

THE SAGAS OF VÆLORA

D. Robertson
The Sagas of Vaelora:
The Burrow and the Blade
Book One

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THE SAGAS OF VÆLORA

THE BURROW AND THE BLADE

BOOK ONE

D. ROBERTSON

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THE
UNKNOWN NORTH





KALIDORIA

*This book is dedicated to my family & friends,
they've always supported me and are largely
why this world even exists. Vaelora is just
a different iteration of a fun, little pretend world
that my mother created for family fun.
Now I am reinventing and sharing it with everyone else.
Thank you for taking the time to read my first complete book!
If it were not for them, Vaelora would never have been.*

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To **Brian Jacques**, whose Redwall series taught me that anthropomorphic characters could carry the full weight of epic adventure and noble hearts.

To **J.R.R. Tolkien**, the master mythmaker who proved that invented worlds could feel more real than our own.

To **C.S. Lewis**, who demonstrated that fantasy serves its highest purpose when it touches the soul as well as the imagination. iii Your words lit the path I've tried to follow. Every great tale requires a

fellowship of devoted souls who venture into uncharted realms
alongside the storyteller.

This book exists because of family first, inspiration second, and then because of the extraordinary beta readers who wielded their keen eyes like master craftsmen, shaping raw narrative into something worthy of the worlds we've built together.

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May your own stories find their way to eager readers, just as you helped mine find its truest form.

PROLOGUE

“We are not the forgotten—we are the root, the blade, and the fire beneath the earth.”

— BLESSED BURROWKEEPER MERRIS BRIGHTPAW



Long before caravans carved paths through the tunnels of the Burrowlands, and long before the name Merrifur meant more than a hollow hill, there was a flame in the dark—and her name was Merris Brightpaw.

She was born beneath the Elderroot Grove during the Year of Empty Stores, when mushroom harvests withered black on their stems and even honeyed root-wine turned bitter on the tongue. Her fur gleamed white-silver in the dim burrow-light, her eyes the deep blue of winter sapphires. The midwife who delivered her claimed the child emerged clutching a fallen elderroot seed, though none could say how such a thing found its way into the birthing chamber.

From her first words, Merris asked questions that made the warren’s elders shift uncomfortably in their carved-stone chairs.

At seven winters old, she cornered Elder Brambleclaw after evening prayers. Innocent blue eyes gleaming in the lamplight. “If

we're meant to stay hidden," she pressed, "why do the old songs speak of Dimplekin who walked in sunlight?"

Brambleclaw's oversized ears pressed flat, making his head seem smaller. He gathered his robes and hurried toward the tunnel-mouth, muttering prayers under his breath. Behind him, Merris called out with the relentless curiosity of youth: "Elder! Why do our maps show tunnels that lead upward, if the surface world brings only death?"

Her questions echoed in the stone passages long after the elder disappeared.

The Burrowfolk had long lived in caution—hidden, burrowed, and beneath notice.

But the darkness beneath the world had noticed them.

What followed became known as the Plague War—a slow, festering conflict waged in silence and shadows. The Skul'Vren, creatures of pestilence and malice, whispered their way through forgotten tunnels, spreading disease and terror. But they had not always been so.

Once, they were like the Burrowfolk—harmless ratkin, neighbors, friends, who lived in surface warrens and deep-rooted kinships, until something ancient took hold. A sickness. A darkness. It twisted their minds, blackened their hearts, and turned their bodies into vessels of decay. Where once they shared bread and stories, now they brought ruin. One warren at a time, they struck, leaving rot in their wake. The Warren leadership called them a myth. Merris called them what they were— at war.

When the first tunnels fell, Merris was there. Not to flee, but to fight. Her blade, Burrowfang—an heirloom of old Quivren make—was not gifted but claimed, taken from the cold grip of a fallen defender. She trained with outlaws, veterans, even monsters who remembered the old wars. And when the time came, she stood.

At Grand Burrow Ridge, beneath a sky bruised with ash, Merris Brightpaw led a scattered host of Lopari scouts, Quivren burrow guards, and Dimplekin shadow-blades.

They stood against the twisted, ratlike creatures of sinew and shadow—horrors born from the deepest depths, bristling with disease-ridden fur and eyes like dying coals. Their wiry frames, once scuttling through the tunnels with eerie silence, now lay motionless upon the field, their reign of terror broken. The good burrowfolk were outnumbered, outmatched, and nearly overrun.

But they held.

Exhaustion clawed at her limbs, but Merris did not falter. Her stance was steady, her blade still wet with Skul’Vren blood. Each breath was defiance, each scar a vow her people would not fall.

For three days and nights, they fought. On the third day, Merris descended into the deepest reaches of the burrows, where the Skul’Vren leader awaited. He was called Vermak the Plague-Sworn—a grotesque rat, his body swollen with disease, fangs dripping with venomous saliva, and skin pulsing with unnatural boils. There, in the dark, Merris led the charge.

She met Vermak in single combat beneath the ancient stone vaults of Hollowdeep. His warhammer struck with earth-shattering force, once slamming her into a wall with a sound like cracking bone. But she rose again, bloodied but unbroken. Bloodied but burning. And with a cry that carried through root and stone, she charged—her final strike swift as judgment. Burrowfang sang through the dark. Vermak’s head fell to the stone.

With his fall, the corruption that had spread through the roots of the Burrowlands seemed to recoil, retreating like mist before the dawn.

The surviving Skul’Vren, their will broken, fled into the darkest depths, never to be seen again.

She called down the names of every warren that had fallen, and when the morning came at last, she stood alone among the corpses.

Her voice, hoarse and raw, rang like an oath across the bloodied hill: “This day, we stand as one.” The words carried across the weary faces of Lopari, Quivren, and Dimplekin alike, turned toward their leader with reverence. “No longer scattered. No longer divided.

The Skul’Vren came to break us, to pull us into the depths and feast upon our bones.” She gestured toward the fallen enemy, her sapphire eyes burning with conviction. “But we did not yield. We did not cower. We did not burrow into the earth and pray for the storm to pass.”

A chant rose from the gathered throng, a name carried upon the wind. “Brightpaw! Brightpaw! Brightpaw!”

When she returned from the depths, Merris lifted her sword, its silver edge glinting in the morning light. “Today, we are united. The Burrowlands are not just tunnels and trade routes; they are our home.

And as long as we stand together, no force, no shadow, no creeping horror will ever take that from us.”

She lowered her sword and turned to the Council of Elders, who stood among the people, their aged faces awash with pride and newfound determination. Grand Arbiter Brindlethorn, his whiskers twitching with emotion, stepped forward. “The Root-Blessed Brightpaw,” he declared, his voice trembling with reverence. “Let the Burrowlands forever remember this day. Let your name be etched into stone, and your deeds sung by every generation to come.”

Her legacy became the spine of the Burrowlands. Those who shaped its future, its coin-bearers, lawmakers, and protectors—would quietly trace their lineage or inspiration back to her flame. Under her teachings, the warrens united. Trade flourished. Peace endured.

Her sayings became law. Her strategies studied, her resolve mirrored in those who would rise generations later with sharp minds and sharper convictions. Her likeness was carved in stone. Her blade, Burrowfang, enshrined in the Sanctum of the Hollow Sun—a vast underground chamber bathed in filtered golden light, where her statue stands vigil above a pedestal of polished obsidian, and the walls whisper the names of those who fell beside her.

Each year, on the Day of the Ember Veil, Burrowfolk from every warren make a pilgrimage to the Sanctum. They bring offerings of rootflowers and carved stones, and speak the names of their ancestors aloud in a candlelit procession. It is said that those who kneel beneath her statue may glimpse visions of buried courage—and in the stillness, hear her whisper among the stone and shadow.

Years flowed by. Seasons came and went like whispers in the tunnels. Heroes rose and were buried in root and stone. But the story of Brightpaw endured—woven into lullabies and carved into hearth-stones, whispered in prayer and shouted in battle.

And now, in the quiet hours before a new storm, the name stirs again.

For the deep dark stirs again, as it did in the days of plague and flame. Something old. Something forgotten.

Over fifteen centuries have passed since Brightpaw’s stand. And now, as shadows lengthen once more, a descendant of trade and legacy—one who bears the name Merrifur—walks unknowingly toward the fire Brightpaw once lit.

And this time, the blade will not rise alone.

CHAPTER I

A MERCHANT'S COURAGE

"Trade is not the lifeblood of our people; courage is. And courage often means leaving comfort behind."

—JANE MERRIFUR



In a softly illuminated chamber, Babax sat alone at an expansive oak table, the dim candlelight doing little to warm the familiar chill of duty. He was lean for a Lopari, built for speed, yet the only race he ran was against the clock, tallying shipments and finalizing contracts.

He tugged at his waistcoat's brass buttons, loosening the top one. The garment had fit perfectly last season—before the sword training with Varnley had broadened his shoulders.

He breathed in the honeyed scent of old ink and sealing wax, and his nose twitched, yearning instead for the sharp tang of pine from the high forests or the dusty freedom of an open road.

His paws—dexterous, with faint calluses from handling both quills and practice blades—rested on the polished oak, fingers unconsciously tapping beside a stack of official documents. His gaze drifted past them, unfocused, seeing not the meticulous script but Stumper's

bold handwriting in the margins—notes from five years ago, still marking the routes he'd planned to take.

Babax lightly traced the finely etched Merrifur crest on a nearby letter seal, the familiar grooves offering no comfort, only the weight of expectation.

Five years. The number sat like a stone in his chest.

Stumper had vanished on the Hollowbrook trade route—a journey he'd made dozens of times. No bodies, no wreckage, no explanation. The council called it a misfortune, offered their reasonable theories: raiders, storms, a deal gone wrong. But all Babax had was an empty chair at the family table and ledgers still marked with his brother's confident notations: "New opportunity in Western markets. Triple profits possible."

