

## **The One Way Forward**

**Wil Clayton**

**Long Shadows on a Wide Plain series**

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**Wil Clayton**

## Chapter 1

“After we rest, can I ride?” asked Calum looking up at the mound of hair and flesh that was his escort.

“Did you bring a horse with you?” asked Roland, flatly, as he always did.

“No.”

“Then you walk.”

Silence descended on the pair, again.

The draught horse that Roland used as his mount lumbered down the dirt track. Calum, small in its shadow, walked with a hurried pace trying to keep at its side, his legs had started to stiffen from hours of travel. He wondered, not for the first time, whether his body would carry him through the day.

“Will it be soon?” asked Calum.

“What?”

“The rest.”

There was a moment of silence.

“We can take a short break at the trees,” said Roland, “but we cannot stay long.”

Calum looked up the dirt road, far in the distance on a lump of dirt which the inhabitants of the plains would call a hill sat three lone trees that had somehow been spared from the farmer’s relentless hunger for land.

“That’s not on the road.”

“We leave the road ahead and then cut across these fields. There’s a stream beyond that we follow to The Grey Wash,” explained Roland and then added, “no more questions.”

Calum had not known Roland for long but knew that it was the end of the matter. Calum looked for something to occupy his young mind and divert his attention from the dull burning in his muscles.

The lands of the western plains were vast and empty. A patchwork made of the soft oranges of grain crops and the dark greens of the pastures. The wheat that grew on either side of the road swayed in the soft breeze that swept across land. The colours were dotted by the occasional splotch of dark brown where a farmer had thrown up a house, shack or stables.

Calum looked behind, the crossroads where he had met Roland in the half light of dawn had vanished and all that he could see now was a long, straight dirt road that they had travelled all morning.

Calum cursed himself for not having taken a horse from the stables. He had been so focused on getting out of the wayhouse without being noticed that the thought had not occurred to him. It was for the best, he decided, a trip to the stables at that time of morning would have raised the suspicion of the watchmen who had patrolled the yard.

Also, how would he have taken the beast through the tight shrub behind the wayhouse that he used to mask his escape. The beams of the guards men lanterns had almost caught Calum as he had pushed through the brush trying to escape taking a horse as well would have been the end of his adventure right there.

Roland simply did not realise how difficult Calum's escape had been. Calum knew he could explain it to Roland at the trees while they rested, once Roland understood he would certainly let Calum ride the horse for the afternoon.

The thought brought a smile to Calum's face and the burning in his thighs became bearable.

The pair travelled further down the road until Roland's horse cut to the left, heading down a small pathway made by the men who worked the fields. The path was decorated with clumps of weeds that broke through the soil, it had been a few months since the fields had been sown and there had been little traffic to stomp the weeds back. The ground became increasing loose under foot and Calum struggled even more to keep up with the rider as his boots lost their footing in the loose ground.

Roland was first to reach the trees, Calum joined him a short while after. When he arrived Roland had already dismounted and was leaning against a tree, draped in his bearskin cloak as he stared out across the fields.

"You have a few minutes to catch your breath and eat," said Roland.

The sun was reaching its zenith as Calum rummaged through his bag for the piece of bread that he had taken from the wayhouse kitchen.

"I was thinking about the horse while we were crossing the field," said Calum before taking a mouthful.

Roland turned his gaze to the boy.

**“It was very difficult to get out of the wayhouse without being noticed but I managed to do it,” munched Calum, “getting a horse though would have been impossible with the watchmen posted around the stables. There was absolutely no way for me to take a horse.”**

**Calum stopped and studied Roland, waiting for a response, but none came.**

**“So, I was hoping that you would understand my circumstances and seeing how tired my legs are you would allow me to ride on your horse for the afternoon?” Calum smiled warmly.**

**Roland turned back to the look at the plains.**

**“Eat your bread and rest your legs.”**

**“You didn’t answer my question.”**

**“Eat your bread and rest your legs.”**

**The emptiness of the statement was what infuriated Calum the most, the audacity that he would simply ignore a simple question.**

