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CROSSROADS



The Middle of Nowhere

Paul B. Thompson





Before, in Nowhere

Everyone comes from somewhere, the Elder used to say. Kender have a home, even if they leave it once and never return from their wanderings. Soldiers and priests, merchants and monsters, all have points of origin. A patch of ground, the shade of a tree, a pattern of stars overhead are all parts of home.

The village of Nowhere was just that: isolated, unknown and unremarked. A scholar could have pointed out the larger locale on a map, but no map bore the name of Nowhere. Unlike some hamlets kept secret and safe by high mountains or steaming swamps, Nowhere was nowhere simply because it was out of the way, a small spot in a large expanse. Riches and resources they had none. The terrain was nondescript grassland, amidst low hills crowned with stands of willow and alder. Too scrawny for

lumber and too gnarled for spears or tool shafts, even the trees of Nowhere were of little use.

Despite the forgotten nature of the place, people did live there. A village had grown up around the only clear spring for two days' ride in any direction. Gray-bearded villagers called it the Eternal Spring, for in all the unbroken history of their lives, it had never run dry.

Simple huts of wattle slathered with mud daub surrounded the spring in a horseshoe plan, the open end of the shoe facing west, where the villagers kept fields planted in onions, carrots, barley, and cabbage. Constant labor was required to make anything grow. The climate was dry, and some seasons the only thing that kept the crops alive was the ever-flowing spring.

It was late summer, and the harvest was four weeks away. A minor drought had plagued the region since high summer. The usual towering thunderstorms had all passed south of Nowhere, leaving the yellow soil dry as flour. When the wind huffed down from the north, it brought with it a cloud of dust that covered everything in a drab and desiccated ochre grit.

Parched through and through from his morning's labors, Malek sought the old well. Sweat stung his eyes as he hauled up the bucket from the depths. The worn wooden pulley rattled and squeaked as the brimming bucket rose. Malek was pleased to see clear water sloshing as the container swayed upward. No matter how erratic the rains might be, the village could always rely on the ancient well.

Malek gathered in the bucket. He splashed a handful of water on the Ancestor's head, a token of appreciation of the well's steadfast bounty. The Ancestor was an upright lump of sandstone, as tall as his waist and red as the

sunset, inset in the rubblestone wall around the well. Totally unlike the nondescript gray rocks found around Nowhere, the Ancestor had been brought to the village from some far-off place so long ago its exact point of origin was forgotten. In time it had become the totem of the village. Old folks in Nowhere believed it housed the spirits of every man, woman, and child who'd ever lived in the village, hence the epithet, "Ancestor." Hearth tales told on long winter nights held the Ancestor was guardian of the Eternal Spring, with ancient and recondite powers.

Looking at the bucket, Malek frowned. The wooden sides were slick with slime. Someone was not doing their job. Every family in the village took turns caring for common property like the well. In summer, the bucket had to be scraped every few days to keep the slime off. It had been so neglected green moss was beginning to grow on the bottom. Malek poured the rest of the brimming bucket into a tall waterskin and tried to remember who had care of the well this month. Willat's family? Old widow Naek? Or was it Bakar? It must be Bakar. He was known to be careless, and besides, he was unmarried and couldn't slough the job onto a wife or child.

"How goes it, Malek?"

Bakar sauntered up, a sprig of barley in his teeth. The stem was yellow-green and thin like the crop in the fields.

"It goes dry," Malek replied with a grunt. When Bakar looked alarmed, Malek quickly explained, "The weather, I mean. The well flows."

Four times Malek dropped and retrieved the bucket. He hefted the now full skin onto his shoulder. Destined for his carrot patch, it held four buckets full, a heavy load. Even Malek's sturdy knees bowed a bit under the burden. He passed his neighbor the slimy bucket without a word.

He looked out over the patchwork of gardens. It was midday, and everyone able-bodied was in the fields. Only crippled old folk and the smallest children remained in the village during the day. They kept inside, out of the sun. Nothing was stirring, not even the wind. Malek's eyes narrowed.

"What's that?" he said, puzzled.

Bakar dropped the bucket down the deep shaft. Before it hit the water he replied, "What's what?"

"That dust."

Bakar turned languidly to see what puzzled his neighbor. Though a young man, he moved more slowly than anyone else in the village, save the Elder himself.

Shading his eyes, Bakar perused the narrow column of yellow dust rising southeast of the village.

"Wind," said Bakar, unimpressed.

"Wind's out of the north," Malek replied. "That dust is coming towards us, against the wind."

As soon as he said it, both knew someone was coming. As no one ever came to Nowhere casually, visitors meant trouble.

"Sound the gong!" Malek said. "I'll go to the fields!"

Bakar loped away, almost moving quickly. On a post between the last pair of houses in the village hung a slab of bronze, green with age. As Malek sprinted past, the phlegmatic farmer picked up the wooden mallet leaning against the post and started whacking the gong. The battered metal plate rang surprisingly clearly, and the sound carried far across the open land. By the time Malek reached the edge of the communal barley field, men and women were already gathering.

His elder brother Nils was there with his sixteen-year-old son Larem, the Elder's daughter Caeta (herself the

oldest woman in Nowhere), the tow-headed twins Lak and Wilf, and the other adults of the village.

"Why the alarm?" demanded Caeta. Malek, out of breath, simply pointed at the column of dust, now much closer than when he first spotted it. Grim-faced, Caeta shouldered her hoe and said, "Back to your homes, everyone!"

The fields rapidly emptied of farmers, each clutching whatever tool they happened to have—rakes, hoes, dibbles. Everyone converged on the clanging gong. Trailing the crowd, Malek took the opportunity to look for Laila, his bride-to-be. He spied her in the door of her family's hut, her blind father leaning on her strong, brown arm.

