvy insisted on a fancy forest green hooded cloak just in case Braxton was caught in the rain or had to hide in the forest. They bought so much stuff that Braxton was sure he would need an extra horse or a cart to carry it all with him.

It struck him that only a few days remained until he would set out alone on the road toward a city that he'd never seen. Camberly, the capital city of the kingdom, was the home of King Barden and his new palace. The old palace was south in Antole, the previous capital city.

The Ancestor's Dream was also in Camberly. It was supposedly a wondrous monument to those who settled here so long ago. A testament to the men and women who fought and explored and somewhat tamed these lands.

Braxton was torn with emotion. So many places that he'd only heard of, or read about, awaited him. He was anxious to be gone, to see them all, or as many as he could, anyway. The anticipation of leaving grew inside him and he wished that he could just get the goodbyes over with and be gone.

Davvy's kindness and excitement while helping Braxton prepare for his departure were genuine and welcome, but Davvy's envious longing to come along was tangible. Underneath his helpful cheer was a sorrow that couldn't be hidden, no matter how hard he tried. Braxton had similar feelings, but he knew he wouldn't be gone forever. He was sure he would come back in a year or two, even if only to visit.

Davvy acted like it was goodbye forever.

Braxton suddenly realized it *was* goodbye forever. Not so much to each other, but to the joy and freedom of youth. It was goodbye to an age, part of their lives that, no matter how close or far away they were, they would never be able to return to. No more raft fishing up in the lake. No more floating down the river, hoping to catch a froggle or turtle-fish, no more taunting and tormenting brothers and sisters. No more sneaking out behind the barn with a willing lass. Well, there will probably be more of that, but it wouldn't hold the same fascination or thrill of being bad in that natural and good sort of way. These were some of the reasons he had felt so different, a bigger reason than he had been prepared to realize.

Braxton found himself trying to wipe the wetness from beneath his eyes before anyone, especially Davvy, noticed. After a few moments, he mastered his emotions and spoke.

"After we get all this stuff to the barn, I've got to go spend some time at home."

“Yes,” Davvy said, struggling to get his arms around the tied bunch of stuff he was going to carry. It was the smaller of the two bundles. He took a moment of great concentration, got a good grip, and caught up with Braxton, who waited with the door open.

Braxton noticed that Davvy wasn’t limping anymore, and outside of the ugly scars he carried, it wouldn’t be long until he was completely recovered. Braxton was greatly relieved by his friend’s improvement. For the first several days after the return from their adventure, Braxton had been weighed down with worry that Davvy was maimed for good.

“How is your mom taking it?” Davvy asked as they struggled down the road to the Flamus family’s barn.

“She says that she is sad to see me go, but happy I am going,” Braxton answered.

“What does that mean?”

“I think it means that she wants me to be more than just a farmer like my father and brothers. She said I should learn a craft or study to become a scholar. I think it is part of that stuff Master Finn used to teach about spreading our roots as a people or something.”

“Oh.” Davvy clearly didn’t understand but Braxton was sure he remembered that particular lesson because Davvy’s uncle lived in Antole and was a metalsmith. “After you leave, Brax, the world will never be the same.” He shrugged. “But I suppose you should spend tomorrow with your ma.”

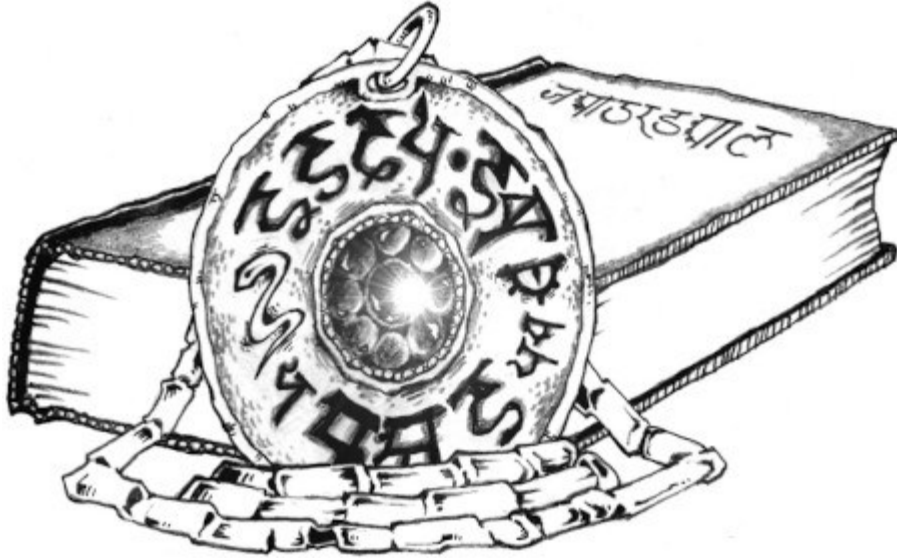
“She has a big family dinner planned, and I need to spend some time with Parl and Savit, and I would like to see my father and Kareen for a little while, too.”