The merchants who had last seen Stumper spoke of his confidence, his easy laugh, his plans to return with stories that would make the council weep with envy. That confidence had been Stumper's greatest strength—and perhaps, Babax now feared, his fatal weakness.

For years, he had watched his parents wield the art of negotiation like a blade, their words shaping destinies with precision. But even they had never uncovered the truth about Stumper. And for all their wealth and influence, they had forced themselves to do the one thing Babax could not—move on.

But Babax hadn't.

He had spent countless nights listening to travelers' spin tales of vast kingdoms, sky-born eyries, and the deep ruins of lost empires—stories that sounded more real to him than the council's explanations. He scoured maps, tracing the paths his brother once walked, memorizing the names of merchants who had last seen him, the deals he had been brokering.

Now, at the cusp of adulthood, Babax was expected to take his place among the council, to oversee the endless tide of commerce that had made the Merrifur name untouchable. But he knew he could not sit idly while the truth called to him from distant roads.

He had to see the roads himself. To feel the weight of a journey in his bones. To follow his brother's path.

And this time, he would not return empty-handed.

The opportunity came sooner than expected.

The evening's peace was shattered when heavy footsteps echoed in

the corridor, followed by an urgent knock that spoke of official business.

The study door burst open. His mother stood there, her emerald eyes sharp with concern. Behind her, a dust-covered Canidar messenger swayed on his feet, his pointed ears pinned back and intelligent brown eyes darting nervously between shadows. His black and tan fur was matted with road dust, and the crimson and gold livery of House Thorne hung loose on his lean frame—fine cloth that marked him as bonded labor rather than free citizen.

The thorned crown over crossed swords emblazoned on his message pouch was unmistakable—a symbol that had appeared on treaties and ultimatums across three kingdoms. House Thorne: a powerful noble house in the Kingdom of Eldoria, beyond the Western Borderlands, known for their ruthless efficiency in trade negotiations and their long memory for perceived slights.

"From House Thorne, my lady," the Canidar said with practiced formality, though his voice carried the strain of hard riding. "I must return immediately." His black-tipped tail remained rigidly still—a sign of controlled fear that spoke of consequences far beyond mere tardiness.

Jane accepted the parchment with careful composure, but Babax caught the slight tremor in her fingers as she broke the wax seal. The Canidar was already stepping backward before she had even begun to read. As the color drained from her face, the sound of the messenger's hurried departure echoed through the corridor.

"The esteemed House Thorne requests the presence of a Merrifur representative at Hollowbrook Market to discuss the future of Burrowland trade," Jane read aloud, her voice growing colder with each word. "Failure to comply may result in economic sanctions and restrictions on Burrowfolk caravans within Eldoria's borders."

Jane's tail flicked sharply in irritation as she lowered the parchment. "A 'request' under threat of financial ruin. Classic Eldorian charm."

Babax's father emerged from the shadows of the doorway where he'd been listening. Jim stepped closer, reading over Jane's shoulder with a deepening frown. "Extortion dressed in diplomatic language," he muttered. "They're not even trying to hide it anymore."

Jane began pacing, her fury barely contained. "Those dirt-pawed, big-fingered, wine-choked swine! Those thrice-cursed high-walkers

think they can dictate terms to us?" She snatched up the letter again. "‘Lucrative trade deal’ my tail. This is a demand, not a negotiation."

Jim sighed heavily, his fingers rubbing his temples. "Jane, anger won't change what this means."

"No, but breaking their kneecaps might," she muttered darkly.

Jim gave her a warning look. "We knew this would happen eventually. House Thorne has never forgotten that we won the last trade war. I've seen his methods before—he squeezes until something breaks, then claims it was always his by right."

"They're trying to strong-arm us," Jane growled. "And if we give in now, they'll just keep squeezing until there's nothing left."

Jim leaned back, his gaze distant but sharp. "It's not if we send someone, Jane. It's who."

A heavy pause filled the room. Jane's eyes narrowed, catching the direction of his thoughts instantly. "No," she stated, voice flat.

"We need—"

"Don't say it," Jane cut him off. "You're not thinking of sending him. Or worse, you. Need I remind you what Elias Thorne tried last time? He drew steel, Jim. On you."

Jim's expression softened, but his resolve didn't waver. "And who else fits, Jane? Thorne needs a Merrifur face, but one they won't see as a direct challenge yet. Someone underestimated."

"What about Jaspwick? He's got the Merrifur name, he's competent enough, and he's already proven himself in the lumber trade negotiations."

Jim nodded slowly. "Jaspwick would be the obvious choice. Solid, reliable, experienced—everything we need for managing established trade routes. He'd handle their formal demands perfectly, follow every protocol, give them exactly what they expect from a Merrifur representative."

"But?" Jane prompted.

"But predictable responses don't teach us anything about their true intentions," Jim replied. "Jaspwick would come back with a signed agreement and a pawshake, but we'd still have no idea what Thorne is really planning. We need someone who can think on their feet, adapt to unexpected situations, and read between the lines."

Jane's ears twitched as understanding dawned. "Someone who can handle both diplomacy and deception."

"Exactly. We need someone trained not just in negotiation, but in

reading people, in presenting different faces depending on what the situation requires."

Jane's eyes narrowed. "You're talking about someone with illusion training. Someone who can go to Hollowbrook as whatever House Thorne needs them to be—naive enough to seem harmless, clever enough to seem valuable, inexperienced enough that they'll try manipulation instead of elimination."

A heavy silence fell between them as the implications sank in. They both knew there was only one family member who fit those qualifications.

Babax didn't wait for his parents to finish arguing. "The letter is addressed to House Merrifur," he said, stepping between them. "That means it's addressed to me, too. I'm going."

His voice cracked slightly with nervous excitement. "I've been preparing for this my whole life, haven't I? All the training, the lessons—what's the point if I never get to use them?"

Jane turned to him, her protective instincts warring with pride. "Babax, this isn't one of your market games. House Thorne doesn't play fair. You're skilled, but you're not ready for their vipers."

"Then let me get ready!" Babax insisted, straightening. "How can I lead if I never face the danger myself?"

Jim's gaze sharpened. "It's more than just Thorne, Babax. The roads west... the Borderlands are stirring. There are whispers—raiders, yes, but worse things crawl out from the ruins."

Babax met his stare, unwavering. "Then all the more reason I should go. To see it, understand it. Secure the route. I'll do what a Merrifur must."

Jane looked from her son to her husband, conflict clear in her eyes. She saw the same fire in Babax that had driven Stumper—and that both thrilled and terrified her.

"He's our son, Jim! Not a pawn to sacrifice on Thorne's board just to keep the trade lanes open!"

"And what happens if those lanes close?" Jim countered, standing slowly. "You know Thorne. He won't stop at tariffs. He'll choke our supplies, turn the guilds against us. Refusal is a sacrifice, Jane—one the whole Burrowlands might pay."

Jane turned away sharply, gripping the back of a chair until her knuckles whitened. After a long moment, she spoke, voice quieter but

sharp as flint. "I don't trust them, Jim. Not Thorne. Not this summons."

"Neither do I," Jim admitted softly. "It stinks of a trap. But I trust Babax's training. I trust his mind. And..." He hesitated. "He has to walk his own path, Jane. He's not Stumper. He deserves the chance to prove that."

Jane closed her eyes, a shuddering breath escaping her. "He's not a kit anymore."

"No. He isn't." Jim's smile was faint, tinged with sadness. "But he's still ours."

"And that's exactly why he has to go. To become more than just ours."

Jane held his gaze, searching for any waver. Finding none, she finally gave a sharp, reluctant nod. "Fine. He goes. But Jim—if Thorne or his whelp lay a hand on him..." Her voice dropped dangerously low. "There won't be enough left of their House to bury."

Jim's expression hardened in agreement. "Then we'll be ready."

Jane folded the letter and placed it on the table, then turned to her son. "If you go, you will not go alone. You will need protection, you will need steel."

Jim's paws hesitated as he reached beneath the table, retrieving a small velvet pouch that had clearly been waiting, untouched, for years. The fabric was worn soft from nervous handling.

"This was meant to be given when you came of age," he said quietly, his voice thick with unspoken grief, "but with Stumper missing, we... we kept hoping he'd return to claim it first."

Jane's breath caught audibly. "Jim..."

"He should be here," Jim continued, his voice barely steady. "He should be the one going to Eldoria."

With paws that shook despite his merchant's composure, Jim opened the pouch and withdrew a ring. Heavy gold caught the lantern light, its surface bearing the intricate Merrifur family crest—roots intertwined with glowmark and quill, symbols of prosperity grown from wisdom.

"We kept this for him," Jane whispered, her voice breaking slightly. "Always hoping he'd come home to claim it."

Jim held the ring up to the light, and Babax could see the careful craftsmanship, each line lovingly maintained. "Five years we've waited," his father said, his golden eyes heavy with unshed tears.

"But you're here now," Jim continued. "You're ready."

Babax stared at the ring, honor and confusion flooding through him. "Father, I... this was his. Shouldn't we wait? When he returns—"

"Son," Jim interrupted gently, "this family needs someone to carry its name forward. And that someone is you."

As Jim slid the ring onto Babax's finger, it felt impossibly heavy—not just from the gold, but from stepping into a role that had always belonged to his older brother.

"A signet ring grants you the authority to make binding agreements in our family name," Jim explained. "Every contract you sign, every promise you make—it carries the full weight of our house behind it."

Jane stepped closer. "You're not just carrying our hopes, Babax. You're carrying our future."

"What if I'm not ready?" Babax asked quietly, looking down at the golden band. "What if I can't live up to what Stumper would have done?"

Jim's voice grew firm. "Stumper made his choice to leave, son. But you're choosing to stay, to serve, to grow into the leader this family needs. That means everything."

"I won't disappoint you," Babax said finally, his voice stronger than he felt. "I'll prove worthy of this."