**“It was a simple question,” said Calum hiding the anger that was building in him.**

**Roland continued to ignore him.**

**“Do you think you can simply ignore a simple request? You could offer a simple answer to a simple question?”**

**Roland continued to study the gentle slope of the plains in the distance.**

**Calum hated being ignored. No one dared to ignore him in the castle, his father would not stand for such arrogance but his father was not here to fight his battle. On top of a hill, in the middle of nowhere, stood a brute with the strength of seven and a boy of fifteen with sore legs.**

**Calum’s anger gave way quickly to a feeling of dread.**

**“This was a mistake, wasn’t it?” he said to himself.**

**“Perhaps,” replied Roland.**

**“Take me back to my father, then.”**

**“Very well and then you will give me what I am owed.”**

**“What?”**

**“The land you promised as payment is still due. I have risked much to help you and I demand payment.”**

**“It was a half day ride,” yelled Calum.**

**“My time is valuable.”**

**The situation laid itself out in front of Calum. The humiliation as he approached his father, forced to admit to all his plan to escape The First Kingdom and abandon his station, but not only that, he had also given away his only land holding to a wanderer from another land. But what else was there to do? Move forward with a man who seemed to be delighting in his misery?**

**“It’s time we go,” interrupted Roland, “which way are we headed?”**

**Calum stood, quietly, his mind racing as Roland found his horse.**

**Fur whipped through the air as Roland swung his huge legs up and over the mount, his cloak catching on the horse’s hindquarters. Roland took longer than needed to straighten the cloak and then wrapped himself in it, fully, as though in defiance of the strong heat of the summer sun that washed over the land.**

**“Well?”**

**The voice cut through Calum confused thoughts.**

**“This isn’t fair, you’re making this hard for me so you can get your land sooner.”**

**Roland sighed as the boy’s eyes became wet.**

**“Come, I’ll take you back to your father.”**

**“No,” yelled Calum as he wiped at the tears that had started to gather, “I am paying for you to take me to the White Spire, so you are going to take me there.”**

**“Then we had best get moving,” replied Roland without a moment of hesitation and kicked his mount forward and the beast started to lumber down the hill.**

**Calum shook himself, stunned by but proud of the surge of defiance that had taken him from somewhere inside, then he realised he was alone on the hill. He scrambled to gather his discarded bag and ran after the horse that had already descended down the other side of the hill.**

**Thoughts were racing with doubt, anger, sadness and panic. They were too quick to grab at and as soon as one came it was pushed aside by another. Though one thing was true within the whirlpool of anxiety. The only path left for him now was the one in front.**

**Ahead of the pair, a corridor of trees marched across the plain, it was the river Roland had promised. The deep green of the leaves looked dense and cool against the orange of the fields.**

**The two continued on and soon the horse had passed through the tree line and splashed into the water beyond.**

**The stream, only a few yards wide, ran swift and shallow across the smooth, grey stone of the river bed. The world beneath the trees were dark and grey covered almost fully by the branches and leaves above.**

**Roland swung off the horse and lowered himself into the stream.**

**“If they send hounds after you this will hold them back,” said Roland as he started down the stream.**

**Calum stepped into the water, cautiously, and felt the tug of the soft current against his boot. He steadied himself against the flow and followed after Roland.**

The rocks were solid underneath, though slightly slick. His boots clung firm to them with their rough finish and for the first time Calum felt prepared for the journey and cheered to himself in triumph. He had taken his finest boots from his closet before leaving his home of Kabrace, the boots a gift from his mother when he had started his military training a few years earlier.

The river was a marvel to Calum. The water ran clear like the water from the deep wells in the castle. It was much more beautiful than the flows of the King's Way which ran through Kabrace that was always thick with the brown muck of the Northern Lands.

Calum took a breath of the cool, moist air and realised the maddening thoughts that had exhausted him just moments earlier had vanished, subdued by the rushing sounds of the water that cooled his feet and playfully tugged at his feet.