Braxton could feel the moment of departure looming over him like a bucket of icy water on a hot summer day. He knew the feeling of it washing over him would be refreshing if the shock of it didn’t kill him. “Did you ask your father if you could ride to the outskirts with me?”

Davvy's mood brightened a little bit. "He said I could take his horse and ride with you until dark. One last camp, but in the morning, I have to ride back."

"Well, that's good." Braxton smiled, trying to keep his friend's spirit up.

They dropped their bundles inside the barn, and after a quick goodbye, Braxton started home. He was glad to be free of Davvy's sadness, but he felt guilty for having such feelings about a friend as true and loyal as Davvy had always been. Braxton wasn't looking forward to saying goodbye to his family either, but it had to be done. The sooner it was behind him, the sooner he could be on his way. The urge to get going pulled at him like one of Master Finn's magnets, and he had no desire to resist, even if it meant leaving the comfortable world he'd always known behind him.



Chapter Three

It was just getting dark outside when Braxton's family farm house came into view. The breeze was slight but carried in its caress an uplifting sense of hope and comfort. A few stars twinkled between the sparse puffs of cottony clouds that could still be seen in the night sky. The distant sound of a barking dog and a closer conversation could be made out until the unmistakable sound of his eldest brother Parl's laughter came bursting out the front door of the house. As always, Parl was followed by Savit, who seemed to Braxton to be not much more than Parl's shadow. He couldn't remember Savit ever having an opinion of his own or an original thought.

Savit dutifully carried out Parl's creative torture schemes. Braxton usually had the misfortune of being the recipient of them. But Braxton remembered Savit huddling in terrified tears behind the pickle barrel with him one day when Parl and his friends had decided to torture them both. That brought on another memory of Parl getting strapped across the yard by their father for something he had done, and he couldn't help but laugh out loud, alerting them to his presence.

"There he is," Parl bellowed loudly. "Mighty Braxton Bray, killer of lake beasts and adventurer extraordinaire, coming home to humbly visit his worried mom before he runs off."

It was hard to tell if Parl was proud or jealous Braxton was getting to go on an adventure. What was clear was that he was angry that Braxton hadn't spent more time with their mother, and maybe even that he hadn't spent more time with Parl and Savit. Braxton felt it in Parl's words, the sarcastic undertone of them. It gave him an idea.

"Hey, Parl. Hey, Savit. It's too late for me to sit around and talk to ma tonight."

The look they gave him made him wonder if they weren't going to jump on him and beat him senseless. It was one of their favorite ways of showing affection.

"Why don't we go down to the riverside and drink a few? I will spend all the morrow with mother, I promise."

Parl stopped stone still and looked into Braxton's eyes, searching. What he was looking for, Braxton wasn't quite sure, but he seemed to understand something, and the corner of his mouth turned into a smile.

"That would be a good thing." Parl nodded, and then punched Braxton in the shoulder pretty hard. "If you're buying, that is."

"Yeah, if you're paying, we will go," Savit added from behind Parl.

Braxton felt every bit of his older brother's love for him in his bruised shoulder. It caused him pain but there was a greater bit of satisfied pleasure.

Braxton bought a whole bottle of the more expensive brandy from the keep at the River Inn. He and his brothers sat in the common room for a while and watched a few of the girls dance and sing. Before long, they were drunk and decided to go sit by the slow, ever flowing water of the Vasting River, reminiscing of the glories and horrors of their youth. To their great amazement, Savit told them a story about how he and his friend Grimbol set loose a few hundred crickets in the lesson hall one night. They caused Master Finn much grief, for when he opened the windows the next morning a whole flock of hungry finches flew in to feed on the noisy little treats. A few of the birds refused to leave, forcing Master Finn to call off class and round up several cats to chase them out.

Braxton remembered showing up to find Master Finn swinging a broom spastically through the air trying in vain to get the birds to fly out the window. This started a whole string of Master Finn stories that had the three brothers rolling with laughter.

Savit was in the middle of another story when Braxton looked over and saw that Parl had passed out. Braxton quickly hushed his middle brother. "Let's throw him in the river."

"No, Braxy," Savit said drunkenly. "Unlike you, I'm not leaving. I have to stay here with him, and he will kill me."

"Are you scared? Are you a chicken?" Braxton slurred.

"I'm not a clickchen." He giggled at his misspoken word.

