

—1—

The first thing she became aware of was that she was no longer in her bed. Not only that, but the worn fabric of her homespun nightgown did little to keep out the cold of the stone upon which she lay. Opening her eyes did little to alleviate her unease at such an odd happenstance, for no light of any kind was visible, not even the soft starlight that was want to filter through the boughs outside her window.

She sat up and looked around in vain for any source of light. Even using the trick of looking from the corner of her eyes for faint outlines failed to work. The darkness she found herself in was absolute.

I must be dreaming, she thought. For there was no way in which she could be in a place other than her small room at the back of her family's farm. Down the hall from her room slept her parents, not to mention three dogs that would raise a ruckus should she be taken from her home in the dead of night. It was inconceivable that she would be somewhere other than in her warm bed. Yet, she was not.

The floor beneath her felt real, the cold and roughness of the stone abrasive to her hand as she ran it across its surface. The clarity of sensation generated by her hand passing across the stone planted a seed of doubt in her mind that perhaps this may not be a dream after all. Dreams rarely held such precise detail as the disparity of temperatures between her hand and the floor, not to mention the tactile ambiguities of which the floor was constructed. Hairline cracks and crevices were not the part and parcel of dreams, at least none that she had ever had.

Uncertainty began to edge closer to alarm. What if she was no longer within her home? Where could she be and how did she get there? Hoping to detect the familiar odor of home, she slowly breathed in through her nose. Twice she sought any trace of familiarity but only detected the musty smell of earth. Not fresh turned earth such as one would expect in a field recently plowed, but that of her mother's root cellar where vegetables were stored for winter.

Alarm was rapidly turning into full blown fear. All thoughts that this may be a dream dwindled rapidly. It seemed too real, too substantial to be the dream world. Fear getting the better of her, she readied to call

for her father when a noise not far away caused her to stop. It was the sound of breathing, what one would expect coming from someone asleep.

Holding still and barely daring to breathe herself, she listened to the steady rhythm of inhalation and exhalation of another. Whoever it was couldn't have been more than five feet away. If she moved but a little, she could reach out and touch the sleeper. But dare she? Could the rest of her family have been taken as well? One call or one touch could have her wrapped in the safe and strong arms of her father if that was the case. About to call out, she stopped as another thought entered her mind. What if it was the one who took her? In such absolute blackness there was no way for her to be sure.

Torn between the possibilities of being with those she loved or waking one who would hurt her in ways too terrible to imagine, she did nothing. Instead, she sat there listening to the dark.

Minutes passed and she soon became aware of another sleeper on the other side of her roughly the same distance away as the first one. In her fear and doubt she pictured the two sleepers as the worse humanity had to offer, each thought being worst than the last. Unable to bear simply sitting and doing nothing until the sleepers awoke, she pushed her fear down until it was at a more tolerable level, then slowly climbed to her feet.

Taking a moment to ensure the sleepers remained undisturbed, she began taking small, cautious steps with arms held out before her. Moving in a route taking her away from the sleeping individuals, she searched the space before her for any obstructions barring her path. Her plan was to find a door or window and get out before anyone was the wiser. She took less than three steps before her knee encountered something.

Made of stone and rising less than three feet from the ground, her hand told her its outer edge was rounded. The top was level, and constructed of the same material as the floor. It may be a pedestal of some kind, and as best she could figure it was three feet across from one side to the other.

Using her hand as a guide, she worked her way around the object to the other side. Enroute, her hand brushed against a section of the pedestal much smoother than the rest. Pausing a brief moment, she allowed her fingers to inspect an area slightly smaller than the palm of

her hand. Roughly oval in shape, the area rose a miniscule fraction above the main body of this stone object.

A pattern of lines was engraved within the smooth oval shape. As the tip of her index finger traced the pattern, she tried to picture in her mind what it was depicting with little success. About to continue in her search for the door, her finger felt an imperfection marring the smoothness of the oval area, a small rough area near the bottom.

