

# DRAGONS PLIGHT



BOOK I

THE SLAYER SERIES

CHRISTOPHER LAPIDES



“DRAGON!”

Panic instantly took hold of everyone and chaos ensued. The wingspan of the creature was longer than the line of wagons. The sun sparkled off the bright crimson scales. Its eyes were like fireballs on the verge of explosion. Some of the men unhooked horses, jumped on top and bolted away from the caravan. Men were running everywhere, not sure of what to do.

Callobus was frozen. He heard his name but his body stood rigid with fear. Galen grabbed hold of his face and pulled it to his own.

“Callobus, I need your help. Rally the men to the woods. We need to get cover. The Aspenwood is our only hope. Do you understand?”

Callobus nodded but didn't think he could move. He kept his eyes locked on his father and saw the fear on his face, but he also saw a calm that snapped him out of his trance. Before he knew it, he was running as hard as he could, yelling and shouting at men to get to the woods. He spared a look to the sky and saw that the dragon was almost upon them. A few more moments and they would all be dead. He looked to the woods. The closest wagon and rider was still too far away. The dragon let loose a deafening roar that shook the ground and Callobus to his core. He wanted to cover his ears and scream to drown out the horrible noise. Then the creature dove toward the first carriage.

**BOOKS BY CHRISTOPHER LAPIDES**

**THE SLAYER SERIES**

**Dragons Plight**

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# PROLOGUE

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Galen Swordstar stared at the massive army that was marching on Starfall Castle. Hundreds of torches moved like scattered ants among the battlefield. Orcs, goblins, ogres and other creatures not of this world moved among the enemy's ranks, all eager for blood. He thought it more than a coincidence that this army should suddenly emerge four days after the King had mysteriously become ill. It was whispered throughout the castle that he had been poisoned. Everyone suspected it was someone close to him, that there was a traitor in their midst, but investigations into the matter quickly came to a dead end.

The King had summoned Galen just after he became ill. Chandel refused to stay behind so the King made accommodations for her to stay. Being so close to giving birth to their son, Galen thought the safest place for his wife would be with friends in one of the nearby cities, but Chandel was steadfast. She was due in two months and was not about to leave his side. It would be their first child and Galen wanted his wife to receive the best care and be safe. Now instead of preparing for the joyous occasion, he was preparing for war.

"The next few moments will be bloody and brutal," he said to the soldiers lined up behind him. Galen turned away from the battlefield and looked at the faces of his men. Many had seen only minor combat in the Kilmor Desert or the Oakcrest Forest. Most skirmishes were with orcs and other goblinkind roaming the countryside, but the demons and devils were like nothing they had ever seen. He could see the fear on their faces.

Galen kept his features calm and serene. It would not do well for moral to have his men think their captain panicked. His features were that of a warrior, like a statue chiseled out of rock. He always kept his sandy brown hair short

and his beard full. He stood clad in platemail and brandishing his two-handed sword, which he inherited after his father passed away many years ago. As he walked by them, all of his men had to look up to meet his eyes. Standing just over six feet, Galen was taller than most of them. Only his second-in-command stood as tall.

“Remember that you are soldiers,” Keld Blackanvil said. He was as tall as Galen but slightly more muscled. A broad nose and large eyes sat on a face that was well tanned by many years of working in the weapon’s forge of the castle. He never passed up an opportunity to work with metals. Like his captain, Keld sported a full beard and always managed a smile when speaking of battle. He was dressed in the same type of armor as Galen but held a longsword and shield. The two had been friends for many years and always fought together. Galen depended on Keld to get the men’s blood pumping. He had a knack for encouragement.

“Whatever comes, we will meet it head on, and I will be there with you, shedding blood and bashing skulls!”

A cheer went up from his men but Galen could still see the uncertainty on their faces. Never had an army so large come up against the kingdom of Starfall and they had appeared out of nowhere. Galen wondered where they had come from. Reports always came out of the Kilmor Desert of minor bands of giants and orcs, but never one so massive. How could they have stayed hidden all this time?

The guards ran to their positions after Keld issued the final orders then he too went to his post. Galen returned to the emptied barracks to sort through what was left of the weapons. He was only there for a few moments when a voice split the sounds of the battle approaching.

“I hope the captain will be where he belongs.”

Chroben the Red was the kingdom’s leading wizard and one of the King’s, and Galen’s, closest friends. He was dressed in his usual red robes and carrying his blood red staff, which was topped with a ruby. His red hair was neatly combed back into a ponytail and he portrayed a look of confidence, but his eyes showed he had not slept in days. He wore a look of a battle-steady wizard and was dressed accordingly. Galen could see wands, rings and other items of power through his robes. The wizard was ready for war.

“One does what one must,” Galen said. “I will defend these walls until I take my last breath, as I am sure you will do as well. Any progress with the King?” Galen could only hope the priests had found some way to cure his ailment. Nothing had worked so far.

“I am sorry to say that he remains bedridden. Whoever did this knew what

they were doing.” Chroben walked to the window and looked down to the gates. He couldn’t see it, but Galen knew he wore a look of dread and despair. “I’m not sure Merrin will be able to conquer this illness.”

Galen only heard Chroben use the King’s first name one other time, when the Queen had died giving birth to their daughter, Katalya. She was their only child and the tragedy, which happened only eight months ago, was still remembered as a terrible blow to the kingdom. After her death, the King fell into a deep depression. He almost never left the throne room and when he did, it was to visit the Queen’s tomb. Most thought that the widespread knowledge of the King’s depression was why they now had enemies at the gates. Somehow, they knew what had happened and were striking when the kingdom was at its weakest. Chroben had served the King since he took the throne. Both he and Galen had known the man a long time and were not about to see all his work or his kingdom destroyed.

Galen walked over to Chroben and placed his hand on his shoulder. “What will come, will come. We will do what must be done and protect this kingdom and all who live in it. I must go now and I am sure you will be needed on the upper levels. The enemy has almost reached the gates. We could not stop them at Ironglenn, but we will stop them here. If there is any change in the King’s condition, come and find me.”

“I will.” Chroben turned to leave but stopped at the door. “Good luck.”

Galen watched him leave and turned to the window. Smoke started to rise from the enemy’s camp. Hundreds of small fires were being set in hopes of clouding his army’s sight. As they approached the gates, he could see arrows flying through the air, both against and from the castle. He held no doubts that Chroben would give them everything he had. The soldiers he trained would give their all as well. He just hoped it would be enough.



“Fall back! Fall back to the castle!” Galen yelled just as an axe flew over his head. A huge orc was readying another axe to throw when Keld appeared behind the beast. He brought his sword around and separated its head from its body.

“Blood and skulls!” he yelled and looked at Galen. “Go. We’ll hold them back. They need you on the upper levels. There are flying beasts assaulting the catapults.”

Galen turned and looked towards the upper levels of the castle. He could see strange creatures flying around the catapults, attacking his men. Knowing

Keld would handle what was left of his men, he made for the stairs.