"Where are we headed now?" asked Calum.

"There is a wayhouse we can reach by dusk, off the river, though it will add a league to our journey," said Roland, "or we can hold to the river and put another league between us and your men though we will need to camp by the river. Which would suit?"

"I have camped in the wilds with the finest rangers, they trained me extensively in hunting and woodsmanship," said Calum defiantly feeling as though Roland was trying to insult him.

"Then we will hold to the river, how long do you need to hunt?"

"How is the game in this area?" asked Calum his voice had regained the authority he usual spoke with to the servants at home.

"Easy and slow. The farmers have claimed the rest of the land as theirs, so there are plenty of small animals trapped along the river. You will likely trip over a rabbit during your hunt."

"Then an hour will be enough."

"Good."

The journey continued downstream until Roland announced it was time to make camp.

Calum dug through his bag for some rope and then disappear into the shrub. He returned not long after, triumphant, holding a dead hare. Its neck had been snapped clean and quick by his own hands. By that time, Roland had built a small fire while Calum was away and now Roland sat away from it watching the river, still wrapped in his cloak.

"Do you want some?" laughed Calum still high from the victory of the hunt, "there's enough for both of us,"

"No, you eat it. You'll need it."

Calum fished around for the knife in his bag before producing a sheathed blade.

**“I wasn’t good at skinning,” started Calum, “my brother Damon could make a few cuts here and there and then rip the skin off with a single motion.”**

**Calum started to hack at the animal as the sun went down, the fire creating a halo of light around them. Eventually, Calum produced a butchered carcass with tacks of fur still clinging to the places that were too hard to get at. With another flick of the blade, the animal was gutted, the organs spilt out across to the ground. Calum used his water bladder to wash the gore from the meat, then skewered the hare on a stick and placed it over the fire.**

**The tattered remains of the animal’s hide sent a thick, choking smoke into the air which caused Calum to cough while the meat began to brown.**

**“Feels good to hunt your own meal,” Roland’s voice cut through the night from beyond the light of fire.**

**Calum was startled, this was the first time Roland had started a conversation.**

**“It does,” said Calum with face a light with a wide smile.**

**Calum listened to the sounds of the stream for a while.**

**“It’s been a strange day,” he sighed.**

**“If your lucky, there are stranger ones to come.”**

**“Did you think I would make it to the end of the day?” asked Calum and immediately wondered why he had not asked that very question to himself before leaving his bed that morning.**

**“As a prince I know you’ve come accustomed to every man and woman thinking on you,” said Roland looking into the darkness, “but beyond the walls of The First Keep very few man care about the fate of Prince Calum and when we reach the forest, even less.”**

**“That’s what I want,” said Calum, “my father cannot reach me in the Spire.”**

**“I wouldn’t fear your father’s reach. His enemies are the ones I would watch for,”**

**“My father has no enemies, we live in peaceful time. The Saquaari keep our enemies at bay.”**

**Roland shuffled in the darkness.**

**“They teach royals strangely these days,” sighed Roland, “lessons on how to hunt game in the woods and evade the guards in the shadows but then whispers fantasies of peace in their ears. Most surprising is you believe it.”**

**“No war has come to The First Kingdom since the pact. Peace is ours now and my people will not be giving it up easily.”**

**“What is your father’s name among the nobles that chatter in the halls?”**

**Calum paused for a moment.**

**“King Wren the Old.”**

**“And how do you think a man of just thirty five years is given such a name?”**

**Calum sat quietly.**

**“A title, a joke and a warning all in one. The nobles of the First Kingdom have always been as fickle with their kings as they have been with their dogs, a pact will not change that,”** said Roland shaking his head, **“your father may have had a chance at a real peace handed to him by your Grandfather but he threw it away out of either arrogance or ignorance, only he knows that. All I know is the peace your Grandfather died for will not last and the fault lies firmly at the feet of King Wren.”**