The farmers collected around the bronze gong, which Bakar continued to beat until Sohn the brewer snatched the mallet from his hand. Joined by a throng of old folks and children, the villagers milled about in noisy confusion, everyone talking and no one listening.

Malek skirted the chaotic scene and hurried along the row of houses to Laila's hut. Side by side, the resemblance between father and daughter was strong. They had the same sharp chin and straight nose, and identical brown eyes. Old Marren's hair had once been honey-brown, like Laila's. There the resemblance ended. Laila was tall, straight, and strong. The same wasting disease that had stolen Marren's sight had shrunk his formerly powerful frame and turned his wispy hair white.

"It's Malek," Laila said for her father's benefit. "What's happening?"

"No one knows yet, but something's coming—"

A piercing scream filled the air. All eyes turned toward the sound, which came from the cluster of gray-haired women gathered by their houses on the south side of the

village. Trotting through the hot afternoon sun came a line of horsemen. The tired animals' tongues were lolling and thickly coated with dust. Riding the thirsty beasts were figures in bizarre patchwork armor: bits of iron or bronze, mail or plate, wired and tied over thickly padded suits of leather. Cuisses, helmets, and schildrons were sculpted into hideous faces, skulls, and horned monsters. War and the elements gave these hideously mismatched suits a rusty patina that resembled splashes of dried blood.

Rider after rider emerged from the swirling grit stirred up by their horses' hooves, thirty-two horsemen in all. Armed with long lances, they halted just outside the ring of village huts. Visors on their helmets were shut, lending the intruders a faceless, menacing air. It must be stifling for the men inside—if men they were.

The unknown riders were frightening enough, but on their heels came a more terrifying sight. Striding into view came a squad of towering ogres, each almost as tall as the mounted warriors ahead of them. Yellow tusks, filed sharp as daggers, protruded from the ogres' underslung jaws. Their ears were pulled down to their shoulders by heavy ornaments of brass and bone, and their nobby gray hands were smeared with dried gore. The tallest of the monsters had blue-black tattoos on their shaven pates, and dry white skulls of various victims, two-legged and four-legged, hung from loops on their tarnished armor.

The screaming became general as the villagers shrank from the monstrous new interlopers. Many threw down their tools and huddled around the old gong post.

"Ogres," Old Marren said grimly. His grip tightened on Laila's arm.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"I can smell them."

No ogres had been to the village in living memory, and Malek wondered where the old man had encountered such monsters before. He let the question go unasked, muttering instead to Marren, "Do you still have that sword?"

The old man's sightless eyes gazed into the air over Malek's head. "I do. Over the fireplace."

"I'll get it."

"Malek, no!" Laila hissed.

"Go quickly, son!" countered the blind man.

Malek dashed inside. Marren's sword was old, nicked and pitted, but he kept it well honed and oiled. Malek took it down. It felt like stone, long and heavy. He had never held a sword in his life.

Outside, the ogres ignored the cringing farmers and set about slaking their thirst at the well. Bucket after bucket of water went down the ogres' long gullets, spilling out their jutting jaws and dripping from their ivory fangs. When one ogre didn't pass the bucket fast enough, his comrades buffeted him around the head with their massive clawed hands. Slipping in the mud, the tardy ogre fell heavily against the stone wall surrounding the well. His companions hooted.

Malek counted ten ogres, each armed with a long-handled axe; burnished, well-dented bronze shields; and banded-iron armor criss-crossing their chests.

Six more horses entered the village behind the ogres. Taller and finer-bred than those the lancers rode, they bore riders in blackened three-quarter plate, much stained from long days in the saddle. One rider bore a standard pole with a short, forked oriflamme of sun-faded scarlet. When the six appeared, the lancers straightened in their saddles and the ogres ceased their frantic

guzzling and sorted themselves into a semblance of a line.

The riders drew up between the well and the gong. In the center of the group, a tall horseman in streaked sable plate raised his visor and looked over the frightened farmers. Malek made out a short, wide nose and beetling brows, but the rider was undeniably human.

"Where is your headman?" he demanded.

When no dared respond, the man in black armor nodded, and the warrior beside him produced a crossbow. Knocking a thick quarrel, the bowman pointed his weapon at the crowd and loosed. To Malek's horror, Sohn the brewer collapsed, his chest pierced through.

More screaming and weeping erupted as the crowd of villagers surged away. The lancers quickly encircled them, herding the terrified farmers back to the gong. Two of the younger men tried to break free and run. Neither made it more than ten steps before they were spitted on rusty lances. Each new outpouring of blood brought fresh screams from the frightened farmers and restless growls and grunts from the ogres.

Malek had enough. He charged at the rider with the raised visor, waving Marren's old sword. He would have died for his temerity had not the invaders' leader stayed his archer's hand. Six steps from the horsemen, an ogre stuck out the handle of his axe and tripped Malek. The sword went flying, and Malek's charge ended facedown in the fresh mud.

"One of you has courage, if not brains," said the leader. The ogre who tripped Malek drove his bare foot into the villager's ribs. Shod or not, it felt like a plowshare. Malek rolled over and over from the blow. Fire and pain flashed through his side.

"Get up."

When it was clear Malek could not oblige, the leader ordered one of his ogres to get the farmer. The enormous creature, spattered with mud and smelling as if he'd rolled in the rotting carcass of a dead cow, seized Malek by the wrist and dragged him before his commander.

"Who are you?"

"Malek, Gusrav's son," he gasped.

"What place is this?"

"Nowhere . . ."

The ogre slapped Malek on the back of the head. A mild reproof by ogre standards, it rattled the teeth in Malek's jaw.

"I ask you again, what place is this?" barked the commander.