"Remember when Parl and his big friend Joch tied your pant legs up and then put that snake in your britches?" Braxton reminded. "They cinched your belt tight and tied your hands behind your back."

Savit looked at him for a long time, and then a devilish grin spread across his face. "I'll get his legs, and you can get his arms."

They got in position and somehow managed to stop giggling long enough to heave Parl into the cold water. They might have had a chance to escape his wrath if they could have stopped their hysterical laughter long enough to run away. Instead, he crawled to shore submissively, but then, in a flash, he grabbed Braxton by the leg and pulled him into the river.

Savit cheered him on until Parl caught his leg and with Braxton's help, he, too, hit with a splash. Braxton laughed so hard at Savit's girlish squeal that he swallowed a mouthful of river water and nearly choked.

They didn't quite make it into the house but managed to pass out sometime before dawn on the front porch. Luckily, the night was warm because when his father

woke him up with a stiff, but gentle boot, Braxton found he was still soaking wet and his head pounded.

“Wake up, boy,” his father said. “We need to have a word before these other would be jesters wake up and get under foot.”

Braxton raised halfway up, and then collapsed, blinking his eyes furiously. Luckily, the sun was blocked by the old leaky porch roof. His father’s hand reached toward him with a cup of caffee. The strong aroma of the stuff nearly made him vomit, but his father’s stern glare caused him to swallow hard and take the cup.

He followed as his father led him around the outside of the house to the back. His pa stopped and put his foot on the center rail of a wooden fence and leaned his elbow onto his knee. He then put his chin in his hand and took a deep sip of his own caffee.

Braxton remembered a time when he had to look up to see this giant force of a man. Now, they stood eye to eye. Braxton drained his cup with a grimace, leaned his back to the fence, and put his elbows on the top rail as much for support as for comfort.

“You’ll be going soon?” It wasn’t really a question, Braxton knew, and he nodded that it was so.

“Twenty-seven years ago, I left Halden on my own.” He sipped from his cup. “I spent a year or so in Antole, then I came here to Uppervale. I was full of piss and pickle juice and looking to get in on the ore boom, just like everyone else.”

Braxton had heard bits and pieces of this story, usually when he was being disciplined. It had never occurred to him to pay attention until now. He walked a few feet over to the well and cranked up the bucket while his father watched. He took a sip of the cool water, and then splashed more on his face trying to clean away the grit as much as the cobwebs. His father waited patiently for him to return to the fence before he continued.

“I didn’t make no fortune, as I intended, but I made enough before the vein ran dry to buy this piece of land and trick your ma into marrying me.” He was silent for a

while, staring off into nothing, obviously choosing his words carefully. He took another sip from his cup and slung the remainder of the stuff into the grass. "I've been a lucky man, Braxton. Not many men get to have three fine boys to carry on their name. I envy you, and I want you to know that I am proud to call you my son." He reached into his shirt and pulled out a small pouch, then handed it to Braxton. "It is a hard thing to go out on your own, and it takes guts. This isn't much, a handful of silvers and a few gold, but I want you to take it. It will hold you up until you get your feet under you."

"I don't need..."

"Nonsense. Don't be too proud, boy. Don't ever be too proud." He looked into Braxton's eyes now, showing more than a little respect. "And don't ever be ashamed to come back either. If you fall down, get up and do what you have to do. I want you to know you always have a place here on the farm. Always."

Braxton had tears in his eyes and would have tried to hide them, but there were tears in his father's eyes, too. He searched desperately for something to say but could find no words. Instead, he hugged his father fiercely and was comforted when he felt the embrace returned.

"Spend some time with your mother today." His father sniffled and stepped back with his hands on Braxton's shoulders. "She is fussing around in the kitchen, and I don't imagine it will be pleasant, but out of all of us, you're the baby, and she loves you the most."

"Yes, sir." Braxton wiped his cheeks.



The kitchen was hot and filled with savory smells. Braxton's mother spoke quickly as she moved from the table to the counter to the oven. All the while, Braxton sat dutifully in his chair and listened to her ramble. Several times, she stopped and held his head between her hands, looking down on him with tear-filled eyes. Braxton endured

this until the food was almost finished, then he snuck out to the front porch to get some air.

He felt like a character in one of Master Finn's stories. He wanted to be the hero, but he didn't fit the position. The hero was always an orphan raised by people pretending to be his parents, or a bitter young man who had seen his family killed, or some betrayed prince. He was just a young man with a loving family about to venture off into the world as his father had done before him. He had no wise old wizard to guide him, no life or death quest ahead to save the world from doom, he just had to go make his own way. Sure, there would be adventure in that, but what if he couldn't survive out there? Would he have to swallow his pride and come crawling back to the farm? Or would he be too proud to do so and wind up settling for mediocrity as a ship hand, or a scullion, or something. He had always been sure his life would be bigger than all he'd known so far, but he never knew how.