**Calum sat in the firelight, his face neutral, his mind working. The things Roland said had a treacherous truth to them that Calum had considered himself from time to time, but he always dismissed such thoughts because he knew better than that.**

**His father held the authority of the western realms. His mother sat beside him with the authority of the east. And his brother Damon sat before them as the first Low King with both lands of the Kaborn at his back.**

**It was only the commoners who talked of Damon’s low blood but the men of power saw and respected only the Blood the Ka and that royal blood was just as strong in Damon’s veins as any other who had worn the stone crown before.**

**Damon would take that crown when Father went to his grave many years from now. These were the real truths that Calum knew and truths a wanderer like Roland could never know.**

**“The kingdom is stronger than you can know and it is united behind my father,”** said Calum, firmly as he returned to the the world of the camp fire.

**“As you say,”** replied Roland.

**Calum ate the remains of his prey and then felt the fatigue take him. He pushed dirt over the fire, the night air was enough to keep him warm and Roland did not seem to be making us of the flames. Calum then took up his thin travelling cloak, wrapped himself in it, found a comfortable spot between the buttress roots of a tree and let the exhaustion of the day take him.**

## **Chapter 2**

**The dream came again.**

**Calum stood in front of the silver mirror. The world was empty and black around it but somehow his face was lit in the darkness. His thin, red-brown hair groomed neatly, the thin wisps of the hair made thick stains by fresh oil that caused it to glisten and stick to his head,**

his bronze skin cleaned and scrubbed with a hint of red that came after a scolding bath. The sweet perfume, imported from the Heartland, huge in the air, so dense it overpowered his senses.

Calum wore a white shirt of ridiculous pomp, frills and ruffs exploded from wherever it could find a gap in the blue vest that bound his body. Frills from the neck, the shoulders, the belly seemed to grow and reach out into the darkness.

Over the top of his left shoulder hung a robe of mismatched colours, purple, green, yellow, pink and so many others, stitched together with golden threads that sparkled in an unseen light.

The face in the mirror stared back at him, a mockery of his own. The left eye sat slightly lower than it should, the right eye slightly higher. His narrow nose stretched longer than it was and slightly crooked at the end, his large dark lips sagged just slightly on the left.

The vision, no longer shocked his sleeping mind or caused his distant, physical body to thrash as it once did. This was a dream he had come to know and a dream was all it was.

Knocks came at the heavy wooden door as the empty world became a room. The mirror reflected the room and nothing more, his perverse reflection gone. He turned. Slowly. Time was always slow here.

The door opened upon the court of The First Throne, a small stone pillar which only came to a grown man's knee, sat in the centre of the room atop the circular rise. Before it stood a squat man, muscles bulge from underneath his grey regal dress that seemed to absorb the light around it. The muscles pulsed under the cloth with a heartbeat of their own, threatening to burst the seams and leave the king naked to his court. The stone crown sat upon his head, a simple ring of marble.

The king beckoned Calum forward, as he always did, and Calum obeyed.

The room was crowded with nobles dressed in the same ridiculous clothes as Calum. The fabrics of the woman's dresses spilt down and consumed the small children that struggled to escape from beneath. The nobles were frozen in mid motion, some chattered, merrily, other whispered, treacherously, all with painted faces, their poses and makeup exuded life but their eyes were dead and unseeing.

Calum walked towards the king who stood in front of the throne. This was the part he had always hated and still did. When the dreams had first come, Calum had felt nothing but a disgust that pulled at the pit of his stomach as he stepped into the room but since his twelfth year a new emotion had come the sense of excitement and anticipation that effected him as deeply as the disgust.

Calum's hand moved to the cold, stone handle of the blade he had tucked into his belt, under his patchwork robe. He had put it there, he did not know when, he did not know why, but it had been his hand that put it there.

He did not rush, there was no need to rush, the nobles were blind and the king was unaware. The tension of the moment built within in him, slowly, his breath quickened, his heart raced.

