

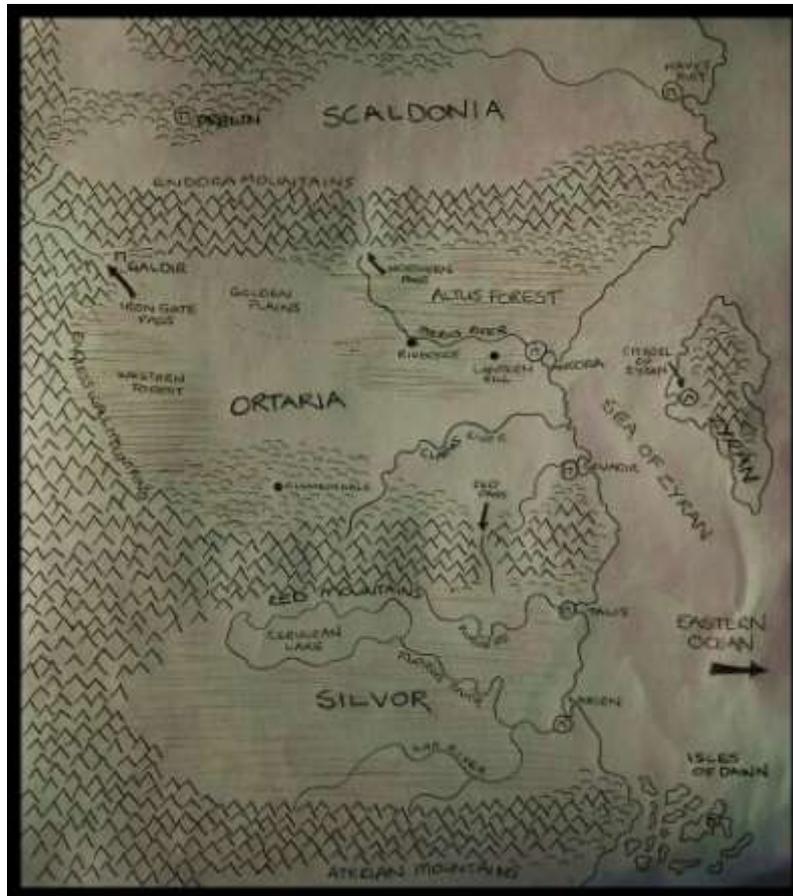
**THE SWORD OF LIGHT**  
**BOOK ONE OF THE VEREDOR CHRONICLES**  
**E J GILMOUR**

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**MAP OF THE EASTERN LANDS**



**CHAPTER ONE**

Deep in the southern hills of the Kingdom of Ortaria, perched precariously on a mountainside, was a lonely and simply built hut. There was nothing particularly unusual about the hut, apart from its rather perilous location. A steep track led down to a little village far below, and anybody passing through the village would have thought it was a very strange place to build a home, if they noticed it at all.

A young man stood by the only window and looked out across the valley. He was tall with wavy brown hair and dark eyes. The small window presented a view

of the entire village. The people of Clemensdale were scurrying about and making preparations for the approaching storm. Dark clouds were rolling across the hills to the east. Thunder rumbled from above and echoed throughout the valley. He reached out and fastened the shutters as lightning lit up the sky above.

The hut was made up of a single room with a central wooden table and two single beds against each wall. An oil lantern filled the little hut with warm light. On top of the table was a small metal box. The young man sat down and gently lifted the lid off the box. Inside was a piece of folded parchment paper. He took it out and unfolded the letter. He then began to read.

*Brother Erako,*

*I send to you this child. His name is Eben. Lady Kaloren has requested that he be hidden from our enemies. She has assigned me the task to protect the child. I must ensure he is placed somewhere where he will not be found. She has also requested for the Ecorian Sword to remain with Eben. I know I can trust you to take care of him. It is truly important that you accept. We are living in a dangerous time. Our numbers are few in these lands. The rumours are true; the hand of evil reaches south. I will only say a few words in this letter of our troubles. We have encountered our old enemies in Ortaria. There is word they have entered Vastoria. We can only hope the Cosmic Gate holds true. We fear the time grows near. One of us will come to take Eben from you soon.*

*Sincerely,*

*Carlin.*

Eben had read the letter at least a dozen times, and with each reading more questions entered his mind. The metal box had been hidden beneath Erako's bed. The contents of the letter had shocked him deeply.

For most of his life Eben had lived in the southern hills of Ortaria. He had been taught the craft of surviving in the wild rocky land by Erako, the Huntsman of Clemensdale. Erako was already an old man when Eben was entrusted to his care, and he singlehandedly raised Eben from when he was only two years old. Few memories remained of the time before his arrival, only vague recollections and faces of people who he could not clearly remember. Eben had always been told that a stranger left him and had promised to return one day to take him away, but the stranger never returned. The months turned into years without a word or message.

Over sixteen years had passed since he arrived at the small remote village. In the depths of winter a fever had overcome Erako. The old huntsman passed away peacefully in his sleep. Life in the village had not been the same since Erako's death.

Erako always said someone would eventually come to Clemensdale to explain Eben's origins, but after reading the letter he felt a deep desire to search for the answers himself. There was so much he wanted to know: who Carlin and Lady Kaloren were, and where had he come from, but mostly he hoped to find his parents.

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After several hours the storm had passed. Questions continued to circle around in Eben's mind. He knew that he would have to leave his home and begin a

dangerous journey if he was ever going to have a chance at discovering any of the answers. Clemensdale was a humble village and very far from anything evil or treacherous. The people were shy folk and went about their business without much care for the happenings of the wider world. The village was tucked away in the hills and mostly forgotten by outsiders.