"The village of Nowhere!"

At his leader's nod, the ogre dropped him. Through tear-filled eyes, Malek watched as the invader unbuckled the chin strap of his helmet and pried the heavy headgear off. Under the sinister black helmet was a surprisingly benign countenance. Of middle age, his heavy brows and flat nose, combined with high cheekbones and deeply tanned skin, lent him an aura of refinement unusual for a bandit chief.

"I am Rakell," he declaimed loudly. "Lord Rakell. I have come to this province to bring law and order to backwaters such as this. From this moment on, I am master here. My word is your only law. Obey me, and all will be well. None shall be spared who defy my will. Is that clear?"

There was no response other than quiet weeping. Rakell ignored the muted lamentations.

"At my invitation, dwarves of the Throtian Mining Guild have established an iron mine sixteen leagues from

here in the northwestern buttes of the Khalkist Mountains.” Sensing geography meant little to his listeners, Rakell gave up further description. “They need able-bodied people to work the diggings. This village will provide twenty for the mine today and in thirty days’ time, another twenty.”

“There are only sixty-six adults here,” protested one farmer weakly. “Take away forty and there won’t be enough hands to harvest or plant!”

Rakell raised his hand, and three ogres waded into the crowd and dragged out the man who dared protest. While Rakell looked on impassively, they beat the poor farmer senseless with their enormous knotty fists. When blood started to flow, the bandit chief called off his thugs.

“That’s enough. Cripples and corpses can do little work.”

The ogres desisted. To the villagers the self-proclaimed lord of Nowhere added, “Perhaps your dialect is as backward as your wits. When I speak, it is a command, not a request!”

When the villagers persisted in clinging together in defiance of Rakell’s orders, the lancers moved in, using their spears to lever men and women from the weeping throng. They cut out the first twenty they came to, ranging from Nil’s teenage son to Bakar’s stout aunt Yena. Torn from friends and family, the chosen villagers were shoved into line by the ogres and shackled together.

Malek managed to roll onto one knee. Catching Rakell’s eye, the bandit-lord called for Malek’s lost sword. An ogre complied, presenting the weapon to his commander pommel-first.

Rakell took the sword. Upon examining it, his thick brows arched up in surprise.

“How did a knightly blade get to this dustheap, I wonder?” To Malek he said, “You, farmer. Where did you get this blade?”

“My plow turned it up in the barley field,” he lied.

Rakell swung the blade experimentally, testing its balance and heft. “Interesting. Pre-Cataclysm work, watered steel made by the school of Thelgaard . . . I shall keep this.” He slid the old sword through his buff leather baldric.

Marren’s sword! How dare he make off with it! Malek attempted to stand, but pain shot through his ribs and brought him up short. Gasping, he dropped back on his hands. Rakell’s companions laughed.

“Heal up, firebrand!” Rakell said, chuckling. “Next time will be your turn. I’d take you now, but the work is hard enough with healthy ribs!”

Rakell’s lieutenants ordered the huts searched. Lancers and ogres scattered, kicking down doors and dragging out women and children who’d hidden inside. Behind Caeta’s hut they found her cow. A lancer looped a halter around the beast’s horns and led her away. When her shaggy calf tried to follow, bawling, another lancer speared it. The sight and smell of blood inflamed the ogres beyond reason. Whooping, they fell on the still-living calf and tore it apart with their hands. Aghast, villagers watched in horror as the ogres happily ate the raw, bloody flesh with all-too-evident joy.

The human raiders filled waterskins and bottles from the well. One young warrior fetched his commander a cool drink. Rakell raised the skin to his lips, squinting against the late-day sun. The water had just begun to flow when Rakell stopped swallowing. Water coursed over his black-bearded chin.

“Mother of scorpions! Can it be?” he breathed. “Are there ghosts in this wasteland too?”

“My lord?” said the young man who’d given his water to Rakell.

The commander tossed the bottle to his aide and spurred his horse forward. At a slow walk, he approached the two figures standing before a rude and humble hut.

“It is you!” Rakell said. “Marren uth Aegar!”

The blind man lifted his chin. “No one has called me that for nine and twenty years,” he said. “Who speaks that forgotten name?”

“I served under you as a lad, forty years ago,” said Rakell. “I fought my first battle in the vale of Garnet at your side.”

“Who are you?” said Laila sharply.

“Another ghost.” Rakell unbuckled the gorget around his neck, revealing the base of his throat. A great livid scar stretched from under one ear all the way around to the other. Laila cried out, unable to believe anyone could survive such a wound.

“What is it, girl?” said her father.

“His throat was cut, and yet he lives!” she said, choking.

Marren breathed a single word. It might have been a name, but no one near, not even Laila, could make it out.

Rakell replaced the gorget. “It’s a day for resurrections, girl, if Marren uth Aegar lives too.”

To his aides he said, “These two shall come with me. Take them!”

“No!” Laila bloodied her knuckles punching a visored warrior, but it was all for naught. Her hands were pinioned, but she continued to struggle and kick. Not until a noose was hung over her father’s unbowed neck did she relent.

“Leave him be!” she cried.

“He can be led or be dragged,” Rakell retorted. “I can set one of my ogres to the task, or you may do it—if you behave yourself!”

Pale but furious, Laila agreed. The noose was taken off.

The lancers and ogres, with twenty enslaved villagers between them, started off at a slow shuffle, their backs to the setting sun. When Malek saw Laila and her father walking in the midst of Rakell and his lieutenants, he found the strength to stand and shout her name.

Heads turned all around. Rakell reined up, waiting to see what Malek might do. Unarmed, unskilled, the young farmer stood, trembling with rage.

“Ride on,” Rakell said calmly. With his first step, his horse put a hoof through the village’s well bucket, crushing it.