Out of habit, she rubbed it in an attempt to remove the imperfection as one would remove a dried dab of mud discovered on a handrail. When her first attempt proved unsuccessful, she used her fingernail. Applying more pressure, she scraped at the imperfection.

Whoosh!

Suddenly, fire sprang to life before her causing her to cry out and stumble backward in shock. Catching the back of her heel on a man lying prone upon the floor, she lost her balance and fell with a thud on top of him.

“What the...,” the man cried out a split second before having the wind knocked from him when she fell full upon his abdomen.

“Back!” a man’s voice yelled as a tall fighter in leather armor with drawn blade quickly scanned the room. Six foot three with black, shoulder length hair secured in a ponytail with a simple leather thong, the man waved his sword back and forth. His eyes were wild and they alternated from looking toward her and the man who was trying to extricate himself from her, and another man slightly smaller emerging from around the far side of the flame burning above the stone pedestal.

“Put that thing away,” the smaller man said to the larger. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

Unconvinced, the tall man merely continued backing until encountering the stone wall of the room they were in.

Now that her initial shock the sudden appearance of the flame produced, the girl quickly rolled off the man whom she landed upon. The man as it turned out was somewhat older, perhaps in his mid to upper forties. Tall, though not nearly as tall as the man with the sword, he had brown hair with a touch of gray about the temples. And like she, was dressed in a long sleeping gown.

His eyes met hers as he quickly gained his feet. “What is the meaning of this?” he demanded. From the tone of his voice it was apparent he was used to issuing commands and having them obeyed.

“I...I don’t know,” she replied, then uncertainly added, “milord.”

The tall swordsman appeared to be the only one with a weapon and that fact soon dawned upon him. Relaxing somewhat, he lowered his weapon, but only by a small margin.

“What is your name child?” the man upon whom she fell asked.

“Breya, milord,” she said. Not having been corrected when initially using the form of address for nobility, she used it again.

Dismissing her as being no threat, the man turned his attention to the young, tall swordsman. “You,” he said as he crossed over to the young man, “tell me where we are and how we came to be here.”

Moving the point of his sword toward the older man, the young swordsman said, “Back off old man or so help me I’ll run you through!” Though attempting to show bravado, he was unable to hide the hint of fear and uncertainty in his voice.

The older man came to a stop. “I am Lord Michael, Baron of Trellar Doon and I demand to know how I came to be here!”

“Trellar Doon?” the young man said. “Never heard of it.”

“Neither have I,” said the third man. Of average height with dark brown hair and blue eyes, the man came around the pedestal and moved closer to Breya. He wore brown jerkins with a dagger on his belt and a brownish cloth hat which sat slightly askew atop his head.

Breya, being the only girl present and the youngest of the four, remained silent.

Lord Michael glanced at the third man, and as he did with Breya, dismissed him as not being an immediate threat. Returning his attention to the young swordsman, Lord Michael put hands on hips and asked, “Well?”

“I don’t think he knows,” stated the third man. Having come to a stop near Breya, he kept his gaze firmly locked on the young swordsman. “He doesn’t act like a man concealing a hidden truth.”

“It was one of you!” accused the young man.

“Which one?” asked the third man. “The young girl in her night gown, the elder baron in his, or me?” He only paused a moment before adding, “And I would hardly leave myself unarmed while allowing you to retain your weapon had I been behind your being here.”

“You have a knife,” the young swordsman argued.

“Do you really consider this a threat?” he asked. Removing it from its sheath, he held it before him. “My three inches against your three feet?”

Breya was scared. Being in an unknown place, alone with three men she did not know, was something a young woman tried to avoid. Add to that the fact the young man was waving around his sword in a most agitated way left her even more ill at ease.

"I suggest we all calm down and try to find out what happened," suggested the third man. Looking at each of his three comrades in turn, he said, "Would I be correct in assuming that none of us expected to find themselves in such surroundings?"

Lord Michael nodded. "I was asleep in my bed before awakening here."

"As was I," added Breya softly.

"For myself," said the third man, "I was walking home from The Cryck."

"Cryck?" said the young swordsman questioningly. "Never heard of it."