"Just... promise us you'll come home," Jane said, her voice breaking slightly. "Rings and legacies mean nothing if we lose you, too."

Babax reached out, taking both his parents' paws. "I promise. Stumper taught me to be bold, but you both taught me to be wise. I'll carry his courage with me, but I won't forget your lessons about caution."

The next evening, the family gathered in their sitting room. Before Babax could embark on his journey, Jim led him down into the Merrifur training chamber—a spacious underground hall carved from the earth beneath their burrow, its walls reinforced with fitted stone blocks. Verdant lamps glowed from brass fixtures mounted along the stone-lined walls, while engineered ventilation shafts brought in fresh air. Word spread quickly, and local merchants and guards gathered along the stone benches, whispering among themselves about the legendary merchant-warrior's skills.

Tension hummed through the underground space as Jim selected wooden practice swords from a wall rack, tossing one to Babax.

"You want to step into the world beyond the burrow, show me you're ready to hold your ground!"

Babax tightened his grip on the blade, adjusting his stance as he had been taught. Jim moved first, fast for a male his age, his blade whistling through the air in a test strike aimed at Babax's side.

Babax blocked the impact, feeling it rattle up his arms. He barely had time to adjust before Jim struck again, pressing the attack with calculated force. Babax deflected one strike, then another, but Jim's experience was undeniable.

Jim suddenly stepped back and lowered his sword slightly. "You're fighting like a human, boy. Like someone who thinks they can match strength for strength, but you're a Lopari, you cannot."

Babax hesitated, panting, as Jim continued, "We are smaller than men, weaker than the Borvann, and slower than the Aeryn, but we are quicker in thought and movement. Speed is our shield, and precision is our sword. Stop meeting me head-on. Move!"

Babax nodded, gripping his sword tighter. The next time Jim lunged, Babax side-stepped instead of blocking, narrowly avoiding the strike. He pivoted, bringing his blade up toward Jim's exposed side.

Jim barely deflected the strike in time, his expression shifting slightly. "Better, again!"

Babax dodged another attack, weaving between strikes. He wasn't just defending now—he was adapting. He aimed for Jim's wrist, his knee, the vulnerable spots where even a small blade could make a difference. The onlookers murmured in approval as the young Lopari moved with newfound agility, fighting with cunning instead of brute force.

Then Babax saw an opening. He darted forward faster than Jim expected and nearly struck his father's side, but at the last moment Jim parried, twisted, and disarmed him with a flick of the wrist.

"You've been practicing," Jim observed. "And not just with me. Who's been training you behind my back?"

Babax hesitated, then admitted, "Old Sergeant Varnley."

Jim's expression shifted to genuine surprise. "Varnley? He's back in Fleetfoot Hollow?" His voice carried amazement and warmth. "I hadn't heard he'd returned from the northern frontier. Last I knew, he was up in Thornwatch, training border patrols against Thralvok raiding parties."

A gruff familiar voice rang out from across the yard. "That's my pupil!"

Sergeant Varnley came striding toward them, his small frame moving with surprising speed despite the cane. His dark eyes darted quickly between faces, assessing the situation with the keen alertness of his mousekin heritage. The old Dimplekin veteran had once been formidable—age had darkened his once-light fur, creating a stark contrast to the long white beard that reached his chest. A leather patch covered his missing eye—a grim reminder of battles survived.

Jane walked beside him, shaking her head at the old warrior's exuberance. Varnley thumped Babax's back with enough force to nearly knock him over. "Get up, lad! I hate all that formality nonsense. You fought well. Tell me, you leave tomorrow?"

Babax nodded. "I do."

Varnley's single eye studied the golden ring on Babax's finger. "That's a fine piece of authority," the old warrior mused, "but it's a merchant's power, lad. Made for negotiating contracts and opening doors in civilized places."

Jim's expression grew grim, understanding where his old friend was heading.

Varnley's weathered face hardened. "You know as well as I do, Jim, that the Borderlands aren't civilized places anymore. That ring's perfectly suited for commanding respect in council chambers—ideal for securing safe passage or favorable terms. But when you're facing a Pazgar brute who's never heard of the Merrifur name?" He gestured to his own scarred paws. "You need steel that speaks a language every savage understands."

"You're saying he needs..."

"A warrior's blade," Varnley finished. "That ring will earn you respect in civilized company, lad. But House Thorne isn't civilized—they're predators wearing merchant's clothing. When they push you to see how far they can go, when they corner you in some dark alley—that's when you'll need steel that speaks louder than authority."

He reached beneath his coat and withdrew a worn but formidable sword. The steel bore the scars of countless battles, its edge nicked but still keen, designed for both strength and speed. This weapon was purely functional—built to kill rather than merely wound.

"This sword has seen more blood than most warriors ever will," Varnley said, his whiskers twitching. "It took down a Pazgar brute in

single combat. Size doesn't matter when you know where to strike—we Dimplekin survive by being faster, smarter, and more vicious than anything twice our size."

He tapped the hilt, reminiscing. "I was alone, my squad dead, and this huge Pazgar came charging at me. The size of a house, tusks dripping with blood. I didn't run. I couldn't. I let him charge, waited until the last second, then slid beneath his legs—one stroke to the belly was all it took."

Varnley's expression grew deadly serious. "Remember that, lad—when you're facing something that wants to eat you alive, authority means nothing. But this blade?" He offered the sword to Babax. "This doesn't just cut—it survives. And more importantly, it keeps its wielder alive."

Babax looked down at the ring on his finger, then at the battle-scarred weapon, understanding dawning in his golden eyes. The signet would open doors, secure allies, and grant him authority. But it wouldn't keep him alive when words failed.

"The ring carries the weight of our family's honor," Babax said quietly, his paw tracing the worn grip. "But where I'm going..." He looked at the veteran's battle-tested weapon. "I think I'll need something that can protect my life when honor and negotiation mean nothing."

As Babax accepted the scarred sword with both paws, the moment his fingers wrapped around the worn leather grip, he felt the difference immediately—this wasn't just steel, it was survival made manifest.

"I won't let you down," Babax said, his voice steady with newfound resolve.

Varnley's gruff expression softened slightly. "That ring will get you through doors and into rooms where deals are made, lad. But this sword?" He tapped the pommel. "This will get you out of those rooms alive if the deals go bad."

Jim stepped forward, his voice heavy with the weight of experience. "Your mother and I hoped you'd never need to learn this distinction, son. But if you're to walk the roads Stumper walked..." He trailed off, the unspoken fears hanging in the air like storm clouds.

Jane stepped closer, her piercing eyes studying Babax with quiet intensity. "You've been training hard, my son—both steel and magic.

Tomorrow, before you leave, I want to see how far your illusion work has progressed. We'll meet in the training yard at first light."

Babax nodded, feeling the weight of both gifts settling on him—Varnley's battle-scarred sword at his hip, his father's signet ring heavy on his finger. "I'll be ready."

"Good," Jane said softly, though something flickered in her eyes—concern, perhaps, or recognition of something she'd sensed in him but wasn't yet ready to name. "Rest well tonight. Tomorrow begins your real education."

As the crowd slowly dispersed into the evening shadows, Babax remained in the training yard, the merchant's signet heavy on his finger and the warrior's blade balanced in his grip. Tomorrow, he would walk the roads to Eldoria, carrying his family's authority and their calculated strategy for outmaneuvering House Thorne.

What his parents didn't know was that every step toward Hollowbrook would also be a step toward understanding what had happened to Stumper five years ago. While he played the role of naive young merchant-prince for House Thorne's benefit, he would be pursuing questions he couldn't voice aloud and following leads his family couldn't afford to acknowledge.

CHAPTER 2

BONDS FORGED IN DAWN'S LIGHT

"A merchant learns early that the most valuable cargo isn't gold or goods—it's the trust of those who guard your back when the road turns dark."

— JIM MERRIFUR, BURROWLORD OF FLEETFOOT
HOLLOW



After the crowd dispersed from the sparring match, Jim stepped forward, his merchant's composure giving way to a father's concern. "Your mother and I hoped you'd never need to learn this distinction, son. But if you're to walk the roads Stumper walked..." He trailed off, the unspoken fears hanging in the air like storm clouds.

Jane stepped forward, her piercing eyes resting on Babax with quiet expectation. "Now, my son, let us see your true talent. Show me your magic."

Babax grinned, ears perking up. If there was one thing he excelled at, it was illusion magic. But not the harsh, willful magic of the Aether mages—this was something deeper, gentler.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, feeling for the essence of

this place. The training yard where he'd played as a kit, where his father had first taught him to hold a blade, where generations of Merrifur children had learned to fight. The very earth remembered their footsteps, their laughter, their determination—and with enough respect and emotional connection, it would share those memories.

But today, something felt different.

As Babax extended his paws, not commanding the magic but negotiating with it, he sensed something unusual in the familiar soil beneath his feet. The memories here ran deeper than he'd ever noticed—not just of his family, but of something older. Something that whispered of forgotten connections and bloodlines long forgotten.

"Show me who I was," he murmured to the essence of the place, "so I might know who I am becoming."

The golden light swirled around him, and suddenly three identical copies of Babax materialized—but these weren't the simple practice illusions he'd managed before. Each one carried a weight of presence that surprised even him, born not just from the yard's recent memories but from something deeper in the earth's ancient recollection.

"How is this?" they asked in unison, their voices carrying an unexpected resonance that made the very air shimmer.

Jane's eyes widened slightly. This wasn't just advanced for his age—this was touching on something she hadn't expected to see for years yet. She could sense the deeper current running through his magic, the way it seemed to draw from wellsprings of memory far older than the training yard itself.

"Impressive," she said carefully, studying the illusions with newfound concern. "But tell me, Babax—did you feel anything... unusual just now? Any sensation of drawing from memories not your own?"

Babax frowned, still maintaining the illusions but now aware of what his mother meant. "I... yes. It felt like the earth was offering me more than just our family's memories. Like there were deeper stories waiting to be told."