Running as hard as he could, Galen made it to the top level just in time to see a soldier's head bounce at his feet and roll down the stairs, a bloody trail left in its wake. He looked up to see four gangly creatures with gray skin ripping apart what was left of the man. They had wide yellow eyes and huge fangs. They looked like a cross between an orc and a bat, but without wings. The creatures had to be the result of some kind of vile experiment. He quickly examined the situation.

Three of the creatures were dead, but so were all the guards on the battlement. Bodies lay scattered all over the ground. He looked past the carnage to the other catapults. They seemed to be fairing better. The archers had set up a wall of arrows and were driving the creatures down. These men must have been caught by surprise.

One of the monsters looked up at Galen. It growled and leaped into the air. There were no wings to lift it. He knew there was only one way it could be held aloft.

"Magic," he said through gritted teeth.

He always disliked magic, especially when in the wrong hands. To him it was a tool used by cowards to fight from afar instead of fighting like honorable swordsmen. One man could wipe out an entire army barely lifting a finger. He thought magic should be used for good and only to protect one's self when threatened by evil. Now was one of those times. His own weapon was a magical two-handed sword, a sword that had been passed down to him from his father and his father before him. Galen looked at the golden hilt shaped like dragon wings and to the blade, which held a faint blue hue. Runes were etched into the base of the blade, which could cut through stone. Galen took a defensive stance as the creature dived toward him and prepared to cut through flesh and bone.

The creature had four long talons on each hand and foot. They were slick with the blood of his men. It came at him like a cat pounces on a mouse, all four appendages extended to rend the flesh from his body. What it did not seem to understand, or care, is that Galen's sword reached further than its claws.

As it flew closer, he lunged forward and impaled it on his sword. The blade slid into the demon's chest like a knife through warm butter. Dark blood splashed on the blade and the creature screamed. The light faded from its eyes and Galen used its forward momentum to flick it off his sword and over the edge. The other three heard the scream, locked their eyes on him and took to the air.

Galen had to jump left, then right. They came at him from all angles. His

back butted up against the wall. One of the creatures took the advantage and dove at him. Galen knew that it would never be able to pull up in time and that it was going to attempt to ram him into the stone floor. At the last moment, he threw all his weight to one side and the creature slammed into the wall with a resounding crunch, ending its life. Though they didn't seem very intelligent, they were certainly deadly. The other two came at Galen from the sides.

Galen managed to parry the next two attacks. He couldn't get anywhere with both of them flying around, so he backed onto the stairway where he had a better chance of making the creatures come to ground level. One flew toward him and flipped around, grabbing hold of the archway with its feet. It leaned forward to attack. He faked a slip and its head came forward suddenly to bite into his neck. Galen went lower, came underneath and brought his sword up into its back. The sword burst through its chest and he pulled down, slicing the creature down the middle. Black blood poured over him but he avoided the creature when it fell to the ground and rolled down the stairs. The other one darted back to the ledge upon seeing the gruesome death.

"No you don't," Galen muttered as he ran forward, sword pointed for its heart. He thought it a bit strange that the creature would just sit there, inviting death. As he sprinted forward, he realized the ruse. Two other creatures had joined the battle and were about to fall onto him from above. He was in the open and had nowhere to go.

Suddenly, a flash of light came from across the way and all three creatures burst into flames. The two diving at him veered off and slammed into the side of the castle, plummeting to the grounds below. The last one just fell over, dead. The smell from its bubbling flesh made him want to vomit.

"Always having to save your hide." Chroben emerged from the stairway across the ledge. His staff glowed red with the magic he had just unleashed. His robes were torn in some places and he had a gash on his cheek.

"Glad to see you," Galen said. His smile disappeared when he saw the look on his friend's face. "What is it?"

"Merrin has taken a turn for the worse. He requests your presence."

Galen looked down below. The enemy had taken the grounds of the castle and most of the city. The lower levels of the castle were compromised as well. All was lost. He breathed deep and realized that there was nothing more he could do. So, he thought to himself, if I'm going to die, it will be by the side of my king.



Galen and Chroben walked into the King's bedroom. Five of the King's elite guard was there. The rest had left to join the battle. Chandel was sitting by his bed with the King's daughter, Katalya, on her lap. Two priests were there as well, praying to Latherial, the goddess of healing, for a remedy to his illness.

Chandel looked up as Galen came in. She was dressed in a bright blue robe and had tears streaming down her face. A golden silk sash ran around her growing belly to hold the robes closed. Her rich, curly brown hair glistened in the torchlight but it lay unkempt on her shoulders. Her smooth, rosy cheeks were red and rough from where she'd been rubbing under her eyes. Her slim, button nose was also red. Those bright blue eyes were bloodshot and full of fear. She ran over to him and threw her arm around his neck.

"They say there is nothing they can do Galen. He just keeps getting worse."

Galen looked into his wife's eyes and then down to the baby girl she was holding. Not even a year old, Katalya looked just like her mother, and like Chandel. The King always said their wives were sisters separated at birth. She had the same rich brown hair and bright blue eyes. He took Katalya into his arms and walked over to the King. When he laid eyes on King Merrin Steelwill, his heart skipped a beat.

Where once a king so full of life had been, there was now a frail old man. His silky brown hair and beard were now completely gray and thin. Patches of hair had fallen out of his head and his skin was splotchy. Eyes once full of life were dim and getting dimmer with each passing moment. Though covered with thick blankets, Galen could see that his body was skeletal and weak. He did not think it was possible that in four days a man could age fifty years. He fought to control himself, to keep his fear and sadness inside so his friend would not see. Everyone in the room wore looks of despair and to make matters worse, Garok strolled into the room.

"Well brother, it looks like our time here has ended."

Garok and Galen looked just like their father, but Garok was a handsman shorter than his brother. He had long brown hair and a short trimmed beard. His clothes were better suited for a merchants meeting than a battle. He wore a bright red shirt with tan pants and a silk sash was around his waist. He didn't even carry a weapon. He always hated fighting and it was well known that even though he was the eldest, he was jealous of his younger brother. Galen was a respected military commander, had a beautiful wife, a son on the way and the admiration of a king. Garok had the King's friendship as well, but he thought Galen was to blame for all his misfortunes.

"Now is not the time Garok." Galen looked up at his brother and his eyes widened. "Why are you not in uniform? Why are you not at your post?"

Garok laughed. “What good will it do? They outnumber us five to one and the cavalry has been destroyed. We must—”

“We must defend our home!” Galen yelled. “We are soldiers and we fight to defend our homes and protect those people that cannot protect themselves, to the death if need be.”

At this point, Galen was face to face with Garok, his eyes burning with rage. His brother had always been lazy and defiant and Galen wouldn't put up with it at a time like this. He had crossed the room, walked away from the King's bedside without even knowing. The only reason he finally realized what he had done was that Katalya started to cry. Chandel walked between them, arms raised to quell the argument she knew would come. She had seen them fight before and now was not the time.

“Stop it! Both of you.” She took Katalya from Galen's arms. “Your king needs you both, sensible and level-headed. Galen, he wanted to speak with you. Garok, if you wish to stay, you will be quiet.”