He always hoped he would play some intricate role in a grand and glorious scheme. Now, he wasn't so sure.

Would having a wife and kids of his own be mediocre? Would he settle for a farmer's life? Could he?

Dinner was finally called, bringing him from his thoughts. He was hungry and hoped food would brighten his outlook.

The first part of dinner was quiet, and everybody busied themselves with what was on their plates. It was clear they were all afraid to speak lest they upset their obviously distraught mother, but about halfway through the main course, Savit blurted out, "So where are you going to go, Braxy?"

Now the object of everyone's attention, Braxton had no choice but to answer.

"I reckon I'll go to Camberly for a while," he answered and quickly stuffed another mouthful of food in his mouth so he wouldn't have to elaborate.

“That’s only four days ride from Uppervale,” his father said, clearly trying to ease his mother’s worry. “I’ve been there several times over the years.”

“Master Grant said that the Ancestor’s Dream is a wonder to behold.” This came from Kareen, Braxton’s older sister by a year. Willian Grant, Master Grant’s oldest son, was sure to marry Kareen soon. At least everyone hoped so. The Grant Family owned four grain ships and did better than most in Uppervale.

Braxton swallowed his bite and readied another in his spoon before speaking. “I’m looking forward to seeing it. That, the new palace, and the Hall of Scholars.”

Braxton’s mother smiled for the first time since they’d sat down. A tear rolled down her cheek unchecked. “Oh, Braxy, I’m going to miss you so,” she said, starting with a strength that faded with every word. “I’m so happy that you’ll be able to see all those wondrous things. It is—” She sobbed. “It is so selfish of me to be this sad, but I just can’t help it.”

“Oh, Mother,” Braxton said bursting into tears. “I’m going to miss you, too.”

Parl had to excuse himself, so did their father, while Kareen cried openly and dimwitted Savit took the opportunity to get himself another helping. Eventually, Braxton found himself alone, hugged in his mother’s loving embrace. It was then he realized something had just come to an end.

All he had left to do now was say goodbye to Davvy, or so he thought.



Later, the sound of something clacking repeatedly off the wall by his room woke Braxton. He figured it was Davvy so he opened the shutters and looked out. He was immediately overcome with a loin-tingling jolt of excitement. It was Hally Brighton, the girl he’d danced with in the barn, and later taken to a bonfire the older youth had built, out away from the gathering last Winterfest. Her hair was a tangle, and her robe was open revealing her well-shaped form, barely clad in her night clothes.

The angry scowl on her face erased any excitement he was feeling, and he remembered he hadn't so much as said a word to her in days. In fact, he was supposed to have met her the night that Davvy was mangled by the lake creature.

He glanced at her body jiggling freely under her thin garments, and wondered how he could have forgotten. He doubted he would ever forget what they did in that barn after Winterfest wound down.

The next pebble hit him in the head, and he could tell she'd meant for it to.

"Ouch! I'm coming out, Hally." He rubbed at the pea-sized knot forming on his brow. "Stop throwing things."

"You'd ride off without so much as a word." She must have realized he was ogling her for she closed her robe and tied it off. "You're not but a scoundrel, Braxton Bray."

Braxton pulled his britches on, threw a shirt over his shoulders, and went outside. It wasn't nearly as late as he figured, but the majority of the town had put out their lamps and shuttered themselves in. He met Hally on his porch, where she promptly throttled him, and then kissed him. But then punched him again before bursting into tears and storming away, leaving him standing there speechless and confused.

"No need trying to figure them out young Braxton," a familiar voice said from the lane. "She was probably hoping you'd stay and ask her for her hand. But it would be easier to understand why some hawks favor fish over mice than to understand a woman's mind." It was Master Finn, and he looked to just be riding by, but something told Braxton that wasn't the case.

"While I'm here," he started, indicating Braxton's notion was correct. "I have something for you."

Braxton walked out to the road, saving the lesson master from having to dismount and lead his horse under the walk gate to get to his side of the fence.

"What is this?" Braxton asked, taking the offered scroll case.

“It is a letter of recommendation for you to have your things looked at when you get to the Hall of Scholars.”

“My things?”