Varnley's single eye sharpened with recognition. "Ancestral resonance," he muttered, his voice carrying a note of surprise. "I've heard of it, but never seen it so young. The lad's not just drawing from recent memory—he's touching the bloodline itself."

Jim looked between them, confusion clear on his features. "What does that mean?"

Jane stepped forward, her own magic stirring. Rather than simply dispelling the illusions, she placed her paw gently on the earth and whispered her thanks to the yard's patient spirit—but also sent out a careful probe, testing the deeper currents her son had accessed.

What she found made her fur bristle with unease. The ancestral memories weren't just of their family line—they carried echoes of the ancient wars, of powers that had once stood against the Abyss itself.

"Synchronized illusions with ancestral resonance at such a young age," she said, her voice now carrying both pride and worry. "You're not just gifted, Babax. You're awakening to something that runs in the oldest bloodlines of our people. Something that might explain..." She trailed off, glancing meaningfully at Varnley.

The old veteran nodded grimly. "Aye. Might explain how certain impossible things become possible when the need is great enough."

"Your gift lies in Memory Weaving," Jane explained, watching her son's illusions settle back into the earth with unusual reluctance—as if they were more real than they should be. "But what you just demonstrated is remarkably advanced Echo Weaving for someone your age. Most illusionists take years to achieve such perfect synchronization."

"What do you mean?" Babax asked, still feeling the strange resonance in his bones.

"Normal Echo Weaving draws from recent emotional imprints—what this place has witnessed in living memory. Root Communion speaks with plant spirits. Lantern Keeping preserves ancestral wisdom in blessed flames." She gestured to the Verdant lamps around them. "But you're showing signs of Bloodline Resonance—the ability to access the deep memories carried in your very heritage."

Jane's expression grew serious. "Such advanced illusion work comes with responsibilities. Perfect synchronization requires intense concentration—push too hard and you'll exhaust yourself completely." She gestured to the ancient stones of the training chamber around them. "But our family's Echo Weaving has always been strongest in places that know us. Here in Fleetfoot Hollow, where generations of Merrifurs have trained, the very stones remember our ancestors. In familiar ground like this, your illusions can draw on deeper wells than most realize."

"But," Varnley interjected, his tone warning, "such power draws attention. There are forces in this world that can sense when the old

bloodlines awaken. And in hostile territory, far from ancestral ground..."

"The power becomes unpredictable," Jane finished. "It might surge beyond your control when you're desperate, or fail you entirely when you need it most. And if you're in a place tainted by Abyssal influence..." She shuddered. "The memories themselves might become corrupted, turning your greatest strength into your greatest weakness."

Babax felt a chill run down his spine. "So, this power—it's not just about technique? It's about where I am and what I'm facing?"

"Exactly. And that's why your training must be different now." Jane reached into the folds of her robe and produced a small silver amulet adorned with swirling runes that seemed to shift and move in the light. "This isn't just a focusing charm—it's a bloodline anchor. Forged by our ancestors to help those with deep resonance maintain control when far from home."

The amulet felt warm in Babax's paws, and he could sense the careful enchantments woven into its silver—protections against magical backlash, but also... something else. Something that felt like a warning.

"There's more, isn't there?" he asked quietly.

Jane and Varnley exchanged a long look. Finally, Varnley spoke. "The power you're awakening—it's the same force that allowed our ancestors to stand against things that should have been impossible to defeat. But it comes with a price."

"What kind of price?"

"The stronger your connection to the ancestral memories becomes, the more you risk losing yourself in them," Jane said softly. "In moments of great stress or danger, you might find yourself drawing on memories and skills that aren't your own. Sometimes that might save your life. But sometimes..."

"Sometimes you might not come back fully yourself," Varnley finished grimly. "I've seen it happen to warriors who awakened this power in battle. They survived impossible odds, but something in their eyes changed. As if part of them remained in the past they'd borrowed from."

Babax stared down at the amulet, understanding now why his mother looked so worried despite her pride. "So, when I'm out there,

in the Borderlands—this power might help me survive things I shouldn't be able to survive?"

"Aye," Varnley nodded. "But it might also make you a target for forces that want to corrupt or control such power. And if you're not careful about when and how you use it..."

"You might find yourself fighting with the skills of warriors long dead, speaking with voices that aren't your own," Jane added. "The amulet will help anchor you to yourself, but ultimately, the choice of how deep to reach will be yours alone."

Babax took the amulet reverently, running his thumb over its smooth surface. The spiral pattern seemed to draw his eye inward, toward a center that felt both empty and infinitely full. "Thank you, mother."

Jane's eyes drifted to the signet ring gleaming on Babax's finger, and her expression grew distant. "He was always touching that ring," she said suddenly, her voice thick with memory. "Even as a kit, before it was his to wear. Said it felt warm sometimes, like it was trying to tell him something." Her gaze refocused on Babax with painful intensity. "I thought it was just a child's imagination. Now I wonder if it was trying to warn him."

Jane stepped closer, her voice softer now but heavy with reluctance. "Are you certain about this, my son? This journey... it may awaken things within you that you're not yet ready to understand. I could send someone else—someone without your particular gifts."

For the first time, Babax truly hesitated. There was something in his mother's tone, a weight of unspoken knowledge that made the familiar safety of the Burrowlands suddenly feel fragile. He looked at his mother, at his father, at the training yard where he'd learned to weave illusions from memory itself, but then his grip tightened around the amulet, and he felt its subtle warmth pulse in rhythm with his heartbeat.

"If I never face uncertainty, I'll never learn to trust my own abilities," he said quietly. "And if my magic is growing stronger, maybe it's because I need to understand it better. Maybe running from challenges would be the real mistake."

Varnley barked a laugh, but it carried a note of respect. "Spoken like a true son of the Burrowlands, lad. Your ancestors would be proud."

Jim stepped forward, placing a reassuring hand on Jane's shoulder.

"He's right, my dear. If his talents are developing, he learns to handle them in the world rather than sheltered here, where we can't prepare him for every possibility." Jim continued, "Besides, the Borderlands themselves hold old memories. If his gifts are going to deepen, better there than in some sterile foreign court where the very stones might refuse to speak to him."

Jane's shoulders sagged slightly, but she nodded, clearly torn between her protective instincts and her husband's wisdom.

Jane pulled Babax into a long, tearful embrace, but when she whispered in his ear, her words were carefully chosen: "Remember, my son—your magic is strongest when you stay true to who you are, not when you try to force it into shapes that feel foreign. The amulet will help focus your abilities, but your own heart must be your true guide. And if you ever feel yourself... slipping into memories that aren't entirely your own..."

"Come home," Babax finished, though he wasn't entirely sure what she meant by memories that weren't his own. All his illusions drew on place-memory, after all.

"I pray you understand when the time comes," she murmured. "Because the gifts that might save your life could also be the things that change you in ways we cannot predict."

The next morning, before the Verdant lamps had begun their gentle transition to the golden glow of dawn, a firm knock echoed through the halls of Merrifur Manor. The magical illumination still held the soft pre-dawn dimness, faithfully reflecting the surface world above their underground home. Babax stirred from his bed, ears twitching at the unexpected sound. His heart pounded, not from fear, but from the anticipation of what lay ahead.

Babax dressed swiftly, excitement overriding his grogginess as he made his way to the grand wooden doors of their home. He pulled them open to find a human ranger standing framed in the morning light—tall and broad-shouldered, his sun-kissed complexion speaking of countless days spent under open skies. His dark eyes held both the warmth of a crackling hearth and the sharp alertness of a predator. Worn leather armor, a longbow strapped across his back, and a sheathed sword at his hip completed the image of quiet capability.

"A guest this early! And a ranger, no less," Babax managed, momentarily taken aback by the sheer scale of the man looming in his

doorway. "To what do I owe the honor?" He gestured inside, though the invitation seemed almost comical given the size disparity.

The ranger chuckled, a low, easy sound that rumbled from somewhere far above Babax's head. Folding himself nearly in half, he squeezed through the entrance designed for the tallest of burrowfolk. Even fully inside, he remained hunched, his shoulders curved to avoid scraping the ceiling as he moved with the careful awkwardness of someone navigating a child's playhouse.

"Your parents sent word," he said, his deep voice rumbling with barely contained amusement. "Though I have to say, this is the first time I've needed to fold myself into a pretzel just to have a conversation." He smirked. "Seems they thought their adventurous son might need someone to keep him from getting lost... or eaten." His amusement was gentle as he looked down at the young Lopari. "Desrael, at your service."

Babax blinked up at him, having to tilt his head back to meet the ranger's eyes. "You? Yourself? I expected... well, someone else."

"Life gets dull without a bit of risk," Desrael shrugged, leaning against the doorframe with casual confidence. "Besides, I owe the Merrifurs a debt or two. Consider this settling an old score." He smirked. "And you're not stuck with just me. We're picking up another companion along the way. You won't walk this road alone."

A thrill, sharp and bright, cut through Babax. An adventure. He grinned. "Then let's make it a journey worth remembering! Come in, we should—"

Before Desrael could step further, another, much louder knock rattled the door. Desrael smacked his forehead. "Ah, by the spirits, I completely forgot..."

"Forgot what?" Babax asked.

"Who?" Desrael corrected, stepping aside just as Babax pulled the door open again.

Standing there with arms crossed and tail lashing behind her was a Felkrin warrior who barely reached five feet but radiated coiled menace. White fur bore stark black markings, while black bangs framed her face. Her whiskers twitched as her claws extended. Her emerald eyes with vertical feline pupils fixed on Desrael with predatory intensity. Twin daggers rested at her hips, and every line of her compact frame spoke of lethal feline grace barely held in check.

"Standing out here like a forgotten sack of grain while you charm

the locals?" she snapped, stalking past Babax without a glance. "Honestly, Desrael, your head would be rolling in a ditch if I weren't here to remind you it's attached!"