The look she gave him silenced any rebuttal.

Galen shot an angry glare at his brother. He then turned and knelt beside his long time friend and king. He took his hand. It felt cold and clammy, like parchment after being soaked by the rain. Galen squeezed his hand a little but received nothing back. He looked up at Chroben who stood on the other side of the bed, a grave look on his face.

“He can hardly move. Most of his strength has left him. The priests give him only a couple of breaths.” Chroben looked away and walked next to Chandel. She put her head on his shoulder.

Galen dried the moisture from his eyes and looked at the King, the man that was also his friend. “Sire, you requested my presence?”

The King moved his head just a little and opened his bloodshot eyes to look at Galen. His voice was barely a whisper. “Galen?”

“Yes, my king. I am here.”

“How goes the battle?” He took short pauses after every word.

Galen looked to Chroben then back to the King. “Sire, we are holding.”

“Never one to tell me bad news. I may be dying, but I still know what is happening in my kingdom.” He wasn't sure, but Galen thought he saw a small smirk on the King's face. “I know my kingdom is lost. My time is at an end.” He coughed violently enough to shake the bed and Galen motioned to the priests. The King just shook his head.

“They can do little else for me, which is why I called you. I know you would rather be defending this castle, but I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

“My daughter has never known a mother and now it seems she will never know a father, so I need you to take her. I need you to take her far from here, keep her safe and raise her as your own.”

Galen’s eyes widened. “Sire, I can’t. Surely there is someone—”

“There is no one else. She needs to have a family. Chandel will be an excellent mother and I have no doubts that you will be a wonderful father. No one could ask for more. I have known you for many years Galen. I could ask no other.”

Galen looked at his wife. Chandel looked down at Katalya and started to cry but she nodded her head. “Sire, we would be honored. We will keep her safe and raise her as our own.”

Galen looked back to the King and then to Chroben. “We need to get him out of here.”

“No.” The King closed his eyes for what seemed like an eternity but finally opened them again. “You must leave me. I cannot walk and will only hinder your journey. My guards have said they will stay to defend me even if it means their lives, yet I may be gone by the time the enemy reaches my bedside. I cannot convince them to leave, but you must go. You must leave now, without me. Take Katalya and keep her safe. I feel that my enemies will look for her.”

Another coughing fit racked the King’s body, worse than before. Blood spewed from his mouth. The priests started casting healing spells over him. They were trying to use magic to lessen the pain.

“Sire, I will do as you ask.”

The King managed a slight nod and looked over to Chroben. “Passage, behind the bed. Take them to...river. I don’t want to know where they are going. Our enemy has ways of getting information, even out of a corpse.” A look of disgust came over the King’s features. Being used after death was something that appalled everyone.

Galen stood and looked to Chroben. His friend nodded then looked to the guards. “Until the last man falls.”

The guards nodded and took defensive positions around the room. They raised their silver shields and golden longswords. Their eyes held no emotion as they looked at their dying ruler. They had been taught to push away emotion because it could be a hindrance in battle and their final battle was coming. They are the elite, Galen thought. He had even been trained by some of them. They will probably take half the monsters with them before they fall.

Chroben walked to a torch on the wall and pulled. The wall behind the bed separated revealing a passage down into the darkness. He muttered a few syllables and made a gesture. A faint blue light radiated from his staff.



“There are boats waiting for us.”

Galen took one last look at his friend and followed Chroben down the steps. Chandel wrapped Katalya in a blanket and followed. One of the priests held her arm as she walked. She was getting bigger everyday and now instead of thinking about only her unborn son, she had a daughter to think about as well.

Garok was the last one in the room. He looked at the guards and then looked down to the King. “Farewell, my king,” he said with as much disdain as he could muster. One of the guards eyed him as he bent down and whispered something in the King’s ear.

The King’s eyes went wide and he stared daggers into Garok. Just as he looked as he was going to say something, he clutched at his chest and gritted his teeth. His body convulsed. Two of the guards ran over and held him down. The one priest that remained in the room looked over at Garok.

“What did you say to him?”

Garok walked over to the stairway and looked over at the King.

“Farewell.”

With that, Garok slammed the doorway shut. The priest and guards looked at the wall in confusion. One of the guards went to open the passage to question the strange man but another coughing fit suddenly shook the King. He went over to help hold him down. The priest made his way over, a healing spell on his lips, to help soothe the King’s pains, but he noticed something on the floor near one of the bedposts.

It was a small glass vial, filled with dark liquid. He picked it up to get a closer look. As he brought it near his face, the vial exploded, sending glass shards into his eyes. The priest screamed in pain but then suddenly started choking as a thick black mist formed in the air where the vial had exploded. He then fell, dead before he hit the floor. The mist quickly expanded and filled the room. The first guard to come in contact with the mist clutched at his throat and dropped dead. The others tried to make it to the hallway but never had a chance. In seconds, everyone was dead. Only the King remained.

He stared up at the ceiling as death floated down to meet him. His last thoughts were of his daughter and of the man that he had entrusted to keep her safe.



Galen, Chandel and the others reached the pier. The boats sat tied to a small post. With the aid of Chroben’s magical light, they could see the slow

moving river led deep into the caverns, away from the castle. They separated into the boats but Chandel noticed someone was missing.

“Where’s Garok?”

They all looked around and just as Galen stepped back onto the pier, Garok appeared.

“Here. Just making sure no one would follow us. Wouldn’t do to have an enemy swimming up to our boat now would it?”

Galen, Garok, Chandel and Katalya sat in one boat, while Chroben and the priest sat in the other. They rowed downstream for a time. No one said a word. All their lives had just turned upside down. No one knew what to say.

Galen looked to Chroben. “Where does this lead?”

“This will take us out under the Bridge of Aris. This tunnel was built ages ago for just such a purpose, though we may be the first to use it for this reason. Princes and princesses who needed some time away from the castle used this secret passage.” He looked around the large cavern. “Once we make the river, I say we head to Bowport. We can catch a caravan or a ship. We need to get you three as far away from Starfall as possible.” He motioned to Chandel, Galen and Katalya.

“I hope Keld made it out of there alive. It feels wrong to leave all our friends behind.” Galen looked at Chroben across the water.

“It was the King’s wish that we leave with his daughter,” Chroben said. “If you hadn’t, his legacy would have ended and we would all be dead. What would that have accomplished?”

“You’re right,” Galen sighed. “We did the right thing.” But he heard the doubt in his own voice. It just didn’t feel right.

“Where do we go after Bowport?” Chandel asked.

Galen looked around. “We’ll find somewhere safe, just as long as it is far from here.”

“I have contacts in the surrounding cities,” Chroben added. “We’ll be able to keep you hidden.”

“I don’t want to live the rest of my days under a rug.”

“You won’t have to but I think it best to keep you hidden away for at least a little while. You’ll have everything you need and friends to watch out for you.”

After another long time of silence, Katalya started to fuss a little. Garok looked at Chandel.

“Can’t you shut her up? Noisy little brat.”

Chandel was taken aback by his reaction.