Many dreadful stories had been brought to Clemensdale by peddlers, drifters, and nomads. The Kingdom of Ortaria had once been a peaceful and beautiful land. Rumours continued to surface that something menacing was growing in the north and east of the country. The summers had grown cold and the winters long and icy. Crops had mostly failed, rivers were depleted of fish, and few animals remained in the forests. However, even with all these happenings, the village of Clemensdale continued to be largely untroubled. The farmers had little to complain about, the bakers still baked, the shepherds still tended their sheep, and the village folk were as happy as they had ever been.

Eben pondered the stories as he packed his bag. He knew the roads that led north would be dangerous. His thoughts were interrupted by a gentle tapping at the door. He opened the door and looked out to see Vera, the baker's wife, standing just outside. Vera was a very old woman with grey hair and blue eyes that were full of cheer. She looked up at him with a warm smile.

'Hello there my dear boy,' she said as she stepped inside and out of the cold.

'Vera, I wasn't expecting you.'

'I've come to bring you some bread. We baked it this morning especially for you,' she said, setting the basket down on the table. She turned to face him. 'How are you my boy? We've been worried about you living all alone up here on the hill. Is everything all right?' she asked as her eyes glanced across at his half packed bag on the floor.

'I'm fine.'

'It looks to me you are planning to go somewhere,' she said, a look of worry crossing her face.

There was a short silence as Eben thought of how best to tell Vera about his planned journey to Ancora. He knew Vera cared for him like an aunt would for a nephew, and he also knew she would probably be opposed to any suggestion of an adventure beyond the boundaries of Clemensdale.

'I am, Vera. I'm going on a journey.'

She nervously scratched her chin and shook her head. 'Eben, you should reconsider. There are many terrible things out on the roads of Ortaria. Erako would have wanted you to stay safely here in Clemensdale. You have an important place in our village. We care about you; you know we do.'

'I know, Vera, but please understand I have to go to Ancora. If my parents are out there somewhere I still may be able to find them. I know the road will be dangerous, but it's a chance I'm willing to take.'

She took his hand and warmly smiled. 'I realise what it is like to have so many questions and no answers. If you really must go then you also must stay safe. You don't know much about the outside world, none of us here in Clemensdale do. Don't trust anyone. It's not like Clemensdale out there; the people beyond the hills are only interested in what they can take from you. They say it's about take, take, take in the north. Keep your eyes wide open. Always remember your home and your people. Once you find what you seek hurry home to us. We will be waiting for you.'

'Thank you, Vera.'

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Eben had been walking for three days. He set out from Clemensdale taking only his leather cloak, a hand axe, his hunting bow, enough food for several weeks on the road, and the Ecorian Sword that was mentioned in the letter. He had decided to take the back road from Clemensdale to the main highway.

It had rained heavily overnight and dark clouds filled the sky above the hilly terrain. Not a single bird could be heard singing that morning, and a deep gloominess had settled over the land. The road ahead looked rugged and unpleasant. He expected a long day of tough trekking along the rocky and rarely trodden way.

The back road led northeast toward the main highway, which he planned to follow all the way to the port city of Ancora. Stories of bandits and other unspeakable terrors on the northern road had convinced him the back way to the highway would be his best option. The road had already proven to be challenging; it traversed many deep valleys and unstable ridges, and often he found it difficult to know whether he was actually following the road or had strayed off onto a goat track.

The brightness of Clemensdale faded away the further he moved north. It seemed that the trees were struggling against a silent and invisible force. The leaves were withered and their branches drooped. The light of the sun struggled to make it all the way to the ground, and a murky feeling permeated the landscape. His hope pushed him to persevere, and he wasn't going to let the road or the gloominess force him to turn back. He had his sights firmly set on the great capital of Ortaria.

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Eben's dark eyes surveyed his surroundings. He had arrived at the place where the old back road intersected the main highway that led from Ancora to the Iron Gate Pass. The landscape around was dotted with large oak trees rising up over moss covered rocky ground. Directly ahead of him were the ruins of an ancient village. Most of the stone houses were completely derelict, and all the inhabitants had long since moved on. A stream flowed through the village, pouring down out of the hill country to the south. Eben approached with caution. Erako had taught him how to pass by unnoticed. He had been educated in all that was necessary to become a huntsman; walking silently was one skill he was quite adept at.

He passed through the ruins and came to the edge of the stream where an old rock bridge spanned the fast flowing water below. For a moment he had a feeling he was being watched. Without moving his eyes darted to the left and the right.

'You there!' shouted a voice to his right. He quickly turned around as his hand went for his hunting dagger. In the centre of the ruined village was an old and very large oak tree. Hanging upside down by a rope tied around his ankles was a bedraggled young man with an unkempt red beard and long greasy dark hair. He was perhaps a year or two older than Eben. It was instantly clear his hands were tied behind his back. The rope around his ankles was attached to a chain that was wrapped around a branch high above, and his head hung about four feet from the ground. He looked at Eben with bright blue eyes and a wide smile.

Eben slowly walked toward him. 'How can I help you?'

'I think the answer to your question is obvious,' replied the young man, glancing upward toward the chain that was holding him in place. 'I've been waiting for someone like you to come by and free me.'

Eben looked up at the chain and wasn't sure if he should trust the stranger. 'I expect someone tied you up for a reason.'

'Not for a good reason,' replied the man defensively. 'I was travelling with a small group of traders. The sly backstabbing thieves robbed me and then left me here to die. Now really, why don't you just go ahead and free me? Surely that can't be too much trouble for you?'

'How can I trust you? You could be a threat to me.'

The young man released a sigh and shook his head in disbelief. 'True, I could be a threat, but when you think about it, you have a sword, an axe, and a bow, and I have nothing. By anyone's guess you are much more of a danger to me than I am to you. I won't trouble you if you just help me escape. Surely you won't leave me here to die? No one deserves to be treated in such a way. It's really quite simple; just use your axe to cut the rope, and I won't bother you ever again.'