Desrael just chuckled, infuriatingly calm. "Correction, prowler, it's attached to my neck. Details matter." Before she could retort, he reached out with familiar ease and scratched the spot right between her ears.

Instantly, the warrior froze. Her ears perked, her eyes half-lidded, and an involuntary, rumbling purr vibrated from her chest. Babax stared, utterly astonished. He stifled a cough, and the feline's eyes immediately snapped open. She jerked away from Desrael, fur slightly ruffled, a flush creeping under her white fur. "T-that changes nothing!" she huffed, regaining her composure with visible effort.

Desrael smirked, clearly enjoying her embarrassment, then gestured to Babax. "Lilly, this is Babax Merrifur. Try not to threaten him immediately."

Lilly straightened, instantly adopting an air of cool superiority. She gave Babax a slow, appraising look, tilting her chin. "Ah. The merchant princeling." Her voice was smooth now, almost silky. "A pleasure."

Babax, still reeling slightly from the purring incident, managed a polite bow. "Lady Lilly. Likewise." He couldn't help but notice the way her paw rested near one of the daggers at her belt.

"She's my shadow," Desrael added fondly. "And despite her... temperament... my most trusted friend."

Lilly's tail gave a slow, deliberate sway. "And Desrael, my akulo," she stated, her voice turning sharp and possessive again, locking eyes with Babax, "is mine to protect. Think of harming him, princeling, and your throat will be the first thing my blade tastes."

Babax instinctively took half a step back, paws raised slightly. The shift from purring companion to deadly threat was jarring. "The thought," he assured her quickly, "hadn't even remotely crossed my mind."

Desrael laughed outright this time. "She's fiercely loyal. You'll get used to the death threats."

The startled young Lopari let out a small nervous chuckle and gulped, "I-I certainly hope so."

Before another word could be spoken, the sound of soft, hurried

steps approached, followed by a clear and commanding voice. "What is all this noise?"

Babax saw his mother descending the staircase with grace, followed closely by Jim. Despite the early morning hour, she was immaculately dressed, her fine robes adorned with delicate gold embroidery. Her sharp emerald eyes scanned the room with warmth and amusement. Jim, in contrast, looked more rugged—a seasoned merchant whose tailored tunic and calloused paws spoke of both wealth and experience.

Jane took in the scene: the tall human ranger ducking under the low ceiling, the irritated but composed feline, and her son standing between them with an expression torn between amusement and anxiety. She sighed and placed her paws on her hips.

"Desrael, Lilly, welcome to our home," she greeted smoothly, her gaze flicking to Babax. "And good morning to you, my dear son. I assume you were going to tell us that you had guests?"

Jim chuckled, stepping forward and clapping a strong paw on Babax's shoulder. "They aren't just guests, Jane. Looks like our boy has found his first companions. A fine start!"

Jane's mouth quirked into a smirk. "Indeed, but before you all start plotting Grand Adventures, come—I have breakfast prepared."

The Merrifur dining hall exemplified underground elegance—vaulted stone ceilings, honey-toned burrow-wood furnishings, and Verdant lanterns casting warm light across a feast that would rival any surface noble's table. The air carried the rich aroma of ham, fresh bread, and aged Dimplekin cheeses, while Everspring grape juice gleamed purple in crystal goblets. Every detail spoke of a family that had transformed subterranean living into an art of comfort and prosperity.

Desrael's eyes gleamed with appreciation as he took in the spread. "I must admit I did not expect such luxury beneath the earth."

Jane smirked as she poured a glass of the deep purple juice and handed it to him. "We Burrowfolk know how to live well, Ranger. Eat and eat heartily, you'll need the strength."

Lilly, who had already claimed a seat beside Desrael, was eyeing the ham with barely concealed hunger, her tail flicking. Babax noticed and slid the plate toward her with an amused grin. She snatched a piece without hesitation, nibbling with the perfect balance of grace and urgency.

Lilly examined the ham with the careful attention of someone who'd once gone hungry, her whiskers twitching as she savored each bite. "Dimplekin curing," she observed with approval. "Better than anything we got in the mercenary camps."

Desrael smiled fondly. "She has strong opinions about food quality. And everything else."

"Strong opinions keep you alive," Lilly retorted, though her tone was gentler than usual.

As everyone dug in, Jim leaned back in his chair, eyeing Babax with a mix of pride and curiosity. "So, my son, this is it—the start of your first venture beyond the Burrows. Tell me, what do you think of your companions?"

Babax wiped his mouth with a cloth, meeting his father's gaze. Excitement simmered in his chest. "They are fascinating. Unexpected, but fascinating."

Desrael raised his glass. "To unexpected journeys then."

Jane lifted hers in return. "And to safe returns."

Babax smiled, gripping his cup firmly. This was it—the beginning of something far greater than he could have ever imagined.

Desrael set his goblet down and leaned forward slightly. "I've made arrangements to meet Timothy Whitefang at the Western border of the Burrowlands—an Icefang clan warrior who served with distinction in the northern passes. We trained together in our youth, and he still follows the old clan traditions: honor through strength, loyalty through blood."

His expression darkened slightly. "It's safer to depart from there, especially with the troubling news I've been hearing."

Jim nodded approvingly but caught the shift in the ranger's tone. "What kind of trouble?"

Desrael sighed heavily. "Pazgar war bands, more active than usual. Scouts say they've been lurking around Mistwhisker Warren."

Lilly let out a sharp scoff, her ears flattening against her skull. Babax glanced at her, noting the sudden tension in her posture. "Something wrong?"

Lilly exhaled sharply, tail lashing behind her. "I was taken by them once," she admitted in a low voice. "I've seen what they do to their prisoners—to my friends. I will never forgive them."

A silence fell over the table. Babax's throat tightened. "I'm sorry," he said quickly.

Lilly waved him off. "I just look forward to the day we cleanse them from existence."

The air grew heavier, but Jane's voice cut through it, steady and strong. "You will face dangers ahead, but you are not cowards. You are warriors, of wit and steel, of strength and purpose. The Burrowlands have survived by endurance, not fear. Never forget your lives are worth more than gold, but sometimes you must be willing to risk everything to secure a future worth having."

Jim raised his goblet, the firelight reflecting off the deep purple wine. "To courage then."

Desrael lifted his drink. "To the road ahead."

Lilly smirked, fangs glinting. "To vengeance."

Babax took his goblet, feeling the weight of the moment. He met his mother's gaze, seeing the pride and the worry in equal measure.

"To destiny."

CHAPTER 3

THE ROAD WESTWARD

“The road ahead promises nothing but uncertainty—yet within uncertainty lies the seed of greatness.”

— TIVWAN MOSSGLEAM, CARAVAN MASTER



The warm glow of Verdant lamps cast gentle shadows across the Merrifur dining hall as Babax savored the last few bites of his breakfast. The familiar scent of fresh-baked bread mingled with the earthy richness of their underground home.

Across the table, Desrael wiped his hands on a cloth, while Lilly daintily licked the last remnants of cheese from her paw, her black tail flicking contentedly behind her.

“Good food,” Desrael said, stretching with a satisfied groan. “I’m almost sad we have to leave it behind.”

“Almost?” Lilly smirked, showing the tips of her fangs. “Any longer and you’d start growing roots.”

Babax chuckled, pushing back his chair. The meal was done, the light conversation ending. The weight of the imminent journey settled onto his shoulders. Time to go. He stood and walked towards their packs, running a final check over the straps and buckles.

Rations, maps, and his new blade – all secure. Leaving Fleetfoot Hollow, stepping into the uncertainty of the Borderlands... the thought sent a shiver of both fear and excitement down his spine.

As Babax secured the final buckle on his traveling pack, the sound of voices drifted up from the manor's main entrance below—his parents speaking in hushed, urgent tones with someone at the door. The conversation had an edge to it that made his ears prick forward instinctively. Curiosity getting the better of him, he set his pack aside and crept to the top of the carved stairway, peering down through the ornate stone railings.

The courier named Quillfur stood in the doorway, his usually immaculate courier's vest wrinkled and travel-stained. The Quivren's whiskers drooped with exhaustion, and his message pouch hung nearly empty—a sure sign he'd been making these urgent rounds for days. “—three different traders now,” the messenger was saying, his voice carrying the weary tone of someone who'd been repeating the same troubling news at every stop along his route. “All reporting the same thing along the western routes.”

“Golden armor?” Jim's voice carried a note of skepticism, though Babax could hear an underlying concern beneath his father's measured tone.

“Aye, that's what they say. Warriors in burnished plate, bearing symbols none of them recognized. Not Eldorian church knights—these ones carried different banners entirely. Moving with purpose through the borderlands, asking questions about... well, spiritual matters. Divine magic. That sort of thing.”

Jane's voice was carefully neutral when she responded, but Babax knew his mother well enough to catch the tension she was trying to conceal. “And they were seen where, exactly?”

“Scattered reports from the Thornwood reach all the way to the Hollowbrook territories,” the messenger replied, shifting his weight as if eager to continue his route. “Seems they're investigating something, though what that might be...” He shrugged. “Above my pay grade, that is. Just thought folk should know there's unusual traffic on the roads these days. Especially with young ones heading out into the wider world.”

Babax heard the rustle of coin changing paws and his father's voice offering thanks before the heavy door closed with a soft thud. He retreated quietly from the stairway, his mind racing as he returned to

his pack. Golden-armored warriors. Divine investigations. The mysterious letter about sacred disturbances had arrived just yesterday. Each piece seemed disconnected, yet something about the pattern made his merchant's instincts prickly with unease.

He was still pondering these troubling reports when a familiar knock sounded at his chamber door—softer than the messenger's urgent rap, but carrying its own weight of significance. Babax looked up as Jim and Jane Merrifur entered, their faces bearing that familiar mixture of parental warmth and barely concealed worry that seemed especially pronounced this morning.