“Might I remind you that she is our daughter now and that means she is also your niece. You should behave like her family.”

“I’m not her uncle. She’s not my blood and once we get to Bowport, I have other things to do than to look after two little brats.”

Faster than anyone could react, Galen swung and hit Garok right in the face. If Garok had been against the back of the boat, the jolt would have knocked him over the side. He shook his head and was about to stand when he saw Galen standing over him with rage burning in his eyes. His fists were clenched and his knuckles were white. Chandel had seen that look only once before, and it had been on the face of Galen’s father.

“You will treat Katalya like she is your blood. Merrin was our friend and he loved all of us, regardless of your feelings. He asked not just me, but all of us to look after his child.” Galen managed to relax. “You are my brother and a part of my life Garok, but you will have to learn to respect my family. By the gods man, Chandel is going to have your nephew!”

At this point, Chroben had stopped rowing and was watching the confrontation. Galen looked at him and turned back to his wife. Garok wiped the blood from his lip and sat up. “Your son will probably be cursed, just like our father.”

Galen looked at his wife and turned slowly. “Shut your mouth! You don’t know that.”

Garok smiled. “Yes, I do. You know as well as I do that the curse skips a generation. Our father had it and his grandfather had it. It has skipped us so we both know he will have it. You can deny it all you want but you know it’s true. You’ll be lucky if he doesn’t end up killing you.”

Galen made to fling Garok off the boat. He almost did until he felt a hand on his arm. He turned and looked into his wife’s eyes.

“We will handle it if it comes to that. We dealt with your father, did we not?” Galen lowered his head. Chandel looked at Garok. “You can choose to be a part of his life if you want. It is your choice.” She looked at them both. “We have just suffered a great loss and tempers are high. I suggest we all sit and try to relax. There is no use fighting amongst ourselves. We need to keep our strength and hold on to hope. We have a long road and uncertain times ahead of us.”

“Always the voice of reason,” mocked Garok. He sat back and looked at the water in front of him. Galen just stared daggers into his back. He looked over at Chroben.

“She’s right, you know,” the wizard said.

“She’s always right,” replied Galen.

Chroben smiled and started to row again. No one spoke for hours. Finally, they saw a faint light in the distance. They were all relieved to see the sky

again. Everyone's mood seemed to lighten a bit. The boats held enough food for only a few days. It would be just enough to reach the city of Bowport.

Galen could not stop looking at his reflection in the water. After a short time, he looked at Chandel and Katalya. "We need to change her name, to keep her safe."

She nodded. "I had a name picked for a girl, but since we are not having one..."

Galen motioned for her to continue. She looked down at Katalya. "Katrina."

Chroben looked at them both. "I like it. You can still call her Kat for short. That was the King's nickname for her." He then looked at Chandel.

"What name are you using for the boy?"

Chandel looked up at Galen and smiled. They had chosen to name their son after her father.

"Callobus. Callobus Swordstar."

# CHAPTER 1

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The wooden sword smacked him on the back of his hand for the third time that day. He was getting tired of being hit, but his father always told him that every master swordsman had to take his hits at some point in his life. He wasn't even an accomplished swordsman yet, but he was getting better.

"You've got to defend yourself better Cal."

Callobus looked over at his sister. She was sitting on the fence, clapping and shouting at both of them. Katrina's favorite thing to do was watch him and his father practice with the wooden swords Galen had made. Every time he looked at her, he saw his mother. Her hair was the same rich brown color and she had the same bright blue eyes. Her hair was always curly and she kept it long, down past her shoulders. She also had the same zest for life. He hardly saw her without a smile on her face. Every time they practiced swordplay, she was right there to cheer, and criticize, his every move. He didn't mind though. He knew she was only trying to help him to become a better fighter.

Galen had given the sword to Callobus on his seventh birthday. It had a very long blade and he had to use two hands just to wield it, even though it was made out of wood. He wasn't sure why his father started him off with such a large weapon but he came to like the long blade because of its reach. It soon felt like an extension of his arm and he became very good at fighting with it, but he could not beat his father. That day was still far away. Chandel objected but Galen said a boy was never too young to start learning how to fight. And fight he did.

Callobus was very big for his age. At thirteen, he towered over all the other children in Kyndale. At fourteen, he was almost six feet tall. Katrina, who had just turned fifteen two days ago, barely came up to his chest and his father

was only slightly taller. Chandel said that he got his height and his strength from Galen's side of the family. Being a blacksmith's son, he had to work hard, lifting metal and other heavy materials so he developed plenty of muscle and strength. His brown hair would never stay down and his chiseled features made him look just like his father. Since he was the biggest, most of his friends wanted to see if they could best him in a fight. They were friendly spats, but sometimes they got out of hand. Chandel always objected to the fights but Galen said it was good for him. It taught him how to stand up for himself. Callobus didn't mind, but he never felt like part of the group. He always felt like an outcast because of his size, so he spent most of his time at home with his family. That is where he wanted to be anyway.

He spent his first summers of life in the city of Denwald, although he remembered very little. Chandel had quickly grown tired of the city and wanted to move away, but not too far. Kyndale was only a five or six day ride away. They still had friends in Denwald, like uncle Keld. Keld was a very well-known and respected blacksmith in the city. Galen said he used to make weapons for far-off kings and queens, even fight for them in battles. Callobus always thought most of those stories were made up to excite him, but he liked listening to them nonetheless. Once they moved to Kyndale, Galen set up his own blacksmith shop. Although it was slow most of the time, it kept food on the table. Callobus and Katrina had everything they needed.

Compared to the large city of Denwald, Kyndale was a small town. Only a handful of businesses lined the main road but they stayed busy for the town sat right off a main caravan route that led to Denwald. There were always people coming and going. The rest of the town was made up of homes and small farms. Most of the inhabitants knew each other and it was a close community. That was the main reason Chandel loved living in the small town.

They lived in the northern part, closest to the Farif River. The river lay only a stones throw away from town. It measured about a hundred feet wide but did not flow very fast. Though slow moving, one could still be swept away if venturing in too far. It was occasionally used to transport goods and for travel to smaller towns downstream but only during the winter, when the roads were thick with snow. Spanning the river was Kyndale Bridge, an old stone structure built many years ago, before Callobus and his family had come to Kyndale, even before Denwald was a bustling trading center. Though the structure was old, it was sturdy and strong. Sometimes Callobus and Katrina would play near the bridge when times at the shop slowed down. Chandel never approved but never complained either. Even though Katrina was older, Chandel always told Callobus that he needed to watch out for her.

Once every ten days there would be a caravan that took various metals and other supplies to Denwald. That is how Galen made most of his gold. He would sell his goods to the merchant's guild and adventures that were in the city. He always said he would take Callobus with him one day, but not until he was older and more skilled.

"Galen," Chandel said. "Stop winning all the time and give him a chance. He'll never learn anything and you'll break his hand if you keep hitting him like that."