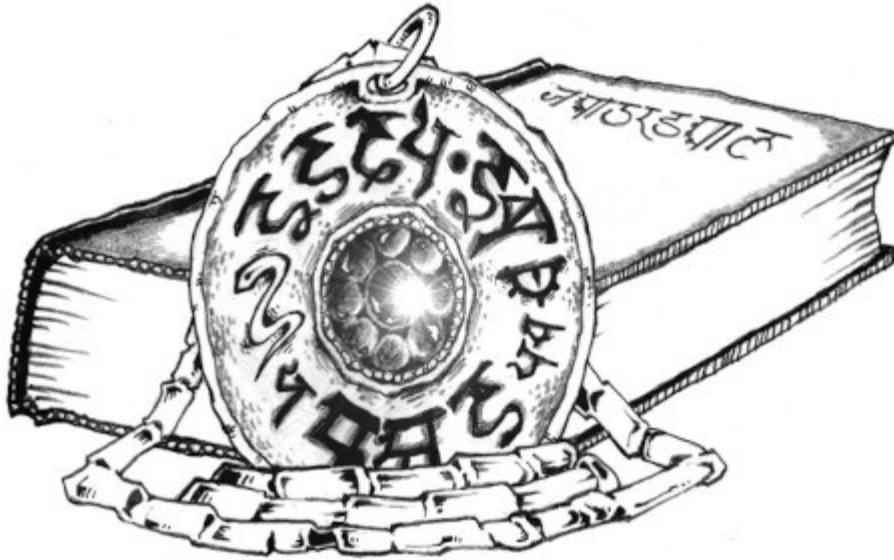
“I’ve been tending Davvy Flamus’s wound for weeks now.” The older man grinned and gave a wink. “He told me about the map and showed me one of the fancy coins you two found. Someone at the hall will be able to tell you where they came from.” He held up a hand, when Braxton started to protest. “I’ve told no one, but people know about that cavern now. Others have gone in there. In that tube is a letter of recommendation to show at the Hall of Scholars. It will get you seen by someone who might be able to tell you where the items came from.”

Braxton grunted his thanks. He hadn’t told Davvy about the book or that there was more than just one map. In fact, he wasn’t sure when Davvy had seen there was a map, but the morning they spent smashing the markings off the coins, Davvy could have easily gotten a glimpse inside the satchel.

“I’ll be off Braxton,” Master Finn said reaching a hand down for Braxton to shake. The old man’s grip was firm, and the exchange was one of finality, as if Master Finn knew they’d not cross paths again. “Travel safe.”

“Thank you, sir.” Braxton forced a smile. “I will do my best.”

“I know you will.” Master Finn nodded and then spurred his horse down the lane at a brisk trot.



Chapter Four

Prism was proud, headstrong, and determined to hurry the pace. Davvy's father's old horse, Hunter, was equally determined to take it slow, and though each animals' temperament was uncannily close to its riders, Braxton fought Prism to slow his pace and Davvy reluctantly urged Hunter to keep up. To Braxton's surprise, Davvy found a way to pack all the gear in Prism's saddle bags. Save for the bedroll, which was strapped to the saddle behind Braxton's rump. Braxton also rigged the sword he'd found and a quiver of arrows in a way that he could reach them. He also had a strung bow across his chest and another quiver at his hip. Bandits and hungry creatures were rare, but not unheard of. He had to be especially wary since he would eventually be traveling alone.

The day was perfect. To their left, the Vasting River sparkled like a flow of diamonds. The summer sun was bright but not oppressive and the wide, green space between the road and the water was dotted with purple and yellow flowers. An occasional patch of red berry bushes flourished along the bank between clusters of drooping limbed trees. On the other side of the river, and to the right side of the road, there were long stretches of tilled soil full of rows of brown and green stalks or heads of yellow vegetation. Some had row upon row of green flowery cabbages, and other fields were like golden blankets flowing with the breeze. Between these fields, in groups of

three or four, were small farmhouses and barns surrounded by pastures containing varieties of livestock common to the valley. A small wagon train full of hopeful faces, laden with goods from Camberly passed, forcing the boys off the road and closer to the river. Braxton felt a little better about his coming journey after seeing people who had just made it up the road with no apparent problems.

“It’s only three days past the outpost,” Braxton reassured himself out loud. Really, the third day would be in the outskirts of the larger city and under protection from the palace guard patrols. The two days of travel on the open road with the thickly wooded foothills to his right and the river to his left still worried him a little. It also excited him. Davvy’s father had reassured him the road was heavily traveled and safe. He’d even commented Braxton would have a hard time actually being alone.

Braxton thought about taking the Riverside Trail that people sometimes used. It wasn’t big enough for wagon trains but it stayed within sight of the river. It wasn’t patrolled by the outpost guards that often rode messages between Uppervale and Camberly, though.