Eben considered the situation and knew what the young man said was true; he simply couldn't leave him and walk on. He took his axe from over his shoulder and walked over to where the rope had been fixed to a lower branch.

'Hey, wait, be careful with that axe,' said the stranger, not knowing for sure what Eben was going to do. A second later Eben cut the rope just below where it was connected to the chain. The man toppled downward and was stunned for a moment. He slowly got to his feet and stumbled around as he gained his balance. Eben helped to untie his hands.

'Thanks. You have done a good deed,' he said as he brushed the dust off his dirty clothes.

'I hope so,' replied Eben as he turned to leave.

'Where are you heading?' asked the stranger as he followed.

'I thought you said you wouldn't bother me again.'

'I'm just trying to be friendly. You hill folk sure are odd. You simply don't trust anyone.'

Eben crossed the rock bridge and walked east out of the ruined village. He was hoping the stranger would take the hint and leave him alone.

'I see; you're heading for Ancora,' said the man, continuing to follow.

'Perhaps,' replied Eben, not wanting to share his plans. Eben was beginning to think he had made a mistake releasing the young man. A few moments went by in silence.

'Are you taking the highway? You won't make it. Walking the highway alone is a sure way to meet a sorry end.'

Eben stopped and looked back. 'So what would you suggest?' The stranger smiled widely.

'I would suggest not going to Ancora in the first place. Ancora is dangerous. If I were you I would return to the hills along the road you came, but if you insist on going forward to Ancora you would probably need someone to show you a different way.'

'I don't need your help if that's what you're suggesting,' said Eben, turning back around.

'But I need your help,' said the man, rushing his words and continuing to follow.

Eben looked back over his shoulder and was beginning to feel a little impatient with the stranger.

'I already helped you.'

'Yes, I agree, you did, but you must realise I'm alone with nothing to eat in a barren land. The truth is that if you leave me here I'll probably die. Yes, you freed me, but really what was the point if you were going to leave me alone with no food. If I don't starve I will be killed by bandits or something much worse,' he said, scanning Eben's face for a reaction.

Eben realised it was going to be difficult to be rid of the stranger. He remembered back to something Erako had said to him many times as a child: 'There is a purpose to everything in life. Every meeting, every action, and every outcome has a meaning. In time everything becomes clear.'

'What's your name?'

'Redding is my name, but I am known as Red.'

'I'm Eben of Clemensdale. You can come with me until we arrive somewhere safe.'

Red nodded and smiled.

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Deep in the dark and gloomy forest, far beneath the canopy of towering oak trees, the two young men trekked slowly eastward. As they walked through the woods they were only seen by an occasional bird or squirrel, and mostly their presence went unnoticed.

Eben moved up beside Red who was crouching down and looking over a slight ridge to a shallow gully beyond. A moment earlier they had heard the sound of crunching and breaking branches ahead. It had sounded like something large was moving through the woods in their direction.

Red peered through the trees. 'It's safe,' he whispered, glancing back at Eben. Eben listened for the sound again. All was silent. 'We can continue,' whispered Red as he slowly began to get up. Eben grabbed his shoulder and dragged him back down.

Suddenly a creature came into view. It was not like any creature that Eben had seen before in all his years of hunting. It was similar to the shape of a man, but it was covered in a hide of thick dark fur. The monster snorted with each breath and walked with a menacing hunchback. Its hands were large with sharp claws, and its head was like that of a wild boar with tusks protruding from beneath a hog's snout. The monster stopped and looked about with fierce bloodshot eyes. The beast snarled and sniffed the air.

'It's a muckron,' whispered Red, his eyes wide with panic.

Eben felt a sense of disbelief, and his heart began to race. He had heard about muckrons, although he had always believed they were mythical creatures. Muckrons were frequently the adversaries of men in many old folk stories. Seeing the reality of the beast before his eyes was a shock. Eben reached for his bow and drew an arrow as quietly as he could manage. The beast leapt in their direction. The muckron was moving as fast as a hunting dog and made its way up the slope toward them.

'Run,' cried Red, leaping up and turning on his heel. Red sped off in the opposite direction. Eben focused his attention on the fast approaching monster and drew back his bowstring. He released the arrow and watched as it flew wide of its mark. The muckron howled furiously, continuing toward Eben and gaining speed. Eben quickly turned and started running, knowing he wouldn't have time to shoot again; his heart was beating like a drum. Red was almost out of sight. Eben looked back over his shoulder and saw the furious beast leap over the ridge and run after him.

He turned and drew his hunting dagger. A moment later the beast was upon him. Eben, holding his breath, stabbed forward with the dagger and felt the impact of the monster. He was knocked off his feet and crashed into the ground. The muckron was above him and had pinned him down. With both hands he reached up, grabbing beneath its foul mouth and used all his might to keep the muckron's fangs from biting into his neck. A menacing howl was followed by a dreadful hiss. Eben cried in pain, using the last of his strength to hold off the monster's yellow fangs.

Suddenly there was a heavy thud. The monster leapt back and turned around. Red stood a few feet away with a large stick. He swung the stick wildly as he stepped away, drawing the muckron's attention from Eben.

'Leave my friend alone!' shouted Red. The beast moved toward Red, howling and snorting as it prepared to pounce once again. Red, wide eyed with horror, gazed up at the monster. He swung the stick again. The muckron stamped its feet like a bull preparing to charge.

Eben struggled to his feet and stumbled across to where his backpack and sword had fallen to the ground. He grabbed the sword and drew it forth. The light of day flashed against the polished blade, and for a moment the gloom of the forest seemed to retreat. The beast turned and glared at Eben. Eben raised the sword, ready to fight, and felt courage flow through his veins. The muckron stumbled backward and was clearly bewildered. It stared at Eben in silence. The monster flung its head back and howled skyward before turning and dashing away through the woods. A moment later the beast was gone. Red sat down on a rock, catching his breath.