Turning his attention to the young swordsman, the third man said, "It's a tavern."

"And who might you be?" asked Lord Michael.

"Name's Parr," the man replied. He then glanced toward the young swordsman. "How about you?"

Eyes flicked from one to the other until finally settling on Lord Michael. Lowering his sword even further he said, "I am Vika Tor. Guard of Lord Yellist, Duke of Ghear."

"Duke Yellist?" mused Lord Michael. "The name is unfamiliar."

"How..." began Vika Tor as the tip of his sword fell the rest of the way to the floor, "how did we get here?"

"That I do not know," replied Lord Michael. Glancing at the others with him, he asked, "No one remembers anything about how they came to be here?" One 'no' and two shakes of the head answered him.

Breya felt somewhat relieved to hear that the three men were in the same predicament as she. Though still very much ill at ease, at least the threat of immediate harm seemed lessened. Then, she noticed something that had escaped her attention before.

"Excuse me milord," she said.

Turning toward her, Lord Michael asked, "Yes my child?"

"How did we get in here?"

"That is what we are trying to determine," he replied, a little peevish at her asking a question currently under discussion. "Who brought us here and why."

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I mean, how did we get into this room? There is no door.”

The three men grew quiet as each came to realize what Brea already had. There was no door. Walls, floor, and ceiling were each constructed of stone blocks set one against the other with no sign of an egress. The room itself was roughly square in shape with the ceiling being slightly higher than the length and breadth of the walls. The only thing marring the simple plainness of the room’s design, aside from the pedestal with the flame burning above it, was a small patch of lichen growing in one corner.

Sheathing his sword, Vika Tor went to the nearest wall and ran his hand across its surface. “There must be a door,” he asserted. “Perhaps made to blend in with the stone.”

Lord Michael nodded in agreement as he gazed at the walls with greater scrutiny. Each block of stone was the same as the ones abutting it, each seam between the stones bore identical characteristics whether on wall, floor, or ceiling. “I have heard of such doors,” he said. “But always to keep thieves out, not to keep captives in.”

Brea gasped at his words. “Are we captives milord?” she asked.

“So it would seem my child,” he replied. “But for what purpose I would hardly hazard a guess.”

Parr watched Vika Tor’s efforts in searching for the elusive door for a short time before he too went and added his efforts in the hunt.

Brea knew little of such things and moved to the middle of the room to keep out of the way. She had her arms wrapped around herself to try and keep the chill of the room at bay. The air was by no means freezing, just cold enough to be uncomfortable. Catching sight of the flame burning above the stone pedestal, she moved closer to warm herself.

To her amazement, moving closer did little to ward off the chill within the room. As unbelievable as it may sound, the flame was not hot. It wasn’t even warm. Coming to stand next to the pedestal, she reached her hand toward the flame and stopped just prior to touching it. No heat whatsoever. It was as if the flame wasn’t even there at all.

“Are you alright?”

Startled by the voice right behind her, she turned to find Parr looking at her with a concerned expression.

Taking a step backward she asked, “What?”

“Are you alright?” he asked again. “You seemed troubled.”

“The...the flame,” she replied nervously. His eyes flicked to it as she said, “It doesn’t give off any heat.”

Holding out his hand, his eyes widened in shock when he realized the truth of her words. “Amazing,” he breathed.

Lord Michael appeared at Parr’s elbow with Vika Tor a step behind. “What’s this?” the baron asked.

Parr didn’t reply. Instead he moved his hand closer toward the flame until the tip of his index finger touched it. “You are right Brea,” he said to the girl. “It’s cold. Or rather it’s not hot or cold.”

“An illusion?” asked Vika Tor.

“It must be,” agreed Parr. Turning his gaze to the base of the flame, he pointed and said, “Look, it doesn’t touch the pedestal at all.”

The others looked closely and saw how the flame began a good inch above the stone surface. “How does it do that?” Brea asked.

“Magic,” replied Parr.

“There is no such thing!” retorted Vika Tor.

Parr glanced over his shoulder and asked, “Then how do you explain this?”