Lancers and ogres rampaged through the village huts, taking what trifles caught their eye. They despoiled far more than they stole. The worst loss occurred when two ogres found Wilf’s pigs. With deep grunts of satisfaction, the towering monsters waded into the pen, grabbing the young farmer’s fat porkers by the hindquarters. Tucking a shrilly squealing animal under each noisome arm, the ogres followed their leader out of the village.

No one moved until the raiders were just a column of dust rising from the hills again. Malek shook his fist at the drifting ochre pall.

Someone touched his shoulder. Malek spun, fists ready. It was his brother Nils.

“They took Larem!” he said. Malek saw something in his placid brother’s eyes he’d never seen there before: total outrage. “He’s only sixteen!”

“I know.” Malek put a hand on Nils’s shoulder and

coughed when the dust cloud swept over them. Every gasp felt like a knife in his ribs. Muddy streaks appeared on his face. "We must go after them!"

"Wait!" Caeta held Malek back. "You can't go. They'll kill you!"

He tore free from her grasp and stamped his feet in helpless fury. "Laila! They took Laila!"

"The Elder," said Nils, casting eyes at the windmill, sited on a low rise outside the village. There amidst the cogs and grindstones lived Nowhere's eldest resident. "Let's ask Calec. He'll know what to do!"

Old folks and children were sent back to their huts as the villagers swarmed up the hill to the mill. The airs were light, so the four vanes of the windmill quivered in place but did not turn. Without bothering to knock, Malek burst in. The others crowded in behind him.

"Aged One! Terrible news!" Malek said.

Calec raised his head from the knob of his walking stick. "I know. I saw."

No one questioned his claim. The old man couldn't see ten steps ahead, and he was nearly deaf, too. Only a deaf man could stand to live in the mill when the works were clattering. Nonetheless, for many years they'd all known the Elder could see and hear things an ordinary man could not.

"What shall we do, Papa?" asked Caeta.

"Do about what?"

"The bandits!" Malek ground his teeth. "They took our people to slave in some mine!"

The Elder's toothless jaw worked. "Take 'em back!"

Malek and the others who'd lost people today roundly cheered the old man's pronouncement, but Caeta said, "How can we? Those men are warriors. What about the

ogres? How can we fight them?"

"Then do nothing!" said the Elder testily. He lowered his chin to his stick and let his sunken eyes close.

"I'm going to try!" Malek declared. "Who's with me?"

Some were, and some weren't. It disgusted Malek that not all his fellow villagers would rally around him.

"Calves to the slaughter," Calec muttered. "Go now, and die."

Mentioning calves reminded everyone of the fate of Caeta's unfortunate beast. The memory of the ogre tusks biting out mouthfuls of still-living flesh was all too vivid.

Seeing the increasing number of downcast faces, Malek exclaimed, "Are we beaten, then? Do we give up our loved ones without a fight?"

"We're not warriors," Bakar said dolefully.

Malek felt as though the dirt floor of the mill was crumbling beneath his feet. "I'll go alone, if I have to!" he declared. He was almost out the door when Calec said, "Wait!"

Malek paused. "Speak your piece, old man, and be done with it."

A thousand fine wrinkles appeared when the Elder screwed his ancient face into a grimace. "Would you plow a barley field with a dibble?"

"Of course not!" A dibble was a simple hand tool, useful only in small gardens.

"But you'll fight an outlaw band alone—with your bare hands?"

"If I must," Malek replied stiffly.

"You need a plow to cultivate a field," said the Elder, wheezing a little as he shifted on his haunches. "For this great task, you need warriors to fight warriors."

"What are you saying, Papa?" asked Caeta.

“Set a wolf to eat a wolf! The world is full of spillers of blood and wielders of iron. They afflict the land as fleas torment a dog! Go and find some to fight your battle for you. Let their blood be shed, not ours!”

Everyone began babbling at once, debating the old man’s notion. Nils spoke for the nay-sayers when he asked, “How will we pay warriors? They’ll want steel or gold. We have nothing!”

“The granaries are full,” replied Malek. “Despite the drought, the harvest will be fair. We can pay in grain.”

“No mercenary will fight for barley!” scoffed Bakar.

“Some may for a full belly,” countered the Elder. “Find the hungriest, and make them your champions.”

After long wrangling, the farmers finally agreed. Four villagers would go forth from Nowhere to seek out warriors for hire. Malek wanted to go, and his brother Nils also volunteered. Daunted by the prospect of leaving their familiar land, no one else was quite so eager to join the expedition. Impulsively, Wilf offered to go. His twin brother Lak had been one of those taken by Rakell. Lastly Caeta announced she would go too. Someone older and more level-headed needed to go along to keep the hot-headed Malek out of trouble.

“Where should we go?” asked Wilf, scratching his rough thatch of straw-colored hair.

No one knew. None of them had ever been more than a day’s walk from Nowhere in their lives.

“Go west,” growled the Elder at last. “Follow the setting sun. That way lies the path of blood.”

Malek clasped hands with his fellow travelers. “We’ll be back in less than thirty days,” he vowed.

They hastily packed a few supplies for the journey and departed before sundown. As they passed the well, Wilf

noticed something strange. The Ancestor bore a large horizontal crack.

Caeta and the rest paused to examine the old stone. The sandstone pillar was broken right across.

“Must’ve happened when the ogre fell against it,” said Nils.

“A bad sign,” Caeta murmured, running worn and callused fingers over the break.

“Will the well dry up?” Wilf wondered.

Malek resumed walking. He was forty steps away before he turned back to call, “Leave that broken stone before your courage dries up!”