Most merchants from the valley sent their goods to Camberly by river. But stuff coming from Camberly was usually transported by wagon train, for taking an empty boat up river wasn’t impossible, but moving a loaded one was more than the rowers could manage. Some of the wealthier farmers paid kingdom guards, caravaneers, or mercenaries to escort their wagons back from the city, but Braxton figured guards would only attract attention to a load. He’d heard a few stories of bandits raiding caravans for profit, but not recently. The last trouble on the road he’d heard about was a merchant and his two sons who just disappeared after last year’s harvest. Their bodies were found days later, stripped nearly to the bone by wild animals, or more likely hungry, two legged kobls.

Kobls weren’t likely to have attacked them on the road because they weren’t known to use weapons or have any system of trade or any need of goods. Someone had

told Braxton they were just two-legged dogs, feral malformed animals that walked kind of like men and scavenged in packs. Braxton figured bandits took the three men into the woods, killed them, and then rode off with their wares. Kobls or maybe wolves had eaten what the bandits left behind.

“What are you thinking about?” Davvy asked, snapping Braxton out of his thoughts.

Braxton realized it was late afternoon, and he had dreamed away most of the day.

“Bandits and kobls, I suppose,” he answered and rolled his eyes at his own foolishness.

The smile Davvy gave was clearly forced. His best friend’s sadness started to show itself. His attempts at hiding it were growing halfhearted. When Braxton looked at him, Davvy turned his head away.

“How much farther to the outpost do you think?” Braxton asked, trying to fake some excitement as if something great awaited there.

They stopped and looked out over the slowly falling landscape. To the right the forest was getting closer and the farms fewer. The land rose in sharp leaps back toward the mountains. Ahead of them in the distance the land was hilly and eventually much lower. So much so that they could see the tops of the trees like a rolling carpet of green for leagues ahead. To the left, the river started to pull away from the road. It flowed much faster here than they were used to seeing.

Braxton felt like the water. He wanted to hurry downstream with the flow, building up speed until the world rushed by. He wanted a new view, new feelings, and a new outlook, hopefully one that was always moving, and ever changing.

Prism seemed to be feeling it, too, for the horse pranced sideways. Braxton didn’t fight him, nor did he wait for Davvy to answer his question. He let the horse resume but held the frisky animal from taking the brisk pace he wanted. Davvy caught up quickly. He looked upset that Braxton was so eager to leave. He seemed to understand the feeling,

though, and he spurred Hunter into a gallop and passed Braxton and Prism, howling out like a madman. Braxton didn't have to urge Prism. The black bundle of energy burst after the others, nearly toppling his rider backwards. Prism slowed then, just long enough for Braxton to regain his balance, and as soon as he did, the horse used tremendous strength, lunging in long ground gathering strides.

It was just the rush Braxton needed, and he was exhilarated and awed by his horse's speed. The wind went rushing through his hair and his heart beat wildly, then they were caught up and passing Davvy.

Braxton looked over his shoulder before he went over a rise. The grin on his friend's face showed the spell of sadness that loomed over them throughout the day had been broken. This would be the last night with his friend, and he vowed it would be a good one. They could shed tears in the morning. Tonight, they would own the world. Braxton looked back again and waved his friend on before he went over the hilltop and out of sight. But when he looked ahead, he saw several men in uniformed kingdom armor moving to block the road.

The captain of the outpost stormed out the door, causing the guards to stiffen and salute. Braxton recognized the stern looking gray-haired captain as the one who had studied the lake creature's tentacle that had been wrapped around Davvy with Master Finn one afternoon.

"He is the one I was telling you about," the captain said boastfully. "You rode in like a whole battalion of gothicans were behind you." He looked to one of his men. "Dendle, this is Braxton Bray, one of the boys who survived--" he looked away, seeing Davvy just topping the hill and held out an open palmed hand toward him. "These are the two boys who survived that thing up by the lake."

A huge well-muscled man with long black hair and a beard braided into two long strands stepped away from the others. He was wearing well-worn leather and mail, not kingdom armor, and when he walked up to Braxton he extended his hand down in

greeting. “Dendle,” he said sternly and nearly broke Braxton’s hand with his huge friendly grip.