"Everything in order?" Jim asked, though his eyes lingered on Babax's face as if searching for signs that his son had overheard the conversation below.

Babax nodded, shouldering his pack with perhaps more confidence than he felt. "We're as ready as we can be."

Jane approached her son, placing a paw on his shoulder. "Remember, the world beyond the Burrowlands is not as kind as home. Not everyone will greet you with a smile, and some will only see what they can take. Trust in your companions, and don't let your pride keep you from seeking help when you need it."

Jim folded his arms, his expression firm but filled with quiet pride. "A sharp mind is a blade better than any steel. But a sharper sword doesn't hurt either. Keep both in good condition."

Before Babax could respond, another familiar voice cut in. "Bah, enough with the speeches. The boy knows how to handle himself."

Sergeant Varnley stood in the doorway, his cane tapping against the floor as he strode inside. His single eye was sharp with experience. The old Dimplekin veteran looked him over and gave a gruff nod of approval.

"Still standing straight, ears high? Good. Thought you might have gone soft in all that comfort," Varnley teased.

Babax grinned. "Not yet, Sergeant. I'll be sure to keep your lessons in mind."

"You'd better, or I'll come find you myself. And trust me, lad, I'd make the trip." Varnley smirked, then reached into his coat and pulled out a worn leather-bound book. "Take this. Training your body is important, but sharpening your mind is just as vital. Knowledge will save you when steel fails."

Babax took the book with a grateful nod. "Thank you, Sergeant. I won't waste it."

Jane stepped forward, her paw lingering on his cheek as she searched his face. "This is truly what you want? There's still time to stay."

Babax inhaled deeply, meeting his mother's gaze. "I love you too, mother."

A small smile formed on Jane's face, but her eyes shimmered with unspoken emotion. She pulled him into a tight embrace before stepping back.

Jim smiled widely at his son's courage. "Then go well, son. And come back richer, not just in coin, but in wisdom."

Babax grinned. "I plan to."

With goodbyes exchanged, the three travelers made their way outside, where a cart awaited, led by a pair of sturdy whisker oxen. Their thick, shaggy coats rippled in the morning chill.

A stable hand, one of the Merrifur household's trusted Dimplekin workers, finished checking the oxen's hooves while humming a traditional working song under his breath. He touched his cap respectfully to Babax before stepping aside.

The oxen's deep, rumbling snorts echoed as they stomped their powerful hooves.

Tivwan Mossgleam was already making final preparations when they emerged from the burrow. The grizzled Quivren teamster moved with practiced efficiency around his wagon, checking harnesses and securing cargo with the methodical care of someone who'd learned that small oversights became large problems on the road. "About time," he called out, not looking up from his work.

Tivwan, noticing them emerge from the burrow, cracked a lopsided grin. "So, these are the great adventurers I'm ferrying to the Borderlands, huh?" His voice carried the dry amusement of someone who had seen far too much on the road.

Babax stepped forward, offering a polite nod. "Babax Merrifur, merchant of the United Burrowlands."

Tivwan let out a short laugh, adjusting his wide-brimmed hat. "A Merrifur, huh? No wonder this trip is already complicated." He gave the young Lopari an appraising look before turning his attention to the others.

Desrael, ever the composed one, inclined his head. “Desrael, ranger.”

Tivwan eyed him up and down, taking note of the well-worn bow slung across his back and the confident stance of a seasoned traveler. “You look like you know what you’re doing. That makes one of you.”

Lilly, who had been watching with her arms crossed, flicked her tail impatiently. “Lilly,” she said flatly. “You talk too much, you fat hamster.”

Tivwan chuckled, clearly unbothered by her sharp tone. “And you’ve got a sharp tongue. That’ll get you into trouble.”

Lilly bared a grin, showing her sharp Felkrin teeth. “Only if someone’s stupid enough to test me.”

“Perfect,” Tivwan said, his grin widening as he gestured toward their weapons. “Armed passengers who know their business—that’s what I like to see.” His tone shifted to business-like efficiency. “Load your gear and let’s be off. The western roads don’t forgive dawdlers.”

Babax climbed into the wagon, glancing at the packed goods—Burrowland cheeses, dried meats, spice bundles, and a small barrel of root ale. Everything was in order.

Tivwan cracked the reins, and the oxen stirred. “Alright, young master Merrifur, ranger, and troublemaker, let’s see if you lot can survive the road west.”

The wagon rolled through the grand stone archway of Fleetfoot Hollow’s ceremonial gate, wheels echoing against carved stone. This magnificent portal, carved with the emblems of the three Burrowfolk clans, marked the formal boundary between the deep city’s heart and the ascent tunnels. As they passed beneath its ancient arch, Babax felt the weight of leaving home settle upon his shoulders.

Beyond the ceremonial gate, the tunnel began its spiraling climb upward from the warren that had been home. The carefully engineered pathway wound steadily higher through the living rock, each curve bringing them closer to the distant surface. Babax’s heart quickened as they climbed toward the surface entrance, the warm glow of Verdant lamps gradually giving way to natural light filtering down from above.

The ascent tunnel ended at a fortified checkpoint where Hollow Guards maintained their silent vigil. Beyond this final security station lay the most closely guarded secret of Fleetfoot Hollow’s defenses.

At last, they emerged from the burrow’s hidden entrance—a clev-

erly concealed doorway nestled between the roots of an ancient oak. The massive tree's gnarled roots had been carefully shaped over generations to camouflage the tunnel's exit, creating an illusion of untouched wilderness that had protected the Burrowfolk for centuries.

The morning air hit them like a cool blessing, crisp with dew and the scent of wildflowers. Babax blinked in the genuine sunlight, so different from the magical glow below. The surface world stretched before them—vast, open, and dangerous in ways the protected tunnels below could never be.

Here in the small clearing, their caravan waited: sturdy oxen stamping their hooves, the wagon loaded with supplies and trade goods. A young Dimplekin lad, barely into his whiskers, finished securing the last of the cargo straps under Tivwan's watchful eye.

"That's it, Master Tivwan," the helper called out, wiping his paws on a rag. "Everything's tight as burrow walls."

"Good work, Pip," Tivwan nodded approvingly. "Off with you now—tell your mother you earned your glowmark today. And remember," he added with meaningful emphasis, "you saw nothing here but trees and morning mist."

The young Dimplekin nodded solemnly and scampered back toward the hidden entrance, which sealed itself seamlessly behind him, once again becoming nothing more than the tangled roots of an old oak tree.

"All secure and ready to roll," Tivwan called out in his gravelly voice, adjusting his worn cap. "These old bones have been drivin' caravans longer than you've been breathin', young Merrifur. We'll get you to the border safe and sound."

Desrael nodded approvingly at the teamster's preparations while Lilly perched on the wagon's edge, tail flicking with predatory restlessness. "Ready to see what's hunting us out there, merchant prince?" she called out, her tone suggesting she almost hoped something would try.

Tivwan cracked his whip in the air—not at the oxen, but as a signal. "Climb aboard then! These beasts know the road better than most, and daylight's burnin'."

The trail westward beckoned—a well-worn path that wound through the heart of the Elderroot Forest, where massive trees created a canopy so thick that traveling felt like moving through a vast green

cathedral. Ancient markers carved with Burrowfolk runes guided the way, while smaller paths branched off toward other warrens and settlements hidden throughout the forest.

With a creak of the wheels and the steady plod of the oxen, the caravan rolled forward into the dappled shadows of the woodland trail. The rolling hills of the Burrowlands gradually fell behind them through breaks in the trees, the familiar comfort of home giving way to the wild, untamed expanse of the Borderlands ahead. The journey had truly begun.

The wagon hit a particularly deep rut, jolting everyone awake from the morning's drowsy peace. Tivwan cursed creatively while wrestling the reins, and Lilly had to grab the wagon's side to keep from tumbling off her perch.

"Road's getting rougher," Babax observed, steadying a crate of cheese wheels that had started to shift. "We're definitely leaving civilization behind."

Desrael helped him secure the cargo, checking the rope knots with practiced efficiency. "Which brings up something we should discuss." He tested a strap's tension before meeting Babax's eyes. "What dangers should we be watching for out here? Beyond bad roads, I mean."

"Bandits?" Babax suggested, passing him another rope. The repetitive work of securing supplies made the conversation feel natural rather than forced.

"Definitely." Desrael moved to check the next crate. "The Borderlands have always been lawless, but recent reports suggest more movement than usual. Some say rogue Pazgar clans are testing boundaries."

Lilly, who had been quietly sharpening one of her daggers during this exchange, paused mid-stroke. "Others whisper of something darker stirring in the ruins," she added, her tone suggesting she took such whispers seriously. "Let them come," she continued, returning to her blade with slightly more vigor than necessary. "I'll happily send them to an early grave."

Tivwan snorted from the driver's bench. "Bold words for someone who's never seen an Ironsnout in full charge, little cat."

Lilly's blade stilled against the whetstone. Her voice, when it came, was quiet but carried an edge that made even the oxen's ears twitch. "I've seen enough."

Something in her tone made Tivwan glance back, reassessing. The easy dismissal died in his throat as he caught the look in her eyes - not bravado, but the flat certainty of someone who'd learned hard lessons. "Aye, well..." he muttered, turning back to the road. "I suppose we all have our stories."

Babax interceded while adjusting another cargo strap. "What about House Thorne? Why exactly are they so interested in this venture?" The question came naturally as he worked, part of the practical planning process. "Seems odd for them to request us specifically."

Desrael's hands stilled on a rope knot, his expression darkening. "That's what I want to find out." He pulled the rope tighter than necessary. "They're not known for charity, and if they have some undisclosed matter with the Merrifurs..."

"There's more at play than what we've been told," Babax finished, understanding the implications as he watched his companion's troubled expression.

The wagon rolled on. Babax noticed Lilly had stopped sharpening her blade, her gaze fixed westward where the road disappeared into shadow.