One by one his companions rose from the wall and joined him. Last to leave was Caeta. By the dying light of day she could see a dark stain spreading from the crack in the red stone. It spread very slowly, but when she touched the stain, her fingers were not colored or damp. The stain spreading from the broken stone did not leave a trace.



Chapter One

Later, Somewhere

Seven days' journey west from Nowhere lay a border where the corners of three lands came together in one place. No country had the power to hold this shadowed spot, and none would claim it. In a way, it was another kind of nowhere, but this nowhere was well known. Many are the rogues who need a place out of the sun to heal their wounds, nurse their hates, and hatch their schemes.

The town was called Robann, a girl's name, but no one living remembered who Robann was. Bordered on two sides by forest and on the third by plain, it was a ramshackle affair of half-timbered houses, plank shanties, and squat, ominous stone towers. These last were strongholds of the town's rulers, the seven gangs of Robann.

It was a windy day, and the wind poured in the

shutterless windows. Raika kept one hand over her cup, to keep the dust out. It wasn't very good beer to start with, and a leavening of sand and dry horse dung would not improve it.

She sat with her back against the wall of the tavern. This was a firm habit of hers. She'd seen a man stabbed to death from behind in a wineshop in Kalaman once. He was a famous general, and he trusted his loyal retainers to guard his back. One of them drove an iron blade into his master's kidney. Raika had no retainers and trusted no one but herself to protect her life.

The tavern was called the Thirsty Beggar. Raika thought the name was apt after she met the owner and barkeep. Taverners were usually bluff, ruddy-faced fellows with expansive waists and red noses. The proprietor of the Thirsty Beggar looked as if he had just survived the siege of Valkinord. What a dried up, hollow reed of a man. . . .

As she thought of him, he appeared before her with a dented copper pitcher full of brown beer.

"You want more?" he rasped, hefting the pitcher in his bony hands.

"I've enough for now." She kept her hand in place on the cup.

His eyes narrowed. "This ain't a lodging house. Taverns are for drinking. You don't drink, you don't sit here."

Raika waved a hand at the nearly empty room. "Yes, a mob is clamoring for my table, isn't it?"

The barkeep curled a lip and stalked away, head hunched between his narrow shoulders. Too mean to afford a bouncer, he had no way of forcing the rawboned woman from the premises if she didn't want to go. Raika didn't. She had no place to go.

She hailed from Saifhum. Her home had been the galley *Manarca*, now at the bottom of the sea with most of her crew. All that treasure had broken the good ship's back and put her under the waves. Bags of gold and ingots of steel, row upon row, nestled between *Manarca's* ribs. Each pair of timbers framed a prince's ransom, and Raika's share would have been a handsome sum. Then a storm came out of the great wide ocean and broke the galley in two, and down went Raika's fortune.

She'd had enough of the Beggar's cheap beer not to notice the four men when they first entered. They tiptoed in, wide-brimmed straw hats in their hands, looking distinctly out of place.

The barkeep made a beeline to the newcomers. Evidently they didn't want a drink, because the old scarecrow fell to berating them in a loud, screeching voice.

"What do you think this is, a temple? You want to warm my benches without drinking my brew? Get out, miserable fools! Get out before I take a broom to your backsides!"

"Shut up, man," Raika found herself saying.

"You can't talk to me like that! This is my place!" he shouted back at her.

"Horsedung! The Silver Circle gang owns this place. You just run it."

His gaunt face flashed more color than Raika had ever seen there. "That's a lie! I pay the Silver Circle good coin every week to stay open, but I own it."

The cause of this dispute huddled by the tavern door, listening. While the farmers cowered, a slight figure brushed past them, making for the bar.

The barkeep spied the newcomer. "You! Kender! I told you not to come back here!"

"Not me, boss. You must've told someone else. I've never been here before in my life, I swear on my granny's knickers—"

Raika laughed. This reminded the owner of her, and he turned back to say, "Mercenary trash! Get out of my tavern!"

She stood up, a study in contained power and careful lethargy. A full six feet tall with ebony skin, sun-washed sailor's togs, and a thick Saifumi turban, Raika seemed to fill the low-ceilinged room. Even the kender, seated nonchalantly on a barstool, turned to gaze at her.

Raika strode toward the barkeep. A head taller and far more robust, she backed the stooped shell of a man up against his own bar. She pushed her face to within a hair's breadth of his.

Glaring at him, she said, "What do I owe you?"

Trembling, he replied, "Nine cups of Number One brown beer, two sticks of boar jerky, let's see . . ." He counted on his fingers. "Three silvers, if you please."

Raika put two fingers in the purse tied to her wide sash belt and brought out a single large coin. It gleamed yellow in the dim light: a gold Saifhum florin. In a blur of motion, she slapped the big coin on the bar. Everyone in the Thirsty Beggar looked up, even the gray-bearded dwarf who'd been snoring in a back booth for the past hour. Before the owner could claim the gold, Raika's hand flashed back to her belt and drew a short dagger.

The men at the door, long forgotten, let out a collective gasp. Sweat trickled down the barman's face.

She raised the dagger alongside her head slowly. Three of the men at the door covered their eyes. One did not. Neither did the kender, already munching something he'd taken from behind the bar.

Without a word, Raika drove the dagger home. The emaciated barkeep let out a whimper and sagged to the floor.

She sauntered toward the door. The farmers made way for her. With one hand on the door, Raika looked back and said, "Keep the change."

She'd driven the dagger through the coin and into the bar. The blade was buried up to the hilt.

The kender hopped down and squatted over the unconscious man. Clucking his lips, he went around the end of the bar and filled his pockets with hard rolls, jerky, and chunks of yellow cheese. He picked up a pitcher of foamy beer. He walked back by the passed-out proprietor, stopping only to give the dagger an experimental tug. It didn't budge. Chuckling, the kender strolled out.