Now, he was next to the man with the stone crown and in flurry of passion Calum drew his blade and stabbed. The warm blood ran down the hilt of the blade, his hands were bathed and his trousers became spoilt as the thick liquid splattered against the fabric, the blood slowly seeped through to the skin and caused the silk to stick warm and wet against his leg.

The eyes in front of Calum were wide and white with shock, tears stained the cheeks. Calum stared into the eyes as he twisted the knife, enjoying the grown of pain that came, not from the man but from somewhere within his own head. The blood continued down the side of the rise and on to the polished floor of the throne room.

Blinking, Calum woke from his sleep and took a few breaths to steady himself. The dream was gone and the dawn was breaking from between the tree trunks making the world golden.

Calum looked down, the front his pants stained from the dream as they always were. He stuck his head up from behind the root that he had cradled him in the night before and looked around. Beyond the black remains of the campfire sat Roland still wrapped in his bearskin cloak still watching the river.

"I am going to wash in the river," said Calum quietly.

Roland nodded in response but did not turn as Calum slinked away not wanting Roland to see him. Calum always felt ashamed when he woke from the dream.

It was his eighth year when the vision came for the first time. He awoke, upright, in his bed screaming at the dark room, so deeply moved he could not settle his mind again. The king's dead eyes watched him from the dark corners of the bed chamber. Calum jumped from his bed to light every candle in the room to chase the spectre from the place but as the years passed, and dream persisted, he grew not to fear the dead king and then, after a few more years, he grew to enjoy the man's end.

That was what shamed Calum the most, what it said about him in his darker moments that was why he had to be away from his home and why he had to find a new life in a distant land.

Calum returned to the camp dressed in his still drying clothes.

"I'm ready to leave," said Calum collecting his belongings.

"Good, we hold to the river for two more days. It will take us directly into Lay'tol."

It was exactly what Calum needed to hear to clear the darkness the dream left in its wake. He enjoyed the river and did not want to see the burning fields and their uneven paths again. The walls of confidence Calum had constructed in his mind while plotting his escape were starting to rebuild themselves after the battering of the doubts they had taken the day before.

Calum looked at his escort with fresh eyes. Roland, though distant, seemed able and willing enough to complete the journey. Calum had enjoyed the gamy taste of his half skinned hare and his legs sung now with the song of achievement rather than desperate struggle.

Soon, he would see the ancient forests of Lay'tol and then the mystical lands of Dunway, beyond. He started to feel like himself again and the strange, cowardly creature he had become yesterday slain by his usual optimism and determination.

The two left the dead campfire behind and the morning passed without a word exchanged, but as the sun rose to the middle of sky Calum, tired of the silence, decided he would engage Roland in conversation.

“Do you have a name for your horse?” asked Calum.

“You do not name a horse,” he replied, “an animal you need to summon, like a dog, has a name but even then it is for the animal not the master.”

“Each of my horses have a name. I have six in total.”

“Horses are easily lost or stolen when you don't have a royal stable to hold them in,” said Roland, “this is the fourth horse I have purchased this summer. I got this one only recently in Kabrace when I met with you.”

“What happened to your last horse?” asked Calum with a morbid curiosity.

“I was taking the off roads of the Northern Burrows, the tracks made by the smugglers and slavers from Gart...”

“Why not use the highways?” interrupted Calum, “my father spent a lot of gold on the m.”

“I do not like to travel the known roads in the Northern Lands,” said Roland simply and then continued his story, “the off roads are just dirt and rocks piled up and then smoothed to let light carts through, they're not braced like your father's roads. So, by the nature of things, one collapsed out from underneath me while I was mounted.

“The horse tried desperately to find its footing but with my weight on top off it there was nothing that could be done and we both tumbled into the pass below. I was thrown a good dozen feet from my mount, when I recovered I found the horse thrashing, broken in the dirt.

“The beast was desperate, kicking into air making it a danger to approach but I could not leave it that way. I made my way through the flurry of hooves, collecting a few to the gut and

ribs as I went but I was able to get to its throat and slice. I held it firm as the blood spilt across the dirt and after a few moments the horse fell silent.