Babax frowned, his mind working through the implications. Their cart carried some of the finest goods from the Burrowlands—cheese wheels, rare teas, spice blends sought after by nobles. It was enough to tempt any bandit or corrupt official. But the unease in Desrael's voice hinted that this was about more than just trade.

Lilly's ears twitched, her voice dropping slightly. "And then there's the Jackal. Even the Pazgar fear him. If he's stirring, then it's not just common dangers we have to worry about."

Desrael exhaled sharply. "The Hollow Jackal plays his own game, but if he's involved, it means trouble for everyone."

As they traveled westward, the morning sun climbed higher, casting long shadows over the winding path ahead.

And with every mile, Babax felt the weight of the unknown settle onto his shoulders.

As the cart rumbled along the winding path, Babax shifted on the wooden bench and opened the leather-bound book Varnley had given him. The pages were old, worn from years of use, filled with notes scrawled in the veteran's rough handwriting. Detailed illustrations of creatures native to the Borderlands sprawled across the parchment, annotated with cautionary remarks.

One image caught Babax's attention—a depiction of a hulking, tusked beast, its grotesque maw stretched wide in a savage roar. He swallowed hard. A Pazgar. An Ironsnout, specifically.

He had heard stories of them since he was a kit, but to see one so vividly rendered made his fur bristle. Varnley's notes surrounded the image in thick, inked warnings:

“Never fight a Pazgar alone.”

“Strength beyond reason, hunger beyond control.”

“They don't just kill. They consume.”

Babax read further, his stomach tightening. The boar-men were more than just raiders; they were living nightmares, bred for carnage, their entire existence centered around an insatiable hunger. They did not negotiate. They did not take prisoners. They feasted.

He turned the page, revealing an illustration of a battlefield littered with gnawed bones, shattered armor, and Pazgar warbands howling beneath a blood-red sky. Varnley's final note was simple:

“If you hear the drums, run.”

Babax shut the book and exhaled slowly, his fingers tracing the rough leather cover. A cold unease settled in his chest, the weight of the Pazgar's savage history pressing against his thoughts. He glanced toward Desrael, searching for reassurance, but the ranger's gaze remained fixed on the horizon, his expression shadowed with thought.

Fear curled at the edges of Babax's mind, but he clenched his jaw, willing it into something steadier—determination. He had left home eager for adventure, and he refused to let dread shape his first steps into the unknown. “Have you ever fought one?”

Desrael didn't look away from the road. “Yes. And I'd rather not again.”

Babax gripped the book tighter. As the shadows of the Borderlands grew closer, he wondered just how much he was truly prepared for.

The cart continued its slow journey westward, the hum of the wheels against the dirt road the only sound between them.

Desrael, sensing the grim cloud hanging over them, attempted to lighten the mood. “Luckily for us, the Quivren Sentinel Guard patrols these edges. They tend to deal with problems before they get too close, so with any luck, we won't be seeing any Pazgar soon.”

Lilly, saying little, walked up and sat next to Tivwan on the

driver's bench. As they passed through the countryside, the scene was serene. Rolling fields of golden grass stretched in the distance, and scattered clusters of trees swayed gently in the cool breeze.

A tinker Quivren with his cart of pots and tools waved cheerfully as he passed, his goods clattering musically. Two Lopari pilgrims, their walking sticks carved with religious symbols, offered polite nods before continuing their steady pace westward. A family of Dimplekin farmers drove their produce wagon toward market, their youngest kit waving excitedly at Lilly until his mother pulled his paw down with an embarrassed smile.

For a moment, the world seemed peaceful.

The caravan rolled onward, wheels kicking up fine dust that caught in their throats and settled on their fur. The climbing sun warmed their backs, but couldn't quite banish the chill that had settled over them since the messenger's news. Babax found himself studying every stand of trees, every bend in the road, as if expecting golden-armored figures to emerge from the shadows.

The familiar rolling hills of the inner Burrowlands slowly gave way to sparser grasslands, the scent of hearth smoke replaced by the cleaner tang of open air and distant water. Babax watched the landscape shift, noting the subtle changes—fewer cultivated fields, more wild bramble, the calls of different birds overhead. They stopped briefly for a midday meal of dried fruit and hard cheese, eaten in the relative quiet of the road, before pressing on.

An hour later, when the oxen began showing signs of thirst and the afternoon heat grew oppressive, Tivwan guided them toward a small stream that crossed beneath the road. "Water break," he announced, setting the brake. "These beasts won't make it to the river crossing without a drink."

As Tivwan began unhitching the oxen, Lilly disappeared into the woods without a word. Babax was helping check the harnesses when a soft whistle—barely audible—came from the treeline.

Tivwan's ears perked up. "Well, that's new. Most passengers just wander off to relieve themselves, not give coded signals."

Desrael's head snapped up. "Company," he said quietly, hand moving to his bow.

"What kind?" Babax whispered, surprised by how quickly his heart started racing. Another whistle, different pattern. Desrael relaxed slightly.

"The harmless kind, apparently. That's Lilly's 'all clear' signal." Tivwan scratched his whiskers thoughtfully.

"Professional, that one. Haven't seen scouting that thorough since I traveled with a mercenary company years back." She emerged a few minutes later, moving silently through the underbrush.

"Merchant caravan about a mile behind us," she reported to Desrael. "Moving slow, lots of guards. Probably carrying something valuable."

"Worth noting, but not our concern," Desrael replied. Tivwan nodded approvingly.

"Good eyes, sharp ears, proper signals. You've got yourself a real guardian there, ranger."

"Thank you," Babax said quietly as they resumed their journey. "For watching our backs."

Lilly's ears twitched in acknowledgment, but she didn't reply. Tivwan, however, chuckled from the driver's bench.

"Modest too. I like that in a bodyguard—means she takes the work seriously instead of bragging about it."

The morning's unease had settled into a steady tension that none of them wanted to acknowledge aloud. Conversation came in fits and starts, dying away whenever the road ahead curved out of sight. Even Tivwan's usual commentary on landmarks and local gossip had dwindled to essential warnings about ruts and loose stones.

The road began a gentle descent, curving toward the wide, blue-grey ribbon of water they could now glimpse through the trees. Ahead, spanning the current, stood a sturdy bridge of timber and stone, reinforced against time and tide. A checkpoint marked its entrance, the blue and silver insignia of the Veyrin River-Toll Authority—the Silvercurrent Wardens—gleaming faintly on a weathered banner.

Several otterfolk leaned on their spears, watching the caravan approach with weary eyes. Two smaller trading wagons waited in line ahead of them—one loaded with river stones, the other carrying what looked like fishing nets. A tired-looking Veyrin merchant counted glowmarks while his driver fed their whisker oxen. Their leader, a broad-shouldered beaverfolk, stepped forward deliberately.

Marshal Rivertide adjusted his river-worn leather armor, his webbed paw hovering near the short axe at his belt. His dark eyes

swept over the wagon, lingered on Desrael and Lilly, then settled on Babax with unnerving focus.

"Halt! State your names and cargo," Rivertide commanded, his voice a low growl that carried over the river's murmur. His eyes lingered on the Merrifur crest visible on their wagon with particular intensity. The Marshal had been expecting them.

Tivwan sighed theatrically, fumbling for his papers. "Marshal, it's Tivwan Mossgleam. You know me. Burrowland goods, headed for Hollowbrook Market, same as always. Do we truly need this dance every crossing?"

Rivertide snatched the offered badge, barely glancing at it before his eyes returned to the passengers. "Times are changing, Mossgleam. Procedures tighten." He nodded towards the back. "And your passengers? Their business?" His usual formal tone was clipped, edged with suspicion.

"Trade," Tivwan grumbled. "Hollowbrook and beyond."

Rivertide ignored him, his gaze fixed intently on Babax. "A Merrifur," he stated, not quite a question. The name hung in the air, heavy with unspoken meaning. "Heading west? Interesting timing."

Babax felt a prickle of unease but kept his expression neutral. "Family business, Marshal," he replied smoothly, adopting the polite but firm tone his father favored. "Strengthening trade relations."

The Marshal hummed, tapping a thick finger against his ledger. "Trade relations." Rivertide's tone suggested he knew better. "Your family has... history with House Thorne. Recent history." He tapped his ledger meaningfully. "Three Merrifur caravans in two months. Either business is very good, or something else draws your attention west."

Desrael shifted, leaning forward slightly. "What patrols?"

Rivertide's eyes shot towards the ranger, then back to Babax, a silent warning passing between them. "Just... patrols," he repeated evasively. "Things move on the riverbanks at night that shouldn't. Keep your eyes sharp and your blades sharper."

Babax held the Marshal's gaze, sensing the deeper, unvoiced concerns. This was more than the usual bandit threat.

Tivwan cleared his throat impatiently. "Can we pass, Marshal? Or are you planning to hold us here until the tide turns?"

Rivertide hesitated, his gaze sweeping over them one last time, lingering again on Babax. Finally, he gave a curt wave. "Pass. But don't

expect the Wardens to fish you out if trouble finds you beyond this bridge. You walk into the shadows at your own risk.”

A pair of dock workers, both muscular otterfolk with river-stained aprons, paused in their loading of timber to watch the caravan pass. One nudged the other and whispered something about “Merrifur business,” earning a keen look from Marshal Rivertide.

Babax glanced back, meeting Rivertide’s unreadable stare one last time before the checkpoint faded behind them. The Marshal’s warning echoed in his mind, colder and sharper than the river wind.

The road west was only getting darker.

The caravan continued along the well-worn path, the rhythmic creaking of the wooden wheels and the steady plodding of the lumbering beasts filling the cool evening air. The sun had begun its descent, bathing the sky in hues of orange and violet. Babax sat quietly, taking in the peaceful moment, but it was short-lived.

As dusk settled deeper over the land, the caravan pulled off the road near a clearing at the edge of a small grove. The place was secluded, surrounded by tall oaks whose thick branches swayed gently in the evening breeze. A clear brook ran nearby, its waters reflecting the golden hues of the setting sun.