"Did you see that? He called her 'mercenary.' We should talk to her!" said the youngest of the men, the one with unruly yellow hair.

"She's certainly strong," agreed the lean, black-haired man, "but she won't be interested in our offer. She's has too much money."

"How do you figure that?" asked the stranger in the hood with the gray brows.

"She paid with gold and didn't take change."

The fourth man, the one with the thick shoulders and bald pate, went to the bar and tried to free the dagger. The dark, stained oak held fast to the slim blade. With so short a handle to grasp, no one but an ogre could free the dagger or the coin.

"Come on, Nils, let's try another place."

Outside, they saw Raika ambling up the street. She was easy to follow, being taller than most. She glanced back once at the four strangers, gave them a hard stare, and pushed her way into another tavern, the Boar's Tusk.

"What about that place?" said Malek, pointing.

Her long braid concealed by the hood, Caeta shrugged. "Any place folks gather will do."

The farmers wended their way toward the Boar's Tusk, clutching each other's cloaks. Robann was crowded by any standard, and to the innocent inhabitants of Nowhere, it was the most thickly populated place they'd ever been.

Wilf, last in line, felt a strange hand grasping the back of his woolen wrap. Over his shoulder he spied a kender, the one from the Thirsty Beggar. He was holding onto Wilf with one hand while he guzzled purloined beer with the other.

"Excuse me—?" Wilf said.

The kender lowered the pitcher and belched loudly. "You're excused, mate. I saw you fellas holding on each other, so I decided to join and up and see where you're all going."

Up front, Malek felt a tug as those behind him stopped. He spied the unwanted addition to their little group.

"What do you want?" he demanded of the kender.

"Nothing special. Just makin' my way."

"We're poor men. We've nothing to steal."

"Steal?" The kender drew himself up in mock outrage.

"You stole that beer," said Nils.

A hard roll fell from the kender's pocket.

"And that bread," added Caeta.

"Cheese and meat, too," put in Wilf.

With much affected dignity, the kender picked up the fallen roll and blew off the dirt. "I have every intention of paying!" he said. "As soon as I get some money," he added, glaring at them. Turning on one heel, he marched away.

“Wilf,” Malek said, “watch your back from now on!”

The Boar’s Tusk was considerably more busy than the last establishment. As soon as the farmers entered, they ran up against a wall of sights, smells, and sounds. The tavern was narrow but deep, lit by three open skylights.

“What now?” Wilf asked.

“Look for ones with swords,” said Caeta. “They’re the ones we need.”

Keeping close together, they insinuated themselves into the noisy crowd. Malek didn’t get five steps before half a flagon of wine was spilled on his shirt. It came from the hand of a sweaty fat man, who was gesticulating wildly as he related some tale to his companion, a red-bearded dwarf.

“What? Eh, sorry, friend!” said the fat man, still waving his hands. Droplets of blood-red wine flew. “Girl, fetch another pipe of this Goodlund vintage! And one for my poor, sodden friend, here!”

Malek tried to wave off the proffered drink. “I cannot repay the favor,” he protested.

“Never mind!” The stout man seemed to always talk at the top of his lungs. “I don’t need wine poured on me, friend, just in me!”

Caeta muttered in Malek’s ear, “We’ll scout the room.” With that, she, Wilf, and Nils were swallowed up by the press.

A glazed clay cup of wine was thrust into Malek’s hands.

“Falzen’s my name,” said the fat man. “This here’s Gorfon, Gorfon Tattermaul.” Falzen belched. “He’s a dwarf!”

Malek nodded to them both with wide eyes. “Malek, Gusrav’s son.”

“You’re not from around here,” said Gorfon. He had a deep, penetrating voice that Malek found he could hear well, even through the din.

“I’m from”—he almost said “Nowhere,” but he’d grown tired of explaining the village’s name. “—east of here. I’ve never been to Robann before.”

“It’s a stinking sinkhole, ain’t it?” Falzen said. “More so since the wars ended. Every out-of-work spear-toter north of the Newsea passes through here, seems like.”

Malek drank deeply of the Goodlund wine as his mind raced ahead. Lots of soldiers looking for employment was good news.

“Are you a warrior?” he asked, looking around for his companions.

“Me? May all the forgotten gods defend me! I’m no hack-and-slasher! Steel’s my line—iron and steel.”

That accounted for his expansive ways. Falzen must be a wealthy man. Eyeing the dwarf, Malek said, “Are you in the metal trade as well, Master Tattermaul?”

“Aye. My brothers and I have a new concession underway. In the east.” Tattermaul let that vague remark hang in the air. “A new iron mine.”

Malek almost choked. What was it Lord Rakell had said? “Dwarves of the Throtian Mining Guild had established a mine in the Khalkist Mountains?”

“Of course, the price of iron is down, thanks to the current peace,” Falzen went on. His small eyes shone. “But who knows? War may break out at any time.” He raised his cup to his dwarf colleague. “Here’s to war and the blades it takes to fight ‘em!”

Gorfon merely grunted.

As soon as he could, Malek slipped away. Loathing the callous steel merchant, he spun out an elaborate plan to

waylay Falzen and the dwarf, holding them hostage against the safe return of Laila and the rest—

He gave up the idea before he'd gone five steps. Four farmers, unskilled at anything but raising crops, weren't likely to overcome a rich merchant (doubtless with his own private guards) and a thick-armed dwarf. Besides, even if they could kidnap Falzen and Gorfon, once they returned them, Rakell could raid their village again with impunity. No, the old plan was best: Find real fighters to defend Nowhere by defeating Rakell's marauders.