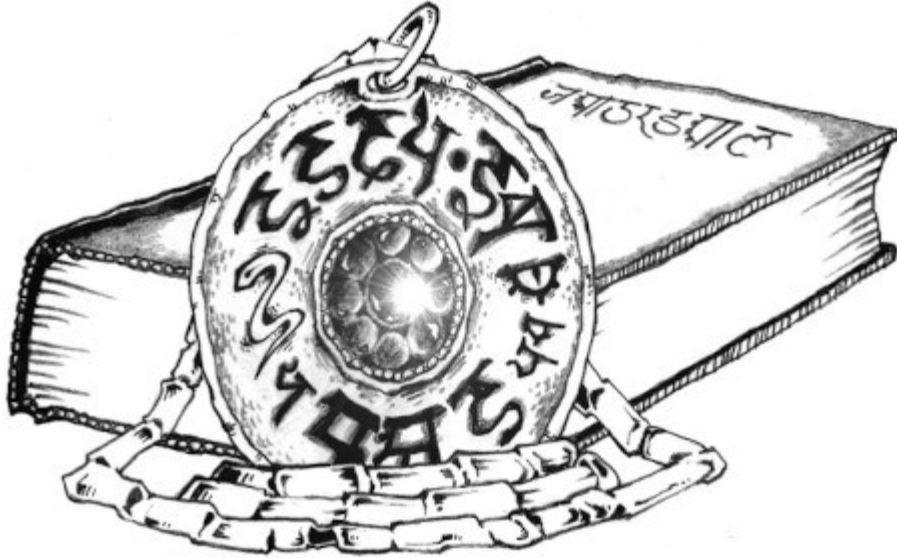
“I’m Braxton Bray, and that is my friend Davvy.”

Davvy reined Hunter in and came to a stop with his hand extended toward the big man.

The captain looked Davvy up and down like he was about to buy him at market. “You look a lot better than the last time I saw you, boy. I’m sure you don’t remember ‘cause you were nearly dead. How are you healing?”

“I have a little limp, but not much pain,” Davvy answered as he hopped off his horse and proceeded to pull down his britches, pull up his shirt, and show them the grisly scar that ran across his back, over his arse, and down his thigh.

Several of the guards “oohed” and “aahed” and then started showing their own scars. Of course, Braxton and Davvy had to tell the story about their encounter with the creature at the lake. They ended up inside the outpost, and as darkness fell, they laughed and exchanged stories around the stove while passing a bottle of horrible tasting, but potent, liquor around.



Chapter Five

Braxton was having the time of his life. Davvy too, was caught up in the tales of battles and beasts the guards told.

Braxton excused himself so he could go water the trees. When he was done, he walked over to where Prism was tethered. Somebody had made sure a full feed bag was in place, and the horse happily munched away on oats.

Braxton breathed deeply. The air wasn't as crisp as he was used to, but it was no less refreshing. The sky was big, bigger than he'd ever seen before. In the valley, the mountains rose all around, but down here in the foothills everything was more open. The small moon, which was rarely visible from inside the valley, since it only topped the horizon for a short while late each night, was to the south. The bigger moon started its rise upward from behind him, and it illuminated the falling landscape in a magical fashion. An owl, a large one by the sound of it, hooted its nocturnal satisfaction from the trees. The crickets and other insects were scared quiet for a moment.

"That's quite a thing you did." The huge presence of Dendle appeared out of nowhere. Braxton hadn't heard him approach, and he was startled.

"What's that?" Braxton responded, trying not to let his voice show that his heart was hammering through his chest.

“Surviving an oterror, and even more, getting your friends back home before they bled out.” Dendle looked down at Braxton, his expression curious. “I went to the lake and swam into that cavern after I heard. I saw all the blood and the skeletons. No doubt that is where you got that old sword?”

“Yes.” Braxton nodded. He wondered if this giant of a man knew about the medallion, the maps, or the book he’d taken. “You called it an oterror? What?”

“It is a gothican word. They are quite rare in fresh water. You should be proud and thankful you survived your encounter. Most men don’t.”

“Like the skeletons?” Braxton asked.

“No. I think they died long before the oterror came around, else their bones would have been scattered, not so close together and whole.” Dendle turned and looked to the sky. Then he asked, “What else did you find?”

“A pack full of junk. A cloak.” Braxton wasn’t about to say anything about the other items. He intended to take them to Camberly and have someone at the Hall of Scholars look at them now that he had a letter of recommendation. “I also found a flask of old soured wine.”

“I was just curious,” Dendle said with an expression that showed he didn’t believe him. “Because you missed this.” Dendle produced a ring with a deep blue jewel that looked like a cat’s eye mounted in it. In the moonlight, Braxton saw markings like the one on the book. “These runes are like nothing I’ve ever seen before. I was hoping you might have some insight.” His stare made Braxton feel like Dendle looked right through him.

“Your friend Davvy said you are going to Camberly.” His penetrating gaze slowly morphed into a broad grin. “I wish I could go with you, but I’m not welcomed so close to Narvoza’s populace.”

Braxton narrowed his eyes in confusion. “You’re not an outpost guard?”

Dendle laughed deeply. "You can't see it, can you? Have you ever seen a gothican? Well, I am a half-breed. My mother was raped by a gothican in a raid, and my huge body was too much for her to bare. The captain here pays me to hunt kobls along the border, but the people in Camberly are afraid of me."