'Thank goodness that's over,' gasped Red, who was visibly shaking.

'You saved my life,' said Eben gratefully.

'We are even,' said Red. Eben nodded in agreement.

'We should probably move on from here just in case the muckron decides to return.'

A few minutes later they set out eastward and away from the direction the monster had fled.

## CHAPTER TWO

In a grassy glade, deep in the forest, a gentle flickering light from a small campfire lit up the surrounding trees. Eben and Red had found a clearing that was well protected from the weather by a circle of shrubs and trees. It was a nice place to set up camp for the night. Red warmed his hands by the small fire.

'We are about two days walk from Ancora,' said Red as he took a stick and stoked up the fire.

'Can you tell me about Ancora?'

Red cringed at the thought. 'It's a dangerous place. A few years ago Ancora was a thriving seaport and mostly a peaceful and safe town. Slowly over the last two of three years it has changed to become a haven of thieves and cutthroats. King Ignis is mostly to blame. He doesn't care much about the people anymore. All the good men of the town were sent away three years ago to a distant fortress called Galdir in the far west of Ortaria. King Ignis told the people that the men were required to guard the Iron Gate Pass against a possible invasion. About three years ago King Ignis employed groups of vagrants and vagabonds to maintain law and order in Ancora. The problem is these new guardsmen are only interested in lining their

pockets with gold and silver. The townsfolk quickly learned it wasn't safe on the streets. Everyone who had the means to leave moved to the safety of the villages around Ancora, but now the villages are very dangerous with all the groups of bandits and monsters wandering around the wilderness.'

'What about you? Are you from Ancora?'

'Me, no; I'm from Talis in the Kingdom of Silvor,' replied Red, snorting at the suggestion that he may be Ortarian. 'Don't take it the wrong way; I like Ortarian people, and I've spent a long time in your country, but at heart I'm a proud Silvorian. We're a little more relaxed than the average Ortarian and probably less money hungry.'

'I see,' said Eben. 'So what brought you to Ortaria?'

'Work and money,' replied Red, seeing the contradiction in his own words and laughing at it. 'I took a job on a trading ship out of the port of Talis about two years ago. Soon after I found the sea was not the place for me. I sailed as far south as Ateria and as far north as Scaldonia. I've probably seen a lot more of the world than the average man, but I knew when it was time to move on. I then took another job working for a small circus troupe operating around the docks of Ancora. At first I was helping mostly with setting up the stage and guarding the tent. Later I started to help out with the acts, and I learned a lot about circus performing. Unfortunately my stint in the circus didn't last all that long. About six months later a gang of local thugs burned down our circus tent in the middle of the night; that was the end of the circus.'

'So what did you do after the circus burned down?'

'I looked for a job in the town. It quickly became clear that the employment situation was constantly getting worse. Just before I had spent every last coin, I took a job working for an overland trader. I like to call him Olack the Terrible. He's a nasty individual who operates a small group of wagons. He trades with villagers all over Ortaria. Olack didn't like me from the beginning and only employed me because few people are desperate enough to work on the dangerous highways around Ortaria.'

'This Olack must be brave to take the risk?' suggested Eben.

Red laughed and shook his head. 'No, no, he doesn't do the work; he sends other people to do it and then takes the profits.'

'So how did you end up tied to that oak tree?'

'I was the leader of three wagons and eight men working for Olack. We traded our goods on a five week journey all the way out west, almost as far as the Endless Wall Mountains. We were on our way back to Ancora with the profits. The men I was leading decided to rob all the money from the expedition. They chained me to the tree when I tried to stop them. Luckily you came along. I could have died in that place. Hopefully we don't bump into Olack in Ancora. He won't be happy with me.'

'Surely you can explain what happened to Olack.'

'Olack, no, he won't understand. I was the leader, and he'll blame me for the loss. It's probably best to stay away from him and hide out in Ancora.'

'I see,' said Eben.

'What about you? Why do you want to go to Ancora?'

'I was not born in Clemensdale; I was adopted by a huntsman. I never knew my real parents. I thought the best place to look for answers about my past would be Ancora.'

'Why would a hunter adopt a child? That seems strange to me.'

‘I guess that’s true. It’s just the way it happened. I don’t really know much of the world outside the hills around Clemensdale. The village is still a safe place and is mostly unaffected by the troubles elsewhere. Although, we have suffered over the last two winters and have had some poor crops.’

‘Poor crops are better than none. Most Ortarian farmers brought in next to nothing last year. I think this whole land is cursed,’ said Red as his eyes drifted to look at the dark edges of the glade. ‘I don’t know what’s happening, but it seems to be getting worse as time goes on. Once I get some money together I’m going to sail back to Silvor and leave this cursed land behind forever.’

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Eben and Red walked east for two days. The forest eventually gave way to grass covered hills that gradually descended toward the coast. They stood on a hill about two miles from the western gate of Ancora. The entire town was set around the edge of a small bay. The sea stretched out into the distance beyond. Eben was mesmerised by the subtle light of the sun shimmering on the water.

He had never seen the sea before and he marvelled at it for some time; he felt something in his heart grow warm at the sight. High above the town several large vultures circled ominously. Smoke rose from many chimneys, clouding the sky directly above the city. Red started moving down the grassy slope that extended all the way to the main gate. The gate was arched and set in a poorly maintained grey stone wall. Eben followed after Red.

‘We will have to be careful,’ said Red. ‘There are a lot of thugs who try to take advantage of unsuspecting folk coming to town. Keep your eyes open at all times.’