“Now another carries me and who knows for how long. This is the way of things outside the walls of your city. Naming it, or any other beast that serves me, would be a waste.”

“I suppose your right,” said Calum thoughtfully, “when your name was sung in the courtyards at home, I do not believe your horse was mentioned once.”

“My name is as worthless as any other,” said Roland dismissively, “a name sung by men who cower behind stone walls and listened to by fools who know nothing of what I have done. The true men who walk the land do not care what my name is nor who I am and that is the way it should be.”

“My people do not cower behind walls,” snapped Calum.

“As you say.”

“My First Council says the name is most important part of a man,” said Calum trying to continue the conversation, “without a name we are nothing but beasts. Once we are named, we are remember, our actions for ill or good are recorded and we are accountable for them. As a prince I had to be very careful with my name.”

“Your councilman makes the mistake of thinking men can be anything more than beasts, with a name or without. Out here you see the truth of it, your actions, your name, you, are irrelevant when all is done.”

“I am not irrelevant,” scoured Calum as the rest of Roland’s words became lost to him.

“You are quick to anger when face with simple truths, like the rest of your people,” rebuked Roland, “this is why I prefer silence from the Kaborn.”

“Then have your damn silence,” shouted Calum having enough of the insults of his companion seemed to be filled with, “lead the way like I am paying you to do.”

Roland did not respond and this made Calum even more furious but Calum had nothing more to do then chew on the inside of his cheek. Even when they had met for the first time in a dark corner of Kabrace, Roland did not have a single kind word for the prince and had taken every opportunity to attack his station and his people.

The sun marched across the sky and by the mid afternoon Calum found his cheek was raw and he had forgotten why. What he did remember was the grizzly fate of Roland’s horse and in his mind pictured the loose flesh where the horse neck had been slit.

Calum took his hand and placed it on the short coat of the horse that walked at his side and let the rough feel of the coat take him back to the royal stables, he was home again amongst friends, for a short while.

The day ended and the two set up camp. Calum hunted a rabbit, made his dinner and slept a dreamless sleep. The next day repeated itself as the one before, silence with short interludes of gruff disagreement, until the afternoon came.

“We turn off here,” said Roland.

“Why?” puzzled Calum.

“I have business with a friend before we head further downstream.”

Roland turned his horse and pushed through the undergrowth and Calum followed, eager to meet a person that Roland would call a friend.

The light of the afternoon sun was dazzling as they emerged from behind the trees, the flat fields a vibrant gold stretching out to both horizons. Across the field, a roof poked above the crop.

The field soon gave way to a small, wooden farmhouse, old but cared for. Clothes, shirt, plain brown dresses and thick trousers had been strung up between the only two trees in sight.

“Stay here,” said Roland, “watch the horse, I will return.”

Calum nodded and took the reins. He watched as the large frame of Roland strode towards the house and vanished inside.

The sun continued to move closer to horizon. The sky started to turn a deep purple when Roland reappeared with a bag in hand.

“We will stay here tonight,” said Roland as he approached, “there is a place for you and the horse in stable.”

“The stable?” said Calum, “why can’t stay in the house?”

“You stay in stable tonight and I will come and get you in the morning,” said Roland firmly and pushed the bag on to Calum, “here is some food from our host, she wishes you a pleasant a stay.”

Calum opened the bag and saw a large piece of cake, a couple of sugar rolls. A grin crept across his face at the sight of treats and the annoyance at being denied a soft bed vanished from his mind.

“And this,” said Roland throwing him a leather bladder, “your rangers have taught you well, I’m sure you will be fine in the stables for a night.”

Calum shook his head and led Roland’s horse into the stables. Inside it was warm and dry as specks of dust danced in the light that flooded into the space from the high windows. The familiar smell of horse hung in the air as a few beasts stirred in the stalls at the back.