"You don't look any different, just bigger than most," Braxton said.

"You're pretty big yourself, tall for a human," said Dendle. "Most people have to look up to see into your eyes, but see, you have to look up to see into mine." He grinned. "In Antol, or Halden, or throughout Nepram, I can get by. Camberly is just too close to the northern outposts. Besides, I prefer the wilderness."

"How tall is a full-blooded gothican?" Braxton asked, then hoped he hadn't offend Dendle with the question.

"Your eyes would look into the belly of a gothican." Dendle laughed, but his eyes said he wasn't joking or exaggerating.

"Hey, Brax," Davvy called from the doorway. "There you are." He staggered over and put his arm around his friend, then looked up drunkenly at Dendle. "Gah. He is a big one."

Davvy almost fell, but Braxton kept him from it.

"I'll leave you to yourselves." The big kobl hunter walked a few paces away, and then turned. "If you ever want to go kobl hunting, Braxton Bray, I'd be delighted to take you. The captain can always find me."

Davvy pulled Braxton off balance, and by the time they recovered from the stumble, Dendle was gone.



Morning came too slow for Braxton. Sleep hadn't come easily. He found himself thinking about wild kobls, gothican warriors, and strange runes. When sleep finally took him, he dreamed of fighting a giant in an unfamiliar city, and he, too, was bigger than

those around him. Streaks of white and blue lightning flashed off his sword's blade as he waged war against a man-monster three times his size. The battle faded, and he found himself crouched in the bushes by the lake where they'd encountered the octerror, then the dreams left him completely, and he woke tired and confused.

They ate dried beef and rode in silence until they could no longer see the outpost behind them. Braxton reined Prism off the road, dismounted, and then led the horse to a group of trees. Davvy joined him, and they tied off their mounts to a limb. Braxton dug something out of his saddle bag, trying hard not to meet Davvy's gaze just yet. First, he handed Davvy a leather scroll case similar to the one they'd found in the cavern by the lake but this one was new.

"What is this?" Davvy asked.

"These are copies of the maps I found. I want you to put them away. Hide them and don't show or tell anyone about them. Not even Master Finn." Braxton tried to convey how serious he was.

"I promise," Davvy answered.

"And this, I want you to give it to my ma." He handed Davvy a pouch full of coins with a note attached to it, "Don't let my father, brothers, or even Kareen know about it. Just stop in on the morrow and tell my mother this is from me in private."

"That's not the money we—"

Braxton cut him off. "No. I've got that here." He patted his belt pouch. "I've got more stashed. My father gave this to me to travel with. I took a little out, but I want my mother to have it just in case something happens to my sister or my brothers." Braxton grabbed Davvy's shoulder and squeezed. "You can't let my father know, just my ma."

"Alright, Braxton, I'll do it." Davvy dropped his eyes to stare at his boots.

Braxton, having gotten his business taken care of, found himself also looking down, studying a patch of gray and purple mushrooms that grew in the protected shade of the big leafy tree.

“Well this is it, huh?” Davvy finally said. When he looked up, a tear spilled down his cheek.

“You’re going to make me cry, doofus,” Braxton said quickly. “I’m going to miss you, you know.” They shared a brotherly hug.

“Damn, Braxy, I want to go with you so bad but my sisters and my father need me.”

“It’s alright, Dav. I will be alright.”

He spoke the words to comfort his friend, but he wasn’t sure he would. All their lives they’d planned on leaving Uppervale together. The battles with stick swords and dirt castles they built by the river. In fact, everything they’d done in their youth, they’d done as a team. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. It was supposed to be two best friends against the world.

Braxton was suddenly worried Davvy wouldn’t be alright. Who would he hunt with? Who would he get drunk with? Would he get married?

All the things that would happen to each of them that the other wouldn’t know about came crashing over Braxton, and he was overwhelmed. He had to go. He had to leave and get it over with. He let go of Davvy and stepped back, then extended his hand to shake Davvy’s like a man.

Davvy sobbed and the sound almost broke the dam of tears Braxton held back.

“I have to go now.” Braxton let his friend’s hand go. “But you’ll always be here.” He pounded his heart with his fist. “Always.”

Davvy pounded his heart with his fist, too. “My ma didn’t have any other boys.” Davvy had to fight the words out. “You’ll always be my brother, Braxton.”

“Oh Davvy.” Braxton hugged his friend again, but this time, when he let go, he walked to Prism and climbed into the saddle.

“Brothers forever,” he yelled as he spurred his horse down the road.

“Brothers forever,” Davvy repeated.

And the goodbye was done.