They approached the gate together and several brutish guards looked up as they walked through. For a few moments Eben thought they were going to be stopped, but they passed by the guardsmen without incident. Inside the gate a cobblestone street wound its way eastward and turned north through the town. The road led up a gradually rising slope toward a large palace which was set atop the headland at the northern edge of the bay. The Palace was a magnificent building and dominated the skyline. Three large towers rose from its highest point, and they stood like sentinels watching over the town below.

Many beggars scurried about. They were dressed in rags and the sight of such poverty shocked Eben. Further along a group of mangy dogs rummaged through the rubbish filled streets. A stench like nothing Eben had ever experienced rose from the streets and permeated the whole town. Red led the way quickly away from the gate, and apart from a few grim looks from strange men they were not bothered by anyone.

‘A good friend of mine lives down by the docks. She may be able to provide us with some safe rooms for the night,’ said Red. ‘Do you have much money?’

‘A little, how much will it cost?’ asked Eben.

‘Probably a few copper coins a night.’

‘I have some silver coins,’ said Eben.

‘That’s plenty.’

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They arrived at the docks several minutes later. There were about five or six ships harboured in the bay. Many smaller boats were tied to a network of docks that were situated toward the southern side of the bay covering an area about two hundred yards in length. The docks were busy and bustling with fishmongers, sailors, and seafaring folk.

'Three years ago the harbour had a hundred anchored ships in it. Most sea merchants try to avoid Ancora these days,' said Red as they walked along the edge of the docks. Red then suddenly veered to the right and led Eben down a narrow laneway. At the far end was a small door. Above the door was an old painted sign that Eben could scarcely read. He strained his eyes and made out the words: The Sea Dragon.

'I used to drink at this place, but it closed down about a year ago. It's an old tavern that doubles as an inn,' said Red as he knocked on the door. He waited for a few moments. 'The King kept taxing places like this until they went out of business,' he added, continuing to knock loudly.

'Who's there?' asked a woman's voice from the other side.

'It's me, Red.'

There was a long pause. Red shuffled nervously.

'What do you want?' she asked warily.

'Stella, I know you probably don't want to see me, but I'm really in a bit of trouble. I need a room for a few nights. My friend can pay for both of us,' said Red, his voice becoming more urgent.

'You owe me a fortune, Red!' she shouted. 'Stay somewhere else!'

Red rubbed the back of his neck. He nervously looked at the door for a few seconds. 'Come on, Stella, just a few nights. Then I'll never bother you again.' There was only silence. He knocked again a little harder.

'Go away, Red!' she shouted.

'Oh, come on. Please, Stella, I really need your help this time. Remember the good old days when we worked in the circus together. Come on, just a night...or two. Please, Stella. You know I'll pay you everything I owe you when I can.'

There was a silence that lasted about half a minute. The door opened a few inches. Eben could see the face of an attractive young woman with dark hair cut to her shoulders, a fair complexion, and large green eyes. She stared out at the two of them unsympathetically. Her eyes narrowed as she looked Red up and down. She then gave a bemused smile.

'Red! What happened to your clothes, and why are you wearing those ridiculous rags?' she asked as she opened the door wider. Red smiled widely and stepped into the large common room of the tavern.

'Great to see you again, Stella,' he said, hugging her. She gave Eben a slightly suspicious glance as he stepped through the door. She then closed the large oak door and bolted it with a big iron latch.

'Only two nights, Red,' she said firmly.

'Sure, I get the picture. We won't bother you at all. You won't even notice us.'

'Good. You can stay in rooms four and five upstairs,' she said. 'Don't forget to make the beds when you leave and change the sheets,' she added. 'And just one last thing: you're not hiding from anyone here are you?' she asked, giving Red a doubting look.

Red took a step back. 'Hiding from someone? What? Why would I be hiding from anyone? Whatever gave you that idea?' He winked at Eben.

'If I find out you're taking advantage of my hospitality I'll throw you to the streets where you belong,' said Stella in a hardened voice.

Red laughed from his belly, 'I really would like to see you try to throw me.'

Stella turned on her heel and marched out of the common room, slamming the door as she exited. Red looked over at Eben with a wide smile.

'She's your friend?' asked Eben.

'Yeah,' answered Red. Eben realised there was some history between them and thought it best not to ask any more questions. He took his backpack up to room five, which had a small window with metal bars and a narrow bed. It was a simple but comfortable room. He set his backpack against the wall and lay down to rest.

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Eben awoke to the smell of eggs and onions cooking. He got up, put on his clothes, and then walked down the stairwell to the common room where Red was chatting to Stella who seemed much more relaxed than she had been the night before.

'Would you like some eggs, Eben?' asked Stella as he approached the bar.

'Thanks, that sounds great,' he replied, taking a seat beside Red.

Red had some new clean clothes and had trimmed his shaggy beard into a neat style, but he had left his hair long.

'What's your plan for the day?' asked Stella, looking to Eben.

'I'm actually in Ancora to find answers about my heritage.'

'Red did say something about that,' said Stella, handing him a plate of fried eggs and onions.

The taste of eggs was delicious compared to the salted meat that he and Red had been eating for the last few days.

'Do you have any idea where you would start looking?' asked Stella.

'I am searching for a woman by the name of Lady Kaloren, I think she would probably know where I could find my parents.'

'The nobles don't tend to mix with the commoners in Ancora, especially these days,' said Stella. 'Lady Kaloren, I don't know the name, perhaps she's the wife of a knight or lord.'

'You could try the Royal Library,' suggested Red. 'They probably won't let you in, but if you pay one of the scholars they might be able to point you in the right direction.'

'I'll give it a try,' said Eben.

He looked to Stella and she smiled back at him warmly.

'So you and Red worked together in the circus?' asked Eben.