"That's where you're wrong, my love." Galen looked over at his wife who was outside washing clothes. She wore her hair up and wore a comely blue dress that she always wore while doing chores. She looked over at Galen and raised her eyebrows. "The more he loses, the more he learns what he did wrong. If he wants to win he'll have to—"

At that moment, Callobus decided since his father's attention was elsewhere, he'd sneak up and get a surprise strike. He pulled the sword back and was about to bring it forward when his father turned suddenly and whacked the back of his arm. Callobus dropped his sword. "That hurt," he said while rubbing his arm.

"You can't sneak up on me, son. No one ever could. Just ask your mother." Callobus looked over to see his mother giggling.

"He's right. It was very hard to catch him unaware at times. I did get him sometimes, but I think he let me. If you keep practicing and follow his instructions, no one will be able to sneak up on you." She smiled at them both, gathered up the dried clothes and walked into the house.

Callobus liked the idea of never being surprised. Now that he thought of it, most of his friends tried to play tricks on him, but they never seemed to be able to catch him unaware. He was always one step ahead of them on everything. It was just another reason why he felt like he did not belong.

Katrina watched her mother go in the house and turned back to her brother and father. "Are you done fighting?"

"For today. Go inside and see if she needs help. We'll clean up out here. We'll do some more tomorrow." He watched Katrina run into the house and saw Callobus pick up his sword and start practicing lunges. He sat there and watched his son practice. His form was perfect most of the time. Even though he was only fourteen, Galen could tell that his son would master the sword in no time, quicker than he did when he was that age. After watching him for a few moments more, he decided it was time to pass on to his son what his father had passed on to him.

"Cal, come with me. I have something to show you."

Callobus walked with his father around the back of the house. It wasn't a large home, but to him it was a mansion. He and Katrina had to share a bedroom, but he didn't mind. The kitchen and the other rooms were fairly large, big enough to play hide and seek with Katrina when he was younger. It also had a warm fireplace and plenty of windows to see the surrounding area. From upstairs, he could see Kyndale Bridge and when he looked hard enough, on some days, he could see merchants traveling to and from Denwald and other places he'd never been to. There was also an extra building in back where Galen had set up his blacksmith shop. He would sometimes work along side Keld when in Denwald but the shop in back is where he made most of his goods.

Callobus followed his father into the shop. Armor and weapons hung on the walls and all sorts of metals were scattered throughout the room. Galen always tried to keep the shop clean, but it would always become disorganized after one use. He always said that a clean shop runs better. There was no need to go looking for what you need since everything was where it belonged. He told Callobus of how dwarven and elven blacksmiths usually kept their shops. Dwarves were a messy lot, but made some of the strongest weapons that could cleave an orc in two. Elves were clean and organized. They made weapons that were as light as a feather but could cut through brick and stone. Callobus had never seen a dwarf, elf or any creature other than humans and farm animals. He had seen pictures in books but Galen told him pictures were nothing compared to the real thing.

It was fairly warmer in the shop than it was outside, yet it was comfortable. Galen had used the forge yesterday and they could still smell the warm steel and coal. Callobus worked in the shop when his father let him. He wasn't bad at it either. The first thing he had made was a dagger that he kept under his bed in his room. Chandel would kill Galen if she found out her son had a dagger at all.

Galen walked up to his workbench and looked Callobus in the eye. "I am going to show you something, something that has been in our family for a long time, but you can't let your mother know I showed you."

Callobus nodded. He was fidgeting in anticipation.

Galen reached under the bench. Callobus bent over to get a better look but couldn't see where he was reaching. It looked like it was actually below the ground. He heard a click and the squeak of a hinge. Then Galen brought out a very long, narrow case. It was almost as long as he was tall. The case itself was something to marvel at. It was made of dark reddish leather and had bright silver studs all along the edge. It didn't have a lock but it looked like



one couldn't get it open without a war hammer. The clasp was in the form of a golden dragon with its wings spread. Callobus could not stop staring.

Galen stood and cleared his bench of metal and tools. He set the case down and looked at Callobus.

"Ready?" He placed his finger on the clasp and pushed. There was a click and it flipped up. He slowly opened the case.

Callobus was bathed in a low blue light. There was little light in the room for reflection but the blade seemed to glow like a thousand candles. Callobus had never seen a sword so magnificent. The guard was in the form of gold dragon wings pointing down toward the hilt. A long blade sprouted from the top, where the wings joined. The hilt was made of bright gold and leather and made to look like claws, claws that were wrapped around a glowing blue light. He looked closer and saw that inside the hilt was a hollow glass vial filled with blue mist. The mist danced and moved as if being affected by some unseen wind. He then looked back at the blade. He noticed odd-looking symbols etched directly into the base of the blade and some in the hilt. He kept staring at the sword, looking at it over and over again.

"Do you like it?" Galen was beaming.

"It's amazing. It's yours?"

"Yes, but it was also your grandfathers. And his father's before him. This sword has been in our family for generations. Eventually, you will wield it."

Callobus's eyes widened and he pointed to the symbols. "What are those?"

"Those are called runes. They are sometimes etched into weapons and armor to imbue them with magic or identify them as someone's property. None of our family ever found out what these particular runes mean. I was told that every magician and sage that looked at them could not decipher their meaning. Very old and powerful magic was used to make this sword." Galen lifted it out of the case and looked at Callobus.

"This sword has seen countless battles and slain many monsters. It was also rumored to have slain a dragon or two." Galen saw his son's eyes widen in wonder. "Even though it is large, it is very light and easy to wield. Would you like to hold it?"

Callobus reached for the sword and grasped the hilt. The hilt was cool to the touch. It was light, lighter than the wooden swords they practiced with. He swung it gently and was amazed at how balanced it was. He didn't even have to adjust his weight to balance his swing.

"It's so light. How can it be lighter than the wooden swords?"

"Magic, my son. Magic can make many things be something they shouldn't. Whoever made the sword wove enchantments and spells into the steel so that it

would be light. There are other magical properties to the sword, the blue mist for instance, that I was never able to discern. If your grandfather knew what they were, he never told me. Some things you'll just have to discover on your own."

"Magic," Callobus said with excitement. He had never dealt with or seen magic performed, but he heard stories involving the mystic arts that his parents had told him. Galen smiled when he saw the excited look on his son's face.

"Magic is a large part of our world, Cal. Some say it is woven into our very beings. It can make steel cut through stone, an arrow fly for miles or even lift a man straight into the air. It can help and heal people as well." His brow furrowed and Callobus knew something else was coming.

"But it can also do many evil things. It can be a deadly weapon. Magic has the ability to level towns and raise the dead. Cowards who wish for nothing but power and control will wield evil magic to attain it. Magic can bring strong-willed men to their knees in--"

He suddenly went silent and his eyes went blank. Galen was looking at the sword but he was seeing something else entirely. Callobus lowered the sword and a look of concern crossed his face.

"Father?"

That seemed to snap him out of his daze. He shook his head and looked at his son. "Cal, listen to me. This sword is a powerful magical weapon. It is only good in the right hands. Be wary of people who use magic. It has the power to corrupt the most pure minds. But as I said before, it can be used for good, in the right hands." His face relaxed a little. "But enough of my foolish banter. Do you like it?"