Calum took the large horse and dressed it down. It was calming to lose himself in the ritual of caring for the horse. As he removed Roland’s saddle from its back Calum almost fell

backwards under the size and awkward shape of it the saddle, like most things concerning Roland, it was not the type for a normal man.

After the job was done, Calum sat cross legged on the ground and open up the bladder Roland had thrown at him. He took a swig and just as he had hoped it was a sharp, red wine.

Calum put the cap back on it, placed it to the side, explored the bag and found some dried meat along side the breads and cake. He tucked himself into a corner and ate the treats, taking several mouthfuls from the bladder and let the warmth of wine fill his body and lighten his spirit.

Calum fell asleep in warm, safe darkness of the stable. The wine bladder, half-empty, laying on his chest, his stomach and mind content.

The cries of a woman woke him from a dream. Calum pulled himself up and the bladder slid to the ground. Calum found his head was light and confused from the wine, slowly the world pieced itself together in the low light of stable. When the world was complete again, all there was left was moonlight and the sounds of the woman still coming from beyond the stable doors.

Calum pushed himself from the dirt floor and went to the doors.

A single window of the farmhouse was open, the light poured out on to the patches of grass. He listened closely to the sounds of the woman and he knew what the sounds were, they were not the sounds of a woman in distress.

Calum smiled to no one and went back to the wineskin he had left lying in the corner. He took another swig, his head spinning slightly and listened to sounds that emanated from the farmhouse. Roland was a man like any other after all, was the thought that came Calum's mind and he laughed.

There were so many tales of Roland the Ferocious, Calum didn't think the one with him would start in such a common way.

When Calum had hired Roland he had imagined a daring escape across the lands of The First Kingdom, as Roland was forced to slay his guards in a desperate battle to protect the precious prince. Calum would have to take up arms against his own men, a demonstration of his rejection of his position and the life he had abandoned in Kabrace.

Calum would have Roland spare one of his former guardsmen and Calum would order the man to return to the king and tell him to forget his beloved son for now, and that Calum would return home after he had tamed the powerful magic of the Dun.

This was how his tale was to start, but unfortunately it had been something very different. Something restrained.

Calum sighed and took another mouthful wine. A sly smile crossed his face and his eyes narrowed, Calum never did like restraint.

The boy returned to the door of the stables and stuck his head out, the yard was lit well enough to see by the large moon overhead. He moved across the ground to the open window and sat himself underneath. The cries of woman now accompanied by the rhythmic, thumping of furniture being used aggressively.

Calum listened and enjoy the sounds taking another swing of the wine, letting the thrill of deviant act wash over him. After only a short while, the sounds of pleasure were no longer enough for Calum. He pulled himself up and poked his head up over the window sill to look into the room.

The farmhouse was alive with the large flames of the fire place, the mountain of naked muscle stood over the table. Calum immediately focused on the woman that gripped the table beneath him. She had a large, curvaceous frame, black, wild hair which swept through the air as Roland pushed her aggressively into the table's surface, chairs that had once sat underneath now were scattered across the floor as the table inched across the wooden floor with every thrust.

The woman's threw her head back and forth in uncontrolled ecstasy. Her breast took Calum's breath away, large and round, they bounced and collided themselves widely as they carried forward the unrelenting force that came from behind her.

Calum had always loved large breasted woman, especially the cook's hand Marsi. She was eighteen when he had approached her, a brave, twelve year old boy and newly anointed Prince of The First Kingdom. Marsi had responded to his aggressive advances with a hard slap and a few curt insults before telling him to a return when his beard was fully grown, then, maybe, she would think about entertaining him.

Marsi had never let Calum forget that day, mocking him relentlessly when no one else was around and that made him love her even more. Calum made do with noble girls from court that threw themselves at him at their mother's instruction and the handmaids that hoped one day he would give them a life better than the ones they were given by fate. But Marsi was the only one Calum had ever loved and he would still have her, one day, when his beard was full.