'I was an acrobat,' replied Stella. 'Unfortunately the circus burned to the ground a long time ago. I do miss those days; seeing you dressed up as a clown was always amusing,' she said to Red, a playful grin crossing her face. Red shot a nervous glance at Eben before uncomfortably looking away.

'You never said you were a clown,' said Eben, smiling at Red. Red twitched in his seat.

'I was only a clown for a little while; it was more like filling in really,' he said defensively.

'Filling in!' Stella laughed. 'Don't believe a word he says, Eben. He was employed as a clown from the very beginning.'

'No! I wasn't!' he cried, blushing crimson red.

'Come on, Red. You're a wonderful clown,' she said, trying to reassure him, but still laughing.

'It's true, I was a clown,' confessed Red, glancing awkwardly up at Eben.

'You are the first clown I've ever met,' said Eben, smiling.

Red nodded and his usual smile crossed his face. He was happy to hear the sound of their laughter, even though it was at his expense.

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Dozens of vultures slowly circled high in the sky above Ancora. They peered downward through the hazy smoke cloud to the dank and filthy streets below. To the town folk their arrival was a sign of the dark times they were living in. Never before had vultures circled the skies above their town. They were a constant symbolic reminder of the ever growing oppression that filled the Kingdom of Ortaria.

Eben walked through the streets and up the main cobblestone road that led toward the palace. A deep depression and despair pervaded the entire town. Stella had given basic directions to the library and he walked along quickly, not wanting to catch the attention of any of the unsavoury looking characters he saw along the way.

The main road ascended gradually toward the palace. At the top of the rise was a large town square, and across the square were several wide stone steps that led up to a mighty arched entrance gate that was set in a gatehouse. A stone wall stood about fifteen yards high and encircled the entire palace. Ten fully armoured guards with long spears stood at the gate. It seemed like the gate was the only way in or out of the palace. He passed by unnoticed and followed the lane that edged along the outer wall on the western side of the palace.

Just down from the wall on the northwest side was a large building with a set of stone steps that led up to a solid bronze door. At first glance the library looked closed. He walked up the steps. There was a big bronze doorknocker with the face of a dragon. Eben knocked three times. There was no reply. After a minute he knocked again, but still there was no answer.

After waiting several minutes he decided to push on the door. The hinge creaked as the door slowly opened revealing a dark hall beyond. Many bookshelves had been cast down and those that were still standing were completely empty. The library had been ransacked. A dim light drifted down from several smashed windows set high in the walls. There was no one around and the abandoned library had a spooky feeling about it.

'Hello,' called Eben as he walked forward into the gloom. His voice echoed off the stone walls.

He heard someone approaching and looked to his right and saw an old man with crazy dishevelled white hair and piercing blue eyes. He was carrying a large wooden staff. The man jumped over a broken bookcase with surprising agility and started to spring forward toward Eben.

'Who said you could come in here?' he shouted as he prepared to swing his staff. 'Damn young ragamuffins coming round here looking for something to steal! Can't you see the King closed the library and burned all the books? There is no money here! I'll teach you a lesson, thief!'

'Excuse me, Sir, you're mistaken. I was looking for a librarian or scholar,' replied Eben, having to jump back to avoid being struck.

'Nonsense!' shouted the old man, swinging the staff again. Eben ducked easily out of the way and stepped backward toward the door.

'Really, I'm searching for someone who can help me find...' Eben had to dodge quickly to avoid getting hit once again. He was almost at the door.

'Please stop swinging that thing. Listen to me for a moment! I need to find someone called Lady Kaloren,' he shouted. A moment later the old man stopped and looked at him curiously.

'Lady Kaloren,' he muttered and raised his thick white eyebrows. 'Why do you want to find her?'

'I believe she may know who my parents are,' replied Eben. 'Do you know who she is?'

The old man nodded slightly and turned around; he walked back into the gloomy library. It seemed to Eben he wasn't going to answer. 'I must find her.'

'You won't find her in Ancora,' said the old man as he continued to walk away. 'Lady Kaloren is a famous Everdonian from the Western Lands beyond the Iron Gate Pass. She was a brave warrior. She fought in many wars.'

'Everdonian. What's that?'

'Everdon is a kingdom,' said the old man with a patronising tone.

'What about someone called Carlin, have you heard of him?'

The old man froze in his tracks and glanced back over his shoulder. 'What do you know about Carlin?' He turned around and started to walk back toward Eben; his piercing blue eyes staring intently.

'Nothing really; all I know is that he may be able to help me find my parents.'

'Who are your parents?' asked the old man, his curiosity increasing.

'I don't know. I'm searching for some answers; that's why I came to Ancora. You seem to know Carlin; can you tell me where I can find him?'

'I did know him once. He served King Ignis. Unfortunately Carlin died many years ago, so you can't find him,' said the old man, staring down at the ground solemnly.

'He died?' murmured Eben, feeling dismayed at the news.

'Yes, I heard, years ago, that he was killed by a monster that had been terrorising the coastal people north of Ancora. He wasn't Ortarian. He was a knight from a distant western land.'

'Why was he in Ortaria?'

'I don't know why,' said the old man, shaking his head. 'However, I do know someone who may have some answers for you. Her name is Torela; I think she knew Carlin. I vaguely remember seeing them together in the old days. She lives in a house near the north gate. I will sketch the directions for you.'

The old man took charcoal and some parchment from his pocket and quickly scribbled down directions.

'Thanks for your help,' said Eben gratefully.

'You're welcome. I should also warn you there is mandatory conscription for every Ortarian man between sixteen and forty. The King is sending all the young men out west to the Iron Gate Pass, and only those who have permission from the crown can remain in Ancora. No one really knows why he is doing it. These are perilous times we live in; you should be careful because you may be forced to join the army and find yourself on your way out to Galdir.'