"Yes. Can I practice with it?"

"Not today. We have been out here too long and your mother will worry. When you can get away, you may practice with it, but only out here near the shop. Do not take it anywhere else. Understand?" Callobus nodded and handed it back to his father. Galen placed the weapon back in its case and put it back underneath the bench.

"I will keep the door open so you can get to it. The case will only open when someone of our bloodline touches it, so it's quite safe."

He stood up and clasped Callobus on the shoulder. "Be careful with it. It's very sharp and can cut through almost anything, including fingers and toes." Galen said the last remark with a smile and held up his fingers like a claw. Callobus laughed and they walked out of the shop.

As they walked back to the house, he spared a glance over his shoulder at his father's workshop and smiled.



As time passed, Callobus's skills dramatically improved with his new sword. The blade just seemed so natural to him. As with the wooden sword, the weapon became an extension of his arms. He practiced as often as he could and even though Chandel eventually found out about it, she knew it was good for him to know how to fight with a real blade. He couldn't live at home forever. She was a bit concerned that practicing with it took up all of his free time. He didn't seem to want to do anything else. Although she didn't mind, she thought he should use his time wisely and still have fun with his friends. Callobus was never one to seek out his friends though. They always came to him.

About a week before his fifteenth birthday, they just finished dinner when someone knocked on their door. It was Delk, one of Callobus's friends. He and some other kids were going near Kyndale Bridge and he wondered if Callobus could go. Chandel thought this seemed like a perfect time for him to get some time away from his swordplay and have time with something other than steel.

"You can go," Chandel said. "Just be back before sunset. And take your sister with you. She could also use some time outside." There weren't many younger girls in Kyndale so Katrina had no one her own age to interact with so whenever he went out with his friends, she went with him.

Callobus grabbed Katrina's hand and they ran out the door. It was a short walk from the house to the bridge and they passed many town shops and inns on the way. They saw Rind, the Speckled Tavern's owner standing outside, ready for a busy night. There were more people than usual in town and more arriving each day. There was a caravan leaving in six days, heading for Denwald. Callobus knew his father and Rind would be a part of the caravan because they had merchandise to sell, but they also served as guards. Rind saw Callobus and waved.

"Evening Cal. You had better slow down. You're leaving your sister behind."

Callobus looked over his shoulder. Katrina lagged behind so he stopped Delk so she could catch up. He noticed Delk wore a disgruntled look.

"Did she have to come? You know she can't keep her mouth shut." Delk never liked Katrina. She was a year younger than he was and he hated the way that she always told her parents, and sometimes other parents, what he and the others did not want them to know. They would tease her from time to time, but Callobus had put a stop to that by beating Kaveth, the self-proclaimed leader of their group, when he pushed it too far.

“If she doesn’t come, I can’t come,” he signed. “What’s the big deal? She just sits off to the side and watches. She never gets involved.”

“I guess. You should make sure she stays away from Kaveth though. You know how he gets when she’s around.”

Great, thought Callobus. The day was going to be interesting.

After walking over a small hill, they saw the bridge and the forms gathered around it. On the other side of the bridge, a steep hill led down to the water’s edge. A small fence, about three feet high, ran up to both sides of the stone. It served as a precaution to prevent anyone from falling down the hill. Near the fence, Callobus saw Kaveth, Lorm, Serl and four others he didn’t recognize. The newcomers looked a bit older than he was. Must be the children of some of the merchants that were stopping on their way to Denwald, he thought.

Callobus, Delk and Katrina walked up. Kaveth’s smile disappeared as he laid eyes on Katrina. “What’s she doing here?”

“Take it easy Kav,” Delk said. “If she didn’t come, neither could Cal.”

“So.” Kaveth narrowed his eyes at Callobus. He never could get past the fight they had. It left a big scar on his pride considering Callobus did it in front of Lorm and Serl. Lorm was Callobus’s age and Serl was a year older. Everyone said the two looked like brothers, having similar short brown hair, heavy chins and large eyes. The truth was they had been born on opposite ends of the kingdom. They just looked at one another and then at Callobus.

“Come on Kav,” Serl pleaded. “You know she just sits and watches. No big deal.” Callobus considered Serl to be his closest friend. He always spoke up for him when Kaveth or the others would ridicule him or his sister.

Kaveth just looked at her and looked away in disgust. “Fine.” His expression quickly changed. “Look what I got.” He walked over to the bridge and crawled underneath. Moments later, he came out with a cloth wrapped bundle in his arms. He set it on the ground and uncovered what was inside.

It was just a bunch of old wooden weapons—a couple of swords, two maces and five war hammers. They were finely crafted and looked like the real thing, except of wood. Small runes were carved into the hilt of each weapon. Kaveth picked up a war hammer and threw another one to Serl. They started sparing.

“Where did you get these?” asked Callobus.

“Herrin here,” he motioned to one of the group Callobus did not know. “His father trades with the forest folk of the Aspenwood. They are supposed to be used by druids or rangers. They have some sort of magic in them that apparently only they can use. They’re fine to spar with though. He’s going to try and sell these in Denwald but Herrin borrowed a couple we could use.”

Callobus had heard of druids and rangers before. Galen once told him that

druids were warriors that live in forests and mountains. They abhor cities and can talk to plants and animals. They isolate themselves from normal society but are usually peaceful. Rangers are hired as trackers and bounty hunters. Remembering what Galen told him of magic, Callobus was reluctant to use the weapons but he eventually picked up one of the swords and handed the other one to Lorm. Serl was looking at his war hammer closely when Kaveth spun around and smacked him on the shoulder.

“Wait until I’m ready!” exclaimed Serl while rubbing his shoulder. He picked up his fallen weapon and started to spar again. In moments, they were acting like warriors from stories they had read or heard about when they were younger. Callobus made sure Katrina was away from the fighting. He saw her off to the side, throwing pebbles down into the river. He turned and engaged Lorm.

Katrina quickly got bored throwing rocks and turned to watch the make believe warriors. Then she noticed there was one weapon left. It had a long hilt and a ball with spikes on the end. Remembering all the things she had seen in her father’s shop, she knew this weapon was called a mace. She walked over and picked it up. Since she had only used toy daggers, she swung the mace around as she had seen her father do. This isn’t so hard, she thought. She figured the ones her father made were a little heavier than this, but she liked the way it felt in her hand.

“What do you think your doing?”

She turned to see Kaveth standing behind her. His face was a mask of disgust and dislike.

“Practicing,” she said matter-of-factly. “Can’t a girl use this just as well as a boy?” She waved it in front of her like a wand.

A wicked grin formed on Kaveth’s face. “So you want to be a warrior do you?” He raised his war hammer. “Defend yourself!”

He came on so quickly that she barely got the mace up in time to block the weapon from hitting her on the head. He’d swung so hard, the shock of the impact sent vibrations up her arm and she cried out. Kaveth brought the war hammer around repeatedly. Somehow, she managed to block every time. She couldn’t understand how she was doing it, but somehow she just knew where to put the weapon.