“But magic is just something found in bard’s tales,” he asserted.

Lord Michael stepped forward and hesitantly brought his left hand across the surface of the pedestal until it was between the base of the flame and the stone. “It must be magic,” he said when the flame failed to alter its shape.

Brea’s eyes were wide as she stared at the magical flame. “But what does that mean?” she asked, fear evident in her voice.

Turning toward her, Lord Michael replied, “It means we may be in the hands of a sorcerer.” His expression softened when he saw her gasp. “But rest assured child, I will not allow anything to happen to you.” After a moment he added, “Or to any of us.”

Hours went by and still they found no way in which to escape their prison. Over and over they checked the walls and floor. Vika Tor even tried standing upon the pedestal to reach the ceiling but found it to be out of even his tall reach.

“This is intolerable,” the young swordsman stated as he hopped off the pedestal and began pacing back and forth. “If I ever find this sorcerer I’ll kill him for this!”

“Calm down,” advised Lord Michael. “Save your energy for when you need it.”

“Why do you say that old man?” Vika Tor said derisively.

“You will address me as Lord Michael, Baron Michael, or milord!” insisted the Baron of Trellar Doon.

Vika Tor looked him up and down before snorting, “You are hardly in a position to give orders...old man.” Hand resting on the hilt of his sword, his expression dared Lord Michael to press the issue.

“This is not helping our situation,” interjected Parr. “We still have no idea how to get out of here.” Having gained the attention of the two men, he said, “Our enemy lies without. It would behoove us to work together to figure a way to escape before our situation worsens. The last thing we need is for the two of you to be bickering.”

After a moment Lord Michael nodded. “You are correct.”

Vika Tor on the other hand didn’t seem completely swayed by the argument. Turning his gaze onto Lord Michael, he said, “Very well then...*milord*.”

Accenting the word ‘milord’ with a slightly derogatory inflection wasn’t lost on the baron. Though he bristled at the implied insult, Lord Michael said nothing.

“Milord?” questioned Brea from where she sat with back propped against the wall. When his gaze turned to settle on her, she said, “What did you mean by ‘save your energy for when you need it’? Do you think something bad is going to happen?”

“One never knows,” he replied. “Though given our current situation, it would seem that little in the way of good will be coming our way anytime soon.”

She drew her legs up against her and rested her chin upon her knees. Desperately wishing to simply break down and cry, she refused to allow it. As her father always said, ‘When a situation is dire, tears only make matters worse. Get through it, then you can cry.’

Her father had always been a wise man, though he was but a simple farmer from a long line of farmers. How she longed for him to be with her now. At times he wasn’t the most amiable person, especially when she had neglected her responsibilities. But she knew that he loved her. During her reminiscence of times past, she spied Parr investigating the flame above the stone pedestal.

“Wonder how long it’s been here?” he asked, more to himself than to the others.

“It appeared after we got here,” she explained.

Parr turned and gave her a quizzical look. "What did you say?" he asked.

She glanced toward Lord Michael and Vika Tor who had also turned their attention in her direction.

"I...", she began then nervousness caused her to momentarily pause. "When I awoke, it wasn't there. Then it was."

Vika Tor sprang to his feet and came toward her. "You made it appear?" he asked.

"I...I don't know," she said, pulling her knees closer as the young swordsman drew nearer. "I was searching for a way out when it suddenly sprang to life."

"Ahhh," began Lord Michael, "then perhaps it was something you did?"

She drew in on herself as the three men came close. Being the focal point of their gazes made her feel acutely uncomfortable, almost as if they were accusing her of causing all this.

"Relax, child," Lord Michael said soothingly to her. Then he knelt down on one knee before her and gave her a reassuring smile. "Tell us what happened. Perhaps you brought the flame to life unknowingly."

"Yes," added Parr. "It may be important."

Three pairs of eyes bored into her as they waited. Swallowing hard, she began relating what happened from the time when she awoke in the darkness. "It was dark and I tried to find a way out."

"You were going to leave us here?" accused Vika Tor.