Calum fell to the ground under the window, colliding with the powdery dirt. A melancholy took him, brought on by the thoughts of his friends at home. The sounds of the fierce love in the farmhouse became distant and hollow. He wanted to see his friends again, all of them. He wanted them to be with him as he saw the forests and walked its paths, side by

side with the great Roland. Tears came to his eyes and Calum took another mouthful from the bladder, the wine would help.

There was a loud crash and the sound of splintering wood came from within the house, the world came back into focus, Calum jumped and stuck his head up.

Laughter exploded from his mouth as he saw the legs of the table had come apart. The woman now lay on the floor on top of pile of wood, puzzled and stunned. Her laughter joined his as she looked through the window to see the boy's red face catching her in such a ridiculous position.

Roland was not laughing. He stormed over to window.

“Get in the stables and stay there,” he shouted the force of the words pushed Calum back.

Calum skipped across the darkness of yard, still laughing. He would not let Roland's temper ruin his fun. The light of the farmhouse vanished from the yard as the shutters were pulled shut and the laughter of woman inside became muffled.

Finding the nearest pile of hay in the stables Calum collapsed face down feeling the rough straw stick into him. The laughter did not stop as he rolled over and took another mouthful of wine. He laid back and stared at wooden roof high above him, it was spinning and his legs tingled.

Then he was asleep.

A hard kick to his back woke Calum. Startled, he jump and yelped. Roland was standing over him, his horse saddled and ready. Calum held his head, it felt heavy with a dull pain that dug into it.

“Time to go,” said Roland and took his horse from the stable.

Calum quickly found his bag and grabbed what was left of the sweet bread and meat. He had forgotten to cap the wineskin and what little remained of the contents had now spilt across the floor making a thick muck in dirt.

The stable door swung open and morning light spilt over him, his head screamed trying to force him back into the half light but he had no choice but to push on. In the distance, Roland was leading his horse into the field away from the farmhouse.

“Thank you for your visit, my Prince,” came the loud voice of woman from the farmhouse, “I do hope you enjoyed your visit to our home.”

Calum looked behind and in doorway stood the strong, square frame of the farming woman, a white skirt wrapped around her hips, she was naked from the waist up. Her bronze skin glowing the morning light.

He smiled at her and waved back to her.

**“I did indeed, fair woman,” he called back across the dirt, “may your harvest be as bountiful as you are.”**

**The woman laughed and shook her breast at him and closed the door. Calum smiled to himself and ran to catch Roland who had already vanished beyond the trees.**

**Calum caught him marching up stream, his horse swaggering next to him.**

**“I understand...” started Calum.**

**“You do?” snapped Roland cutting him off.**

**“A man has needs,” Calum continued with a smile, enjoying himself.**

**Roland grunted but Calum was not sure what it meant.**

**“If you need to meet with a woman you can just tell me,” laughed Calum, “you don’t have to lie about having business with an old friend or some other story.”**

**“I have no reason to lie to you or anyone else. Last night was not what you think it was.”**

**Calum thought for a moment.**

**“I think I know what it was,” laughed Calum.**

**“No, you don’t,” snapped Roland, “Salith, is old friend of mine, her father let me stay on his farm whenever I travel into the Heartland. She has continued to let me stay even though her father died many years ago. She and her husband have had trouble bearing children and last time I passed through I offered to help, if they wished.**

**“They decided to continue as they were but they have had no success. A friend was in need and I was willing to help, nothing more.”**

**“The soldiers would talk about nobles that would make similar requests of the them when they couldn’t perform for their wives. They paid large amounts for the services and the silence.”**

**“They do,” said Roland, “and silence is best for all involved, so I will hear no more of it.”**

**“If you demand it,” laughed Calum with a shrug, “but must you break the table when you do it?”**

### **Chapter 3**

**The world became darker as the fields beyond the tree line fell away and were replaced by dense forest. The soft grass and vines that grew along riverside turned to hard tangles of branches and thorns. Enticing berries of red and yellow dotted thick shrubs, Roland warned Calum not to touch them.**

**The river started to deepen and the stream rose to Calum’s knee, the cold water drowning his boots.**

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