The look on Kaveth’s face went from depraved pleasure to anger as she continued to block his swings. He backed her up almost to the fence that lined the hill.

“Stop it!” she cried as her legs hit the fence. She looked down and cried out to Callobus. Kaveth swung as hard as he could. She was so startled by

hitting the fence that she wasn't able to get her mace up in time. Looking down at the fence saved her from getting her head split open. The war hammer grazed her shoulder instead of hitting her head, but it still sent her tumbling over the fence and down the hill.

Callobus heard the cry and turned just in time to see Katrina topple over the fence. He dropped his sword and ran to the top of the hill. He saw Katrina's limp form at the bottom of the hill near the river's edge. She was bleeding from a dozen small cuts and wasn't moving. He turned and looked at Kaveth, who just stood there with a cruel smile on his face.

"Stupid little brat. If she didn't want to get hurt, she shouldn't have picked up the mace. I told you—" His words caught in his throat as he looked at Callobus.

Something snapped inside him. The image of his sister lying motionless on the ground was burned into his head. His faced turned from shock to rage. His muscles bulged and his eyes seemed to glow red with fire. A low growl escaped through his clenched teeth.

Kaveth swore Callobus had grown a foot taller. His mouth hung open in amazement. Then fear gripped him.

"Cal?"

Callobus lunged at him, yelling with anger. On instinct, Kaveth brought his war hammer up and swung it at him. It hit him on the side of his shoulder, but seemed to have no affect. Callobus slammed into him and drove him to the ground. Roaring like some possessed beast, he pummeled Kaveth, who tried to fend off the blows, but they were too strong. He brought his arm up to defend his face, but Callobus brought both fists down, slamming them into his raised arm. The arm went back and smashed into his face, breaking his nose and sending blood splattering over his face.

"Get him off me!" Kaveth screamed from below Callobus's enraged form.

Lorm and Serl just stood there, eyes wide with terror. They had never seen Callobus like this. The other four boys jumped on him. One grabbed his right arm and the other grabbed his left. Callobus roared and flung them both backwards about ten feet away. The other two ran at him full force and tackled him off Kaveth. The two he had flung away regained their senses and jumped onto the pile, hoping to keep him down. At the bottom of the pile, Callobus screamed with rage and pushed. All four were thrown away, each landing in a different spot.

Lying at the bottom of the hill, Katrina opened her eyes and stood up. She wasn't hurt, just bruised from the rough ground. She spotted her mace, picked it up and walked up the hill, determined to give Kaveth what for. Then she

heard the inhuman roar and froze.

“Cal?” she whispered. She ran to the top of the hill, just in time to see Callobus throw the four boys off him. Then she noticed Kaveth sitting up and she saw his face. His nose was broken and one of his eyes was swollen shut. His right arm looked like it was broken as well. He stood and grabbed the nearest weapon to him, which was the war hammer. Callobus’s back was turned and he ran at him with the hammer raised high in the air.

“CAL!” Katrina screamed, but it was too late.

Kaveth brought the hammer down on Callobus’s back as hard as he could. He was hoping the strike would bring the enraged boy to his knees so he could bash his head in. His hopes were dashed when the weapon snapped in half. Callobus turned and grabbed him by the neck. He lifted him right off the ground and threw him into one of the other boys who was coming at him from the side.

Katrina didn’t know what to do. She had to get father. She jumped the fence and ran for home as fast as she could. Lorm and Serl saw her running back toward the town.

“Cal! Kat’s fine. She ran back home,” they yelled in unison, pointing in the direction of the fleeing girl. Callobus turned and looked at them. His eyes were wide with rage, spittle flying out of his clenched teeth. He started to walk toward them, growling like a rabid dog. They backed up and were about to run when Kaveth tackled Callobus from behind. As they hit the ground, Callobus’s eyebrow was sliced open on a rock. Blood poured into his right eye, which just made him angrier.

He turned and kicked Kaveth in the head. Kaveth flew back and landed on his face. He didn’t get up this time. The other boys looked from his prone form to Callobus and all four ran at him. He let them in. They hit him from every angle, but they might as well have been trying to move a mountain. They were like gnats to him. He balled his hand into a fist and hit one in the chest. Ribs snapped and the boy fell backwards clutching his side, trying to catch his breath. The other two tried to grab hold of his arms so the third, Herrin, could attempt to knock him down. They were thrown clear over the fence, to the river below.

Herrin looked at the devastation that Callobus had wrought. He had taken out five of them without a weapon and they had all been armed. He waved his hands up in surrender and started to back off, but Callobus advanced on him.

“I give up. I don’t want to fight anymore.” He walked back and tripped over Kaveth’s still form. Callobus walked up and was about to pummel Herrin when arms from behind wrapped around him.

“Callobus!” Galen shouted. “Listen to me! You have to calm down. Kat’s fine. She’s not hurt. Fight it,” he yelled into his son’s ear.

Callobus continued to fight. He opened his arms wide and broke Galen’s hold. Galen stumbled back but stayed on his feet. Arms held open, he pleaded with his son.

“Cal, it’s me, your father. Kat’s all right. Look.” He pointed and moved to the side. Katrina was standing far off next to Chandel, with tears in her eyes. Rind and some other people were behind Galen. Chandel wore a look of utter horror.

Callobus looked right at Katrina. Recognition appeared on his face and the rage started to leave his body. As the adrenaline pumped from his veins, he started to shrink to his original size. He collapsed into Galen’s arms and they fell to the ground. His chest heaved as he took in deep breaths. Sweat poured from his skin. Through blood shot eyes, he looked at his father.

“Father?” He looked around at Kaveth and the others. Lorm and Serl were standing over Kaveth and looked as if they had seen a ghost. He didn’t understand what was going on.

“Father? What happened?”

Galen just cradled his son’s head and started to sob.



All he saw was red. His enemies were bathed in crimson light and he had to kill them all. His hands wrapped around Kaveth’s neck and he squeezed.

Callobus woke with a scream. Chandel was sitting on his bedside with a cool rag. He was drenched in sweat. She placed the rag on his forehead. “It’s all right. It was just a nightmare.” She wiped his head and gently eased him back down to the soft mattress.

He was still having nightmares from the fight four days ago. He remembered seeing Katrina lying on the ground, battered and bruised. Kaveth said something and then everything went red—dark, blood red. Then he saw his father’s face staring down at him and the carnage that surrounded them. His parents told him that he had thought Katrina was hurt and he had beaten Kaveth. Lorm and Serl were unhurt and the other four boys were only banged up a little, no permanent damage. Luckily, Kaveth was okay, except for a broken arm, nose and some other cuts and bruises. What if I had held onto my weapon? he thought. I could have killed someone. I could have killed Katrina.

She was still a little shaken from seeing him enraged. She would come to his room and peek around the corner. He would see her and smile, but she



would disappear from sight. After the first two days, she started to come around him again. After he came out of his trance, he had never felt so exhausted. It was like he had worked on metal for days. He could barely move.

“You’re all right now. Just rest a little.”