'Thanks for the advice,' said Eben.

'And one last thing,' said the old man. 'I'm sorry for my haste in trying to drive you away; most of the time the only people who visit the library are thieves looking for something to steal. Once, only a few years ago, I was the Chief Royal Librarian, and this was one of the finest libraries in Veredor. Now I am homeless and living out my days frightened for my own safety.' The old librarian stared vacantly at the ransacked shelves and drew a long breath.

'I'm sorry to hear about your troubles. I hope you can rebuild the library one day,' said Eben, seeing clearly that the man was truly devastated by the way his life had turned out.

'That day won't come until King Ignis comes to his senses and ends all this insanity,' said the old man.

A moment later he shuffled about nervously, realising he was probably saying too much and that he shouldn't be talking about the King in such a way to a stranger. 'Goodbye and good luck young man,' he said as he turned away and closed the library door.

### CHAPTER THREE

Eben walked toward the north gate and found his way to a long and narrow laneway that cut away to the south. There were piles of debris and waste everywhere. The laneway was especially gloomy because the buildings on either side had high walls and very little light entered from above. He weaved his way through whilst searching for the red door. At the far end he found what he was looking for. The door was set in a very grimy stone building with no windows facing the laneway.

A black cat leapt off a ledge and knocked over some empty bottles; they fell to the ground and smashed, shattering the gloomy silence. Eben was feeling edgy; the mood of the place was oppressive.

He knocked three times and waited. Nothing happened. He knocked again. A small sliding hatch opened and an angry looking eye stared out at him from the other side.

'Who are you and what do you want?' asked a deep grumbling voice of a man.

'My name is Eben, I'm looking for Torela. I was told she lives here.' There was a short silence and the man shut the hatch abruptly.

'Go away stranger!' he yelled aggressively.

Eben knocked again. 'Please, I need to talk to her. She's the only one who can help me.' A few moments silently passed. The door burst open and a hulk of a man stood pointing an oversized crossbow at him.

'Don't move!' shouted the man as he glared down at Eben. Eben took a step back and then stood completely still. The man standing in the doorway was the biggest man Eben had ever seen in his whole life. He had deep lines in his forehead, black curly hair, and arms like tree trunks. An instant later a woman with a gentle face stepped into view from around the corner of the door. Her long hair was light brown with streaks of grey, and her eyes were remarkably turquoise blue. She wore a simple long green dress and brown leather boots. It was difficult for Eben to guess her age, but he thought she was at least forty. She studied Eben for a few moments and then glanced up to the huge man.

'Torg, be still, he means us no harm.' She seemed kind and peaceful in complete contrast with the fuming giant standing by her side. 'I am Torela and this is Torg. What do you want from us?'

Eben instantly felt reassured by her. She had a sense of peace that seemed to push the gloominess away; he had a feeling she could be trusted. She also had a strange accent that he had never heard before.

'My name is Eben. I was told that you knew Carlin when he was alive. I need to ask you some questions about him if you have time?'

She stared at him and pondered what he had just said. 'Yes, I did know him. What is your association to him?'

'I came to Ancora looking for him. I went to the library. An old man there told me that he had died years ago. I hoped to find him because he may have known my parents.' She nodded slightly in response and watched him for a few moments. She appeared to be contemplating what she should do next.

‘You should come in out of the cold,’ said Torela, directing him inside and into a long hallway that led to the back of the house. Eben stepped in, and Torg slammed the door behind them, bolting it solidly with two large steel latches. Torela led Eben down the hallway which opened into a large room. The room was full of exotic luxurious goods: rich carpet covered the floors, the couches were draped in silk, and beautiful artworks adorned the walls. The room didn’t have a single window and was lit entirely by candlelight. On the far side a staircase ascended to the second level. There was also a door to their right that led into a kitchen area.

‘It’s a beautiful house,’ said Eben, his eyes glancing around the room.

‘Thank you, Eben. Please take a seat.’ Torela directed him to a comfortable cushioned chair. He sat down and she sat in the chair opposite him.

‘Eben, you said that Carlin may have known your parents. What can you tell me about this?’

‘I was hoping you could tell me something because I really don’t know much at all,’ replied Eben as he took the parchment letter from his pocket and handed it to her. She opened the letter and read it to herself. Eben saw her eyes widen as she read; she looked up at him and stared directly into his eyes for several moments. She then glanced at the sword that was latched to his belt.

‘Your sword, is it the same sword mentioned in the letter?’

‘Yes,’ he replied.

‘May I have a look?’ He nodded and handed the sword to her. She unsheathed the blade. ‘This sword is ancient. I never expected that I would ever come to hold the Ecorian Sword in my own hands.’ She studied the blade and hilt closely for at least a minute.

‘What do you know about the sword?’ asked Eben, very curious to know what she was implying.

‘I know it once belonged to the emperors of the Ecorian Empire.’

‘But why do I have it, and why did Carlin hide me away in a remote hill village?’

‘I don’t know why,’ replied Torela, handing the sword back to him. ‘However, I know that Carlin had many secrets that he never told. He never told me about you or the sword.’

‘Who exactly was Carlin?’

‘He was not from Ortaria. He came from Iarthar, a land far in the west of Veredor. He was a member of an ancient order of knights, and he was a noble warrior who worked tirelessly to protect the lands from evil.’ She paused for a moment and stared at Eben. ‘I think you should not have come to Ancora. This city is living under a terrible curse; you are not safe here.’

‘I know we are living in dark and dangerous times, but I came because I needed answers.’

‘I understand your desire to find the answers you seek. I’m sure everything has a purpose, and I know that you have come at this particular time for a reason. I’m not sure what your purpose is yet.’ She cast her eyes down at the sword. ‘Every warrior who ever carried that sword fought for the good of all the people of Veredor.’ Her voice was calm and strong. Eben could feel in his heart that she spoke the truth. He looked down at the sword.