“This will do,” Tivwan declared, jumping down from the wagon. “Can’t have these beasts pulling all night. Even the whisker oxen need a break.”

The group got to work setting up camp with practiced efficiency. Tivwan busied himself with the oxen, unhitching them from the cart and leading them toward the brook where he laid out fresh hay and filled a trough with water. The massive creatures snorted contentedly, their tails flicking as they drank.

Babax noticed Lilly methodically checking every shadow, every potential hiding spot around their clearing. The thoroughness was almost excessive—except that he found himself sleeping better knowing she was that careful.

“Does she ever relax?” he asked Desrael quietly while they gathered firewood.

“When she trusts the area completely,” Desrael replied. “Which is almost never when we’re traveling.” He paused, watching Lilly test a tree branch’s stability near their camp perimeter. “She takes responsibility very seriously. Sometimes too seriously.”

“What do you mean?”

"She thinks everyone else's safety is her job. Gets angry at herself when things go wrong, even when there's nothing she could have done." Desrael's voice carried fond concern. "It's admirable, but exhausting for her."

Babax watched Lilly complete her patrol, noting the slight slump in her shoulders when she thought no one was looking. He was beginning to understand that her fierce protectiveness came from somewhere painful.

Desrael knelt by a patch of dirt, stacking kindling into a neat pile before striking a flint to spark a fire. The flames flickered to life, crackling as they licked at the dry wood. The warmth spread quickly, casting long shadows across the clearing.

Babax took out the provisions they had packed, laying out dried meats, fresh-baked bread from the Burrowlands, and a few wheels of sharp Dimplekin cheese. He sliced everything into portions with precise movements, making sure they had enough to eat without wasting supplies.

Lilly emerged from her final patrol of the treeline and settled near the fire. Tivwan stretched his legs and plopped onto a log with a groan. "Finally, a bit of rest."

As they settled around the fire, sharing the evening meal, Lilly spoke unexpectedly. "House Thorne," she said, not looking up from sharpening her dagger. "Are they the type to send assassins, or do they prefer direct confrontation?"

The practical question hung in the air, but Babax heard the underlying concern. After watching her careful vigilance all day, he understood this wasn't bloodthirst—it was someone trying to protect people she was starting to care about.

"I honestly don't know," Babax admitted. "That's what worries me."

Lilly nodded, still focused on her blade. "Then we prepare for both."

"Lilly," Babax said carefully, "I've been watching you today—the way you scout ahead, how you check every shadow. You're looking out for us, aren't you?"

Her paws stilled on the whetstone. For a moment, the only sound was the crackling fire.

"I won't let anything happen to either of you," she said quietly. "I can't lose..." She stopped, jaw tightening.

"You won't," Babax said with quiet conviction. "And you won't have to carry that responsibility alone. We're in this together."

Lilly's eyes flicked up to meet his, searching his face for something. Whatever she found there seemed to satisfy her, because she gave a small nod.

"Together," she agreed, and for the first time since they'd met, her smile looked genuinely peaceful.

Desrael exhaled, shaking his head. "You two are going to drive me mad."

Tivwan chuckled from his seat by the fire. "Rabbits swearing oaths of protection to cats. Strange times indeed."

Desrael sat across from Tivwan, stirring the embers with a stick before glancing up. "You've been running this trade route for years, haven't you? How long, exactly?"

Tivwan snorted. "Longer than I care to count. Started when I was just a young kit, barely out of my first season. My father was a merchant, and his father before him. Guess you could say it's in my blood." Babax, listening while slicing another piece of cheese, raised a brow. "You ever think of settling down? Owning a proper storefront?"

Tivwan let out a dry chuckle. "And miss out on the joys of dealing with bandits, toll keepers, and Pazgar looking to turn me into stew? No thanks. The road's where I belong. Besides, someone's got to keep these routes running. Without merchants like me, half the Burrowlands wouldn't have their favorite tea blends or spice shipments."

Desrael smirked. "Fair enough. Just seems like a dangerous way to make a living."

Tivwan waved a paw dismissively. "Danger's everywhere, lad. Better to face it head-on than wait for it to find you."

Lilly emerged from the trees then, her tail flicking as she settled into a seat. "No threats nearby. Just a few hares and an old fox skulking about."

Babax passed her a piece of bread, which she accepted with a nod.

The group settled in the warmth of the fire, driving away the chill of the encroaching dark. Laughter broke out among them as they shared light-hearted tales of past adventures. Mostly Tivwan's misadventures with dishonest merchants and greedy toll-keepers.

Then Tivwan leaned forward with a sly grin, "All right, I got to

ask, Desrael, how did you end up teaming with this overly protective Felkrin?"

The question sobered the moment, shifting the mood slightly. Desrael glanced at Lilly, silently asking for approval. She met his gaze, her expression unreadable for a moment, before she gave a small, almost imperceptible, nod.

Desrael exhaled and leaned back, "Lilly wasn't always a warrior, wasn't always my shadow, she was a slave."

A heavy silence fell over the camp. Babax's ears perked slightly. Lilly's tail flicked, her gaze fixed on the fire.

"She was born into captivity," Desrael continued, "Raised in a human bandit camp that traded slaves to the Pazgar for their feasting pits or to dishonorable Borvann mercenaries. She learned early on how to survive, how to be silent, how to disappear, how to fight when she had to."

Lilly's claws idly scraped against the log she was sitting on. But she said nothing.

"She stole food to keep herself from starving, picked locks when she had the chance, and when she saw her moment to escape, she took it. Violently."

Babax swallowed hard, glancing at Lilly. She showed no emotion, only the calm firelight reflected in her golden eyes.

"She fled into the wilderness," Desrael continued, "Cold, starving, hunted, and that's when she found me, or rather tried to rob me."

Babax's eyebrows raised slightly. "She robbed you?"

Desrael smirked, "She tried."

For the first time since the story began, Lilly let out a quiet chuckle.

"I let her try," Desrael admitted, "She was desperate, half-starved, and dangerous. I caught her easily, but instead of hurting her, I fed her."

Lilly's ears twitched, but she said nothing.

"She followed me after that," Desrael said, glancing at her, "And never left my side."

Babax looked at Lilly. Her eyes were focused on the fire. Her posture still, but alert. She finally spoke, her voice quiet but unwavering, "They took everything from me once," she murmured, "They won't take you too."

The weight of her words settled over the group. Desrael nodded solemnly, understanding the unspoken promise in them.

Babax, for once, had no witty retort. He only nodded, his respect for her deepening. The fire crackled between them, and in that moment, their bond felt more unbreakable than ever.

Desrael shot her a look before sighing. "She's like my adopted kid at this point."

Lilly nodded firmly, expression utterly serious. "I am. Simple as that."

Babax let out a chuckle, shaking his head. The warmth of camaraderie settled over them, but the quiet snoring of the sleeping oxen in the distance signaled that it was time to rest. One by one, they climbed into their tents, the fire reduced to glowing embers. The night was calm, save for the occasional rustling of the trees.

Babax awoke to a low, distant rumbling. His ears perked instinctively, his heart quickening. Beside him, Lilly stirred, eyes snapping open as she, too, sensed something was amiss.

Without a word, they slipped from their tents, moving as silently as shadows. The golden hues of dawn were barely beginning to break over the horizon as they crept up the road, finding cover behind a thick patch of bushes.

The sound grew louder. Hooves. Many of them. Babax peeked over the foliage and sucked in a breath.

A platoon of Dimplekin light cavalry thundered down the dirt path, their riders clad in quilted armor, banners of dark green and gold trailing behind them. They rode Swiftwhiskers, the famed small, yet fiercely agile deer-like mounts of the Burrowlands, their long, lean bodies built for speed and endurance. Their oversized whiskers twitched in the wind, their split hooves pounding the ground in rhythmic unison. Their powerful legs and compact frames made them ideal for maneuvering tight forest trails and charging through uneven terrain.

Lilly leaned in, whispering, "Something's wrong."

Babax nodded, gripping a branch tightly as the group passed just feet away. The rhythmic pounding of hooves echoed through the air, mingling with the clatter of armor and the sharp calls of the riders. He caught glimpses of their faces—set in grim determination, eyes scanning the horizon with urgency. The tension in their posture, the

hurried pace of their mounts—something was wrong. He could hear the clinking of weapons and the urgency in their voices.

“We must ride, men! Hurry!” shouted a leading officer, his tone strained.

Babax and Lilly exchanged a glance before darting back to camp.

Desrael and Tivwan were already awake, tightening packs onto the wagon. Tivwan shot them a questioning look. “What’s got you two running like startled hares?”

Lilly wasted no time, recounting everything she had seen—the Swiftwhiskers, the riders, the desperate urgency in their voices.

Desrael listened intently, his face hardening with concern. He adjusted his bowstring and turned to Tivwan. “We must make haste to Hollowbrook Market. Something’s happening westward. I pray Timothy is alright.”

The weight of his words lingered in the morning air, the first true sense that trouble was waiting ahead.

Tivwan adjusted his seat at the front of the caravan, the old Quivren’s paws gripping the reins as he flicked them, urging the Whisker Oxen forward. Their massive, shaggy bodies plodded along steadily, heavy hooves kicking up the morning mist that still clung to the road.

“Three days until we reach Hollowbrook Market,” Tivwan mused aloud, more to himself than anyone else.

Desrael sat beside him, his keen eyes locked on the road ahead, brows furrowed in thought.

“The Swiftwhisker cavalry will be there much sooner,” Desrael murmured. “I hope that’s enough.”

Tivwan nodded, but there was an unspoken weight in the air.

Lilly sat near the back of the wagon with her arms crossed over her chest. Her tail flicked impatiently. The news of the riders had unsettled her. Babax could tell—she had been unusually quiet since they broke camp.