"She had no way of knowing if we were friend or foe," stated Lord Michael. "For all she knew, we could have been the ones who had brought her here." Returning his attention to Breya he said, "Please continue."

"As I made my way through the room, I encountered the pedestal." Her eyes briefly flicked to the stone base beneath the flame before she continued. "I was working my way around it and the flame appeared." She turned her eyes toward Lord Michael and said, "It scared me and that is when I tripped over you milord. I do apologize for that."

Waving away the comment, the baron asked, "Did you do anything while you were near it?"

"No," she quickly replied, shaking her head. Then a recollection returned to her. "Wait...", she began as she scrutinized the memory. "There was a smooth area on the pedestal." Holding up her hand she said, "About the size of my palm, I think."

Parr nodded. "Yes, I noticed that too. Oval shaped and very smooth to the touch." Glancing to Lord Michael he said, "There are several lines engraved within it but the pattern is meaningless as far as I could tell."

"Perhaps they mean more than you at first thought," countered Lord Michael.

Vika Tor turned toward the pedestal. "Show this to me," he commanded.

"As you wish," agreed Parr.

Lord Michael came to his feet and held out his hand toward Brea. "Come along child," he replied.

Parr and Vika Tor had already returned to the pedestal where Parr was showing the tall swordsman the smooth, oval area.

Brea took the proffered hand and was helped to her feet. Of the three men, Lord Michael put her most at ease. Walking next to the lord, she returned to the pedestal.

Parr turned at her approach. "Can you explain exactly what you were doing just prior to the flame's appearance?"

She glanced to Lord Michael who nodded encouragingly. "If you would be so kind," he said. Unsure as to the location of where she awakened, she took a guess and moved to that spot. With three pairs of eyes watching her every movement, she reenacted awakening and moving toward the stone pedestal.

"It was dark and I could hear the sound of someone sleeping," she said. Coming to the pedestal, she reached out and touched its cold stone surface. "When I encountered this, I ran my hand along its surface as I worked my way around." With her hand maintaining contact with the stone pedestal, she began making her way around it.

"Did the flame appear at that time?" asked Lord Michael.

"No," she replied. Coming to the smooth area which was on the side just below the lip, she stopped before her hand encountered it. "I...I think it appeared when I touched this," she said, indicating the smooth area. With the light of the flame illuminating the room, she was able to see the lines engraved into its surface.

Parr looked to the others. "I have touched this area many times without anything happening," he explained.

Vika Tor, who throughout her narrative had remained silent, came forth and touched the smooth, oval area. When the flame failed to respond, he seemed disappointed.

“You didn’t really believe that would do anything did you?” asked Lord Michael.

Flashing the baron an annoyed look, the young swordsman choked back his initial reply. Returning his attention to the smooth area, he asked Brea, “Did you do anything special when you touched it?”

She shook her head. “No. I remember running my fingers along the lines like this.” Moving her hand closer, she touched one of the lines with her forefinger. Immediately, the flame vanished. A shriek escaped her as the room was plunged into total darkness.

“Yes!” she heard Parr exclaim. “Touch it again and see if the flame reappears.”

About to touch it once more, she heard Lord Michael say, “Don’t!”

“What?” asked Vika Tor. “Do you wish to remain in darkness?”

“Look at the ceiling!” the baron exclaimed.

Across the ceiling, dots of fluorescent green were moving about like ants whose anthill had just been disturbed.

“What are they?” asked Brea.

“I do not know child,” replied Lord Michael.

“Did you see them before?” asked Parr.

“No,” she replied.

As the dots moved about, they would at times encounter one of the others and a miniscule flash would occur. When they parted, the two dots were slightly more elongated.

“Incredible,” said Lord Michael.

More and more of the flashes occurred as the dots collided with growing frequency. Each time, they would further elongate. Soon they were no longer dots but what looked like a myriad of worms crawling across the ceiling. Worms turned into snakes.