‘I want to help the people of Ortaria,’ said Eben, feeling a sense of conviction rise through his body. She stared at him for a little while as if she could read his thoughts.

‘Tomorrow there will be a meeting here at sunset. You may find some more answers if you come. You may also find that there are ways you can help the people of Ortaria.’

‘I will come,’ said Eben, eager to learn what he could do to help.

‘Do you have a place to stay?’

‘I’m staying with some friends at a closed down inn near the docks called The Sea Dragon.’

‘Eben, you must be careful, this city has danger lurking around every corner.’

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It was a rarity to see people out on the streets after dark in Ancora. Only vagrants, vagabonds, and other unsavoury characters would dare go out at night. There was a good reason to be cautious as many unsuspecting folk would simply disappear into the darkness never to be heard of again. Of course there was an argument to be made that the streets were actually safer at night simply because there were fewer people around. Either way the streets of Ancora were not safe at the best of times.

Early in the evening a pair of evil eyes caught sight of something peculiar. Anyone else may have thought that a young man passing by wearing a worn leather cloak was simply one of the many vagrants making a living from the misery of the townsfolk. But a glimmer of hope, like light in the darkness, lit up the murky street, and a darkened heart for a moment caught a glimpse of its own frozen state and felt powerless.

Eben walked back along the main road toward The Sea Dragon. It was getting late and he thought it best to hurry. He passed by the palace and continued to walk toward the docks. Rounding a corner he saw a hooded man mounted on a large black warhorse. The darkness and gloom seemed to accumulate around the rider. Slowing his pace, he looked up as he passed by, attempting to appear inconspicuous. The rider’s dark eyes stared directly at Eben; most of his face was shrouded by the shadow of his hood. For a few moments they made eye contact. Eben felt a shiver rise up his spine. He glanced away and continued along the far side of the road and passed by without incident. He quickened his pace and looked back over his shoulder to see the rider hadn’t moved.

A few minutes later Eben arrived at the inn and he knocked three times on the door. It was an icy evening and a cold gale was blowing in from the sea.

‘Who’s there?’ asked Stella a few moments later.

‘Eben,’ he replied in a shivering voice.

She opened the door and smiled as she ushered him in out of the cold.

Red appeared from the bar with a smile on his face. ‘We were starting to worry about you. I’m glad to see you’re all right. Come over and have a warm glass of ale.’ Eben followed them over to the bar and took a seat.

‘Did you find any news about your parents?’ asked Stella as Red poured him a mug of ale.

‘No,’ replied Eben. ‘But I did learn a few things about my past.’ Red handed him the ale. ‘I found the library you told me about. It is in a state of ruin. I met an old man who was once the librarian there. He directed me on to a wise woman who lives near the north gate. She knew Carlin, the one who sent me to Clemensdale when I was very young, although she had never heard of me. She also seems to know what’s going on in Ortaria. I’m going to meet her again tomorrow night.’

Stella raised her eyebrows and gave Eben a troubled look. 'You should be careful who you trust. Don't get involved in anything that's plotting against King Ignis unless you want to get yourself killed.'

'She's right,' agreed Red, nodding soberly. 'Everyone knows the reason we have these troubles is because the King doesn't care for the people anymore. Nobody likes the King; anyone and everyone who has tried to do something has been thrown in the dungeon or executed for treason.'

'Surely something needs to be done,' said Eben.

Red took another sip of his ale. 'True, something does need to be done, but it's probably best left to other people.'

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Eben found his way back to Torela's house late the following day. The sun was setting sooner than he expected, and he was rushing because he was running late. He arrived at the laneway and quickly approached the red doorway. It was a little after sunset. A moment later the door opened.

'You're late,' grumbled Torg in his deep burly voice.

'I'm sorry,' said Eben, stepping into the hallway.

'They're all down there,' added Torg, pointing toward the room beyond the hall. Torg then closed and bolted the door.

Eben walked down the hall and came to the large furnished room. A group of about twenty people were seated in a semicircle. They were facing the far side where Torela was standing and speaking to them.

'....all of you have heard the rumours and have seen what is happening in Ancora. You know the darkness continues to grow.' She looked to Eben and directed him to a seat as she spoke. 'Each one of you is here because you are concerned. Each one of you is here because you care for the people of Ortaria and you want to see an end to all the villainy and evil.'

'How can we do anything if King Ignis won't listen to the people? Years ago he cared for us, and now he refuses to hear our cries for help,' said a man in response.

Torela nodded and paused for a moment before speaking, 'True, he doesn't listen. He refuses to give audience to anyone. He seems to have changed and hardened. He once was a much loved and honourable man. Three years ago everything changed, and for a long time there has been no explanation or reason. No one has known why, but tonight I believe you will learn the truth,' she said, and her words stunned the people. 'I want to introduce to you a young man named Cassiel. He was once a student of the magic academy on the island of Zyran. You will want to hear what he has to say.'

A tall and handsome young man stood up and walked over to stand beside Torela. He looked to be in his mid-twenties and was wearing a long brown coat. Cassiel held his chin high and his shoulders back and had a certain sense of pride about him. He had carefree dark hair, dark eyes, and a fair complexion.

'Thank you, Torela,' he said and she took a seat. He looked down at the group seated before him and cleared his throat before speaking. 'For you to understand what I have to tell you I first must inform you of a few details about myself and also about the Citadel of Zyran. Firstly about myself: I was once an apprentice at the Magic Academy of Zyran. Seven years ago I began my training; many of you know such training is rigorous and takes over a decade to complete. Honestly, I was never a talented wizard; nevertheless, I always worked hard and committed

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