Malek found his companions in a boisterous crowd surrounding an incipient arm-wrestling contest. On one side was an enormous man, seemingly carved out of sinew and hard muscle. He wore a sleeveless leather vest studded with brass rings, and his coal-black hair was gathered into a single long scalplock. A narrow mustache drooped on either side of his chin. His forearms bore many thin, parallel scars.

Across from this fearsome man was an even more startling figure. Bulking larger than any human in the tavern was a great bull-headed creature, a minotaur from the islands across the Blood Sea. Naked to the waist, the minotaur presented an expanse of heavily muscled chest. His dark, bovine eyes were soft in the shadowed recesses away from the skylights. When he blinked, Malek noticed the creature had very long brown lashes.

Onlookers howled bets and waved sweaty fistfuls of coins at the combatants. In spite of the minotaur's superior size, betting was heavily in favor of the burly man. Judging by the shouts around him, his name was Durand.

"Six to four, six to four for Durand!"

Odds makers scratched tallies on tabletops with lumps of chalk. More money appeared in all sort of denominations—

gold coins of a dozen nations, steel rings (the common pay of soldiers), square silver plaques, uncut gems, and even a sprinkling of humble coppers. The odds rose to two to one in favor of the human. Wilf got so excited he tried to bet the buckle of his cloak, but Nils restrained him.

"All right, beef-man," said Durand with a sneer. "Shall we be about it?"

"I regret this. I really do," replied the minotaur. His voice was as low and rumbling as his physique predicted, but his intonation was surprisingly gentle.

"Enough regrets!" Durand presented his brawny right arm, palm out. "Put up your paw!"

The minotaur's great hand almost completely enclosed the human's. "Notice, please, my hand has the same form as yours," the bull-man said. "It is not a paw."

Sinews in Durand's arm leaped out as he threw his strength against the minotaur. Everyone gathered around the table began shouting, most crying "Durand! Durand!" as the man tried to force the minotaur's arm down. So far, neither contestant had budged.

Veins appeared in Durand's neck, throbbing with effort. He bared yellow teeth and bore down, bowing his head to the task. Still the minotaur's arm did not shift. Quite absently, he raised his left hand and scratched behind his short horns. Durand grunted curses at his opponent.

The minotaur had few partisans in the crowd up to now. Seeing him resist Durand so effortlessly led a few to chant, "Go, bull-man, go!"

Eyes popping, Durand let out a roar of defiance. His elbow rose until howls from the onlookers made him bring it down again.

"This is tedious," said the minotaur. "I really must go now."

Without warning, he swept his arm down to the table. Everyone heard the loud pop as Durand's forearm snapped.

After a heartbeat of silence, the crowd erupted. Those who had bet on the minotaur whooped with joy. Durand's supporters cried foul. It wasn't long before a fist was thrown, then a flurry of weighty mugs followed. Touts scrambled to recover the wagers before a riot broke out. All the while Durand writhed on the floor, grasping his broken arm.

Someone flew backward into Malek, bowling him over. Wilf received a fist in the face and spun away, stunned. Tough old Caeta picked up a stool and used it to fend off a barrage of cups and mugs while Nils frantically dodged punches thrown at his head.

Malek got to his knees. He crawled toward the only calm person in sight: the minotaur. Several men fell over him along the way, but Malek reached the bull-man's side. Liquid brown eyes regarded him impassively.

"Any shelter in a storm!" Malek said.

Just then he spied the gleam of bare bronze. A man in a soldier's tunic with a bloody nose loomed behind the minotaur, dagger drawn. Malek tried to push the minotaur out of the way, crying, "Look out!" He might as well have tried to shift Mount Estvar.

The minotaur rose and turned. Easily seven feet tall, he towered so high his attacker lost his nerve. He gaped at the bull-man, and another brawler flattened him with a bench.

"Time to go," rumbled the minotaur. He grabbed Malek by the back of his shirt.

"Hey, wait!" Malek flailed helplessly, his feet off the floor.

"You did me a good turn. I'll see you safely out of this fracas."

"But my friends—!" He pointed at Nils and the others.

"Very well."

Still holding Malek, the minotaur waded into the melee, swatting aside anyone in his way. Once Nils, Wilf, and Caeta were together, he boomed, "Follow me," and started for the door.

It was a wild trip for Malek. He kicked and struck at anyone who got in his way, but it was hard to fight while dangling in mid-air. On the way he saw Falzen cowering under a table, while Gorfon stood over him, an axe resting on his shoulder. Brawlers gave the armed dwarf wide berth.

Three men cut the minotaur off, blocking the door. "Stop, you!" one of them shouted. He carried a short sword already stained with blood. "You cost us a lot of money!"

"That's hardly my fault," answered the minotaur mildly. "It was no contest. That should have been plain."

"Shut up, beef! Pay up, or we'll take our losses out of your hide!"

His friend, armed with a broken bottle, said, "Wonder if we can make a roast of him?"

"Naw," said the sword-bearer. "By the look of him, I bet his mother was a tough old cow."

Thump! Malek hit the floor on the seat of his pants. It hurt, but it was more the indignity he resented. He forgot his small discomfort when he saw the minotaur charge. Lowering his horned head, he caught the man's sword and with a twist, tore it from his hands. Another sideways swipe, and he threw the swordsman six feet onto a table. Next he backhanded the bottle-carrier, leaving him flat on

his back, out cold. The third troublemaker, seeing his armed friends undone, turned tail and fled.

Bellowing, the minotaur burst through the closed tavern door, smashing the planks to flinders. People in the street scattered at the sight of the raging bull-man. Malek and the farmers came tumbling after him. They piled up against the immobile minotaur's back.

The vast horned head snapped around, and Malek felt hot breath on his face.

"Little men, do not trouble me!"

"Don't you remember? I'm the one who warned you!" Malek replied.