Then by some unseen command, the green fluorescent snakes turned as one and began crawling toward the wall. A river of green flowed from the ceiling, down the wall where it parted into two smaller streams midway down. Then both streams continued until each encountered the floor. There they came to a stop.

Snakes began aligning themselves side by side with their brethren into vertical lines, the uppermost curving so the tops of both columns touched. When the final snake fell into position, there was another green flash, and the snakes fused into a single mass along the surface of the wall. To the amazement of those watching, the mass took the form of an archway that was five feet wide and peaked ten feet off the floor.

“Could that be the way out?” Brea asked hesitantly.

“Maybe,” replied Parr. “Touch the smooth area and we’ll see.”

“I’m trying to but nothing is happening,” Vika Tor stated.

“Not you,” said Parr. “Brea.”

Brea could feel more than hear Vika’s retort. Reaching out, she pressed her hand against the smooth area. Immediately, the flame reappeared.

The sudden switch from total darkness to bright light blinded them for a moment. When their eyes finally adjusted, they found the archway gone.

“What happened to it?” demanded Vika Tor. Moving toward where it had stood, he ran his hands across the stone wall, desperately trying to find the exit. “This was where it was, yes?”

“Yes,” replied Lord Michael. Coming to stand beside the young swordsman, he too inspected the wall.

While the two men searched the wall, Parr came to stand beside Brea. “It would seem the flame answers only to you.”

Brea glanced toward him. “Do you think so?” she asked.

He nodded. “Both Vika Tor and I touched it, but only your touch had any affect.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

Shrugging, he replied, “It could be because you were the first one to touch it.” Pausing a moment, he then added, “Or it could be that you are not a man. No way to know for sure.”

From the wall they heard Vika Tor say, “It’s not here!”

Lord Michael glanced back to where Brea and Parr stood. “Make the flame go away again,” he said.

Reaching out, she touched the smooth area and the flame vanished. Once again, green fluorescent dots appeared across the ceiling, then just as before, they collided. First turning into worms, then snakes, then moving to form the archway once more.

“Now what?” asked Vika Tor when the snakes flashed and fused together.

Lord Michael stood near the glowing archway, his face lit by the green light. “Does anyone have a coin?” he asked.

“I do,” announced Parr.

“May I have it?” the baron asked. “I would like to try something.”

Parr came over and handed him a copper piece. “Here.”

“Thank you,” said the lord as he turned to face the archway. “I hope this works.” Tossing the coin, it flew toward the center of the green, glowing archway, and disappeared. In the silence that followed, four sets of ears listened for the tell-tale sound of the coin coming to land, but none was forthcoming.

“What happened to it?” Vika Tor asked.

“It passed through,” replied Parr.

“But to where?” asked Lord Michael. “And is it safe for us to follow?”

“I don’t think we have much choice,” asserted Parr. “It’s the only way out of this room that we have discovered.”

Breya stared at the glowing archway. The thought of passing through left her trembling and weak with fear.

Lord Michael saw her fearful face in the glow emanating from the archway. He came to her and put an arm around her shoulders. “I told you I would not let anything happen to you,” he said reassuringly. “We can’t stay here and this may be the only way out.”

“Are you serious?” asked Vika Tor. “This is magic and nothing ever good came of a sorcerer’s spell.”

“Afraid?” taunted Lord Michael.

Puffing out his chest and standing tall, the young swordsman said, “I am afraid of nothing.” With that, he turned toward the wall and started forward. Before entering the space encompassed by the archway, he hesitated only a moment. Then steeling himself, he stepped through and vanished.

Breya gasped and clung to Lord Michael at the man’s disappearance.

“Shall we?” asked Parr.

“You go ahead,” said Lord Michael. “Breya and I will be right behind.”

Parr nodded and moved to enter the archway.

“We must go child,” he said in a manner similar to the way her father would when trying to comfort her.

“Okay,” she said and wrapped both arms around his waist. The contact brought her comfort if not any alleviation to her fear.

Moving steadily, Lord Michael brought them to the archway. He could feel Breya trembling beside him. “It will be okay,” he assured her. Then trying to marshal his own courage, stepped through.