“I want to get up. I need some food.” Callobus sat up and walked downstairs next to his mother. Katrina and Galen were sitting around the table. Galen was reading a book to her. He stopped when they entered the room.

“There he is. You feel any better?” Galen pulled out a chair and Callobus sat down.

“I’m all right.” He could not bring himself to look at Katrina, but he didn’t have to. She walked over to him and gave him a hug. He hugged her back and held her at arm’s length. “What was that for?”

She smiled. “You thought I was hurt and defended me.”

“Kat, I could have killed someone.”

“But you didn’t.”

“But I could have.”

“But you didn’t,” she said more forcefully and with a smile. She hugged him again, which made him feel a little better, and sat in her seat. Chandel served them dinner and they sat in silence. Midway through, Galen looked at his son.

“I believe it’s going to be your birthday soon.” Callobus’s eyes never left his food. “You’re going to be fifteen, right? Well, for your gift this year, how about you accompany me to Denwald?”

Callobus’s head snapped up and he stared at his father. Katrina wore a frown. “Do you mean it? I can go with you?”

“You always said you wanted to go. The caravans are leaving in two days. I know it’s before your birthday, but we’ll consider it early this time. What do you think Chance?”

Chance was the nickname Galen used for his wife, usually when he was about to be in trouble. Chandel wasn’t so sure it was a good idea after what happened. She narrowed her eyes at him but smiled. “I guess it’s all right. You have to stay beside your father at all times.” Katrina started to pull on Chandel’s sleeve.

“I want to go.”

“We’ll do something fun while they’re gone. Think of this as a mother-daughter, father-son time. You can go next time.”

“But I’m older than him!”

Chandel smiled. “Next time.”

Katrina’s eyes lit up but she still looked disappointed. She sat back down

and looked at Callobus, who was beaming. He was going to Denwald. He had wanted to go since before he could remember. His father had told him so many wonderful things about the city. Elves, dwarves and other races met there to trade and buy goods. It was full of exotic animals and foods, soldiers, mercenaries, adventurers and so many different places to explore. He couldn't wait to go. He wanted the days to fly by so he decided that after he finished his dinner he would go right to bed.

After dinner, Chandel took Katrina upstairs but as Callobus stood to go, Galen told him to sit. "Son, I know I haven't explained what happened to you when you fought with Kaveth. Truth is I was hoping this day would never come, but it is clear now that you need to know about your family's past." He breathed deeply and continued. Callobus looked at him eagerly and listened. He was afraid of what he was going to hear.

"What I tell you now is the same thing my father told me and his father before him when we were about your age. You and I are descended from a long line of brave warriors. Many ages ago, one of your ancestors was chief of a barbarian tribe known as the Wyrms Fists. It was rumored that they got the name for killing an ancient red dragon that attacked them during one of their ritual festivals. Legends say the tribe killed the beast with just their bare hands. They were notorious for searching out wyrms and slaying them for food and selling the hides to more "civilized" people. Records of their history have been destroyed or misplaced over time, so the details are hazy. Bits and pieces of information have been passed down but the one thing I do know is that our bloodline was tainted many generations ago by one of these dragonkin."

Callobus was hypnotized. He had dragon slayers in his bloodline—mighty barbarians. It seemed all too much to take in. Galen continued.

"One fateful day, the chieftain became enamored of a woman who was passing by in a caravan of festival performers. He fell in love with her instantly and demanded her hand in marriage. You have to understand that these barbarians were used to having women being subservient and doing what they were told. She refused at first, but it was known among her own people that she held the same feelings for him. After much teasing, she accepted his proposal and they were to be wed on the next full moon.

"But it was not to be, for the chief came to find out by others in her party that she had dragon blood in her veins. She was what is now called a sorceress. They are beings with innate magical abilities that were rumored to be descended from dragonkind. They do not need spell books like normal wizards nor do they pray to the gods like priests. Magic comes to them naturally. It is a part of their body and they can become very powerful.

“The chief was angry that she’d withheld her heritage from him, but he did not tell her that he found out. Since he’d been killing dragons all his life, he thought she was angry and bewitched him into marrying her. Despite what he knew, he invited her on an expedition and led his fellow tribesmen against a great red dragon they had found in the mountains. He killed the beast right in front of her and it was during that battle in which she saw the power of the tribe for the first time.

“When the tribe was in battle, they could fly into fits of rage that enhanced their abilities and make them deadly adversaries. They became stronger, faster and deadlier. It was a gift they considered granted to them by Bond, the god of war. This is what you experienced, but back then, they could control it and could come out of their battle frenzy with but a thought. Little did they know that their gift would soon become their curse.

“After the battle, the chief presented the head of the dragon to the sorceress and did so with as much hate and anger he could muster. He accused her of bewitching him and spat at her feet. She was horrified because she had known all along that the chief knew what she was, but she thought he didn’t care. Stricken with anger and sadness for what he’d done, she cursed him and his grandchildren with the rage they displayed while killing the dragon. The rage was perverted by her magic. It became uncontrollable and would emerge in times of great anger. She was so overcome with grief that she killed herself the next day. The chief left her body where it lay and never looked back. Some time later, it was said the chief was driven away from the tribe for fear of the curse. Where he went, no one knew.”

Callobus stared at his father and looked into the fire. The chief had become an outcast, like he now was.

“Since the curse was said to be upon the chief and his grandchildren, every other generation, from the grandchildren of the chief to where we are now, has had the curse. In times of great anger, it emerges, giving one great strength and power but clouding their senses so they don’t know who is friend or foe. But there is hope.”

Callobus couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He was cursed, but the tone in his father’s voice was one of hope and familiarity. It was almost as if his father had seen it before. He thought of the grandfather he never knew. Every other generation his father said. His grandfather would have been affected and now him. He listened intently.

“Your grandfather had this curse, but he learned to gain some control over it with time. As he gathered more knowledge and learned to deal with his affliction, he came to suppress the rages, though he could never completely

control them. Your mother saw him once like this and it terrified her so much, we almost didn't have you. But she saw how he learned to control his anger and knew if the time came, you could do so as well." Galen scanned his son's face for any sign of understanding. "It's also important to know that some have thought this curse a blessing. When a man is in this state, his body becomes a machine. They became stronger, faster and deadlier to their enemies. More difficult to injure and harder to kill, but believe me Cal, this is not a blessing. Men have killed their friends and family on accident." He could only hope his son knew the burden that lay on his shoulders. Callobus would learn to control and conquer this. He had no choice.

"You'll be here to help me, won't you?" He looked longingly at his father. Callobus knew his parents would not be around forever, but he also knew they would do whatever they could to help him.

"Of course we will. We will teach you to control your anger and channel it for good. As long as you understand, you must control yourself and think before you act." Galen stood and started to clean the table. Callobus just sat and stared into the fire, taking in everything he just learned.

"It's late," Galen sighed after the cleaning was done. "In two days, we ride for Denwald."

Callobus had almost forgotten. The excitement of going to Denwald washed away all his worries, though later that night he did think on what his father had said to him and the implication of his words. He realized his life had just changed dramatically.