Nostrils flaring, the minotaur regained his composure. "I am shamed," he said with a profound sigh. "To lose my temper over such a childish taunt! Still, no one calls my mother a c—" He bit off the hateful epithet.

"Not more than once," muttered Nils, behind his brother.

Shouts rang out from inside the Boar's Tusk. The men the minotaur had brushed aside had aroused the angry, drunken mob inside against the bull-man. They were coming, and there were two dozen of them at least.

"Time to go." The minotaur sprinted up the street, drawing stares from passersby as he ran. His long legs ate up ground at a tremendous rate, and the farmers struggled to keep up. A patrol of armed men appeared in front of him.

Someone cried, "Silver Circle guards!"

All the businesses in this part of town paid "protection" to the Silver Circle gang. News of the disturbance in the Boar's Tusk had swiftly reached the gang's stronghold, and this party of footmen had been dispatched to quell the riot and protect the gang's valuable concession.

Seeing naked swords and spears, the minotaur did a

quick about-face. The tavern mob had flooded the street. The minotaur forced his way through the angry crowd, tossing people right and left with hands and horns. The Silver Circle guards charged.

Malek waved and shouted, "This way! Follow us! Come on, this way!"

They ran down a side street, deeply shadowed by the setting sun and smelling damp. Up a narrow alley and over a fence, and they reached the rear of a large, ramshackle wooden building. Pausing for breath, the farmers and the bull-man listened for sounds of pursuit. There was noise aplenty, but it sounded as if the town guards were fighting the mob.

"I guess we escaped!" Caeta gasped, doubling over.

"Thank you for your help," said the minotaur. "I think I shall leave now. Too many hotheads in this town. Too many swords."

"Wait," Malek said. "What is your name?"

"Khorr, of the Thickhorn Clan."

"Wait, Khorr! Stay here until things calm down."

"What is this place?" The minotaur sniffed air filled with straw and horse dung. "A stable?"

"Our lodging," Wilf said wryly. "We can't afford the hostels here."

Planting his hands on his hips, Khorr surveyed the decrepit stable. "No one would look for the scion of the Thickhorn Clan in such a place!" He laughed, and the livestock within squirmed and pranced at the sound.

They went in and closed the rickety door behind them. In the loft, the farmers' meager bundles lay hidden under loose straw. As they settled in, backs against the wall, Caeta said, "How do you come to be so far from your homeland, Master Khorr?"

"It's a sad tale, long, and lacking in romance. Suffice it to say, I am exiled from the land of my clan, and I know not when I may return. Five years I've been traveling in foreign climes."

"On the run, eh?" said Nils. He rummaged through his bundle and distributed dry barley cakes to his comrades. Noting Khorr's interest, he gave the bull-man two cakes. "Kill someone, did you—if I may ask?"

"No. I chose a path for my life my clan could not accept."

Malek couldn't imagine what such a path might be. Pirate? Assassin?

"You see," said Khorr shyly, "I am a poet."

Everyone stopped chewing. "Poet?" said Wilf.

"Quite. I yearn to inscribe my name on the hearts of listeners everywhere, alongside the great bards of my race: Yagar, Kingus, Gonz . . ."

"If your people have had great bards in the past, why did your family oppose you becoming a poet?" asked Malek reasonably.

Khorr made short work of two barley cakes that would have fed a farmer for two days. "Well, the Thickhorn clan have always been seafarers," he said, licking his blunt fingers. "My grandsire, Khol, navigated the Blood Sea Maelstrom, and my Great-uncle Ghard won the Battle of Cape Balifor against the pirate fleet of Khurman the Terrible eighty-eight years ago. I wrote six hundred triplets about the battle . . ." Suddenly abashed, Khorr stopped and cleared his throat. "You see, for one of my name to remain at home in Kothas reciting verse was deemed a disgrace. They ordered me to sign on a ship, but I refused. When I defied my clan, they cast me out."

Silent lightning flickered through the gaping roof tiles.

The smell of rain was in the air. Caeta passed around a goatskin bag. It only held water, but it was all they had.

Malek explained who they were and why they'd come to Robann. "Unless we can find warriors to defeat Rakell and rescue our loved ones, our village is doomed," he finished. Thinking of Laila raised a lump in his throat all the water in the Eternal Spring could not wash down.

"There is much wickedness in the world," Khorr said solemnly.

"Where will you go next?" asked Caeta hopefully.

"South and west, I think. The lands around the New Sea are said to have a liking for the arts. Perhaps I will find a place there," said Khorr.

"Or . . ." Malek steadied himself to say aloud what he'd been thinking. "Or you could come to our village!"

"I'm not a warrior."

"You have twice the strength of any human," Malek said. "Come with us! We'll feed you well and house you. If you make a name defending us, maybe you can return to Kothas!"

Khorr stood, horns scraping the rafters. "Hmmm. I thank you for your hospitality, but I cannot accept your offer. Fighting is a brutal business. That is why I am a poet."

Thunder broke overhead, and rain poured down. The roof leaked, but the farmers moved to a dry corner. Glumly, Malek turned his face to the wall.

Heavy footsteps returned. Malek looked up.

"I'll stay as long as it rains, though, if you don't mind," Khorr said.

"Certainly! Certainly!" They made room in the dry spot for their hulking companion. Khorr drew dry straw up around his bare legs.

Paul B. Thompson

“It’s cold here,” the minotaur said. “Not like Kothas. There the sun shines hot and strong.”

“You really do want to go home, don’t you?” Caeta said gently.

The minotaur shook his heavy head. “A poet must experience life. Travail is the seasoning of good verse.”

“If that’s so, I’m a bard,” Nils grunted.

Though Khorr did not say any more, Malek knew they’d found their first champion.

