

Prologue

Night of Memories

“... and so, I hereby declare, that the order of the Knights of the Wild is once again established. May we all see the day when a true king will rise to the throne.”

Everyone cheered with their cups raised as Bennick finished his speech. Everyone but Hunter, who had no cup to add. He leaned against the wall near the back of the torch lit cavern they were housed in, and watched as everyone else began their little celebration.

There were few enough there, only twelve including himself, but it had come a long way in such a short time. Being a warrior of the order since its beginning, back before it was truly formed, Hunter knew just how much Bennick had put into reestablishing the Knights.

It wasn't long before those who had instruments, and those who truly knew how to play them, were crafting their melodies. He didn't bother looking to see who played what, but he could hear the whistling of a flute, a guitar and a fiddle, surprisingly sounding good together with their amateur players. The others entered the circle made by the tables and began moving to the tunes.

The tables themselves were bare of cloth, only holding plates and what food could be spared for such an occasion. It wasn't the grandest feast he had seen, but it would serve its purpose. Hunter took in the aroma that took little time to permeate the entire area. The venison, his personal choice, caressed his nose and tempted him to move from his comfortable position, even though he wasn't hungry. Ham, fruits, and vegetables were also out from storage. Bread was in absence because there hadn't been time for a proper hearth to be constructed. That didn't bother him however, for he had lived without it for quite some time. The venison, however, he thought he might pick up later in the evening.

While the others seemed to be wearing the best clothes they could find still in their possession, he simply wore his usual clothing, consisting of leather breeches and a cotton shirt. There was no need to dress fancier, at least no reason that he saw. It was an informal party, more for pleasure than an actual celebration, even if it could later become a historical event.

As the dancing began, several of those gathered looked in his direction. Nearly all of them looked away from him just as quickly. Likely, the ones who came from the city found it rude of him to be wearing armor at such an occasion. It was only on his left arm, a smooth and finely crafted leather armor set, covering his shoulder and lying across the length of his arm. He didn't care what they thought though, as he had his reasons to wear it, and he would never remove it, for any reason. Glancing at it, as he occasionally found himself doing, he recalled how he had been unable to repay the craftsman when the armor was made. He would have to do so when he next encountered the man, for he certainly deserved a reward for his fine work.

Looking up, he found Bennick sitting at the head table, seemingly enjoying his meal and watching the dancers as well as the musicians. He was a big man, easily the largest in the cavern, but not the largest Hunter had seen. His hair was brown, shaggy,

and curly, and there was a fair amount of it all over his body. The beard was not kept at great length, which would have looked ridiculous on him. Tonight, he wore his finest clothes like the others, leaving his broadsword in his room. Hunter easily recalled the times when Bennick had used that massive broadsword, Mountain Cleaver he called it, slicing through scales, armor, and an entire tree with seemingly equal ease. And yet there he sat, smiling at those gathered before him, looking like he had never held a weapon in his life. Even Hunter couldn't help but feel at ease with Bennick, even if he did occasionally disagree with him.

Turning his gaze back towards the dancers, it wasn't long before he spotted others of whom he knew well. The easiest to find was Rishale, swinging around the others and covering the entire dance floor with her movements, a smile on her face that barely helped back laughter. Those movements reminded Hunter of the times he had seen her fight when outnumbered. The comparison brought out a rare chuckle from his lips, and he continued to watch her for a bit in contentment. He could even visualize her in combat as she danced. She weaved through and around pairs of dancers, seemingly oblivious to their presence. Her long red hair was tied back into a ponytail and she wore what one would likely consider men's clothing, as usual. As she whipped around the dance circle, she grabbed a partner to share in her merriment.

The person that she chose to dance with, for the moment, was someone that Hunter did not enjoy being near. Tallis was the youngest member of the order and the only one younger than Hunter himself. The boy, as Hunter saw him, did not belong with the order, yet there was no place else he could go. At the moment, his blonde hair was cut extremely short and he was one of the finer dressed individuals there. Hunter looked away toward the closest torch hanging from the wall, still not understanding what Bennick saw in the boy. Bennick viewed him as a young man, and had been trying to convince Hunter of that for nearly two seasons.

There was another there that he knew well, but looking through the crowd, he could not find her. Sighing, he stood in the shadows and watched the others enjoy themselves. He began pay more attention to the music than the dancers, as it held far more for him. Though the musicians did not compare to the songs that nature could create, they made a sound all their own that was almost as pleasing. As soon as they finished their second set, they swept into a third, a slower piece that caused all the dancers, even Rishale, to dance at a slower pace. Hunter knew the piece well. Memories had tied themselves to the piece, memories he wished would remain buried, for they only brought him pain. Taking one last look at the dancers, who were now dancing formally to the somber music, he stepped away from the wall and quietly made his way to the exit.

He walked through the main hall of the extensive cavern, passing several halls on his way to the entrance. Various tunnels made their way through the mountain, leading mostly to empty caverns. It had not been long since they found the tunnels and so little had been built in them. But even Hunter could see how much could be done. With little stonework, the halls were wide enough for three men to walk comfortably side by side and tall enough so that each man could carry a spear upright. He wasn't sure how these caverns came to be, but knew that they had been untouched by human hands until their arrival.

The music soon died off behind him, slowly being replaced by a soft pattering sound. It was a sound so familiar and welcome that he knew it in an instant. What had

been left of the evening sun was now covered by clouds, and a light rain had begun. Hunter took off his cotton shirt as he reached the opening, laid it on the dry stone of the tunnel, and sat on the ledge of the cliff with his legs off the end. He always felt at peace in the rain, and relaxed, letting the rain wash away the slight tension that had begun and bringing him calm. Even the rain brought back memories though, as the song had, but these memories were ones he was fonder of. A time when life was beginning, a journey starting, and a purpose was entering his life.

“Hunter?” he heard a young woman’s voice next to him.

He knew the voice, and looked up to meet Leona’s eyes. The light blues eyes seemed to almost shine in a way through the evening rain. Her face seemed so delicate at the moment, but he had seen that face with a fiercer look on it, and knew there was strength behind those gentle features. He looked at her without a word, knowing there was nothing he needed to say.

“I guess you wouldn’t be one for a party, would you?” she asked.

“No, but it was a good idea. Those inside will be better off for it.”

“But not you.” Though it was a statement, there was still a bit of a questioning tone involved.

There was nothing he could find to say to that, and so he looked out across the dark horizon, at the forest below and the plains far to the east. For a time only the rain made a sound, a gentle rain that merely pattered against the unmoving stone of the mountain, as well as those sitting on the stone.

“Does this seem familiar to you?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied, “Like the first time we met; only you had your swords with you then.”

He smiled at the comment. He had actually thought about wearing his swords to the party, being as much a part of him, if not more so, than his armor. But, with only the slightest persuasion from Bennick, he had decided to go without them for the evening. Those who had joined the order more recently seemed to avoid him, and he had heard from more than one of them that he was a spy for the king, or at least a dangerous and untrustworthy man. As much as he wanted to wear his blades, he knew that unity among the order was more important, and wearing his swords would only create animosity towards him in the order. And the order was where he belonged.

“You still think about it, don’t you?” Leona’s voice pulled him from his thoughts. Only then did he realize that he had again been staring at the armor.

“Yes.” There was no point lying to her, and he didn’t want to anyway.

“He’s resting in peace Hunter. Please, trust me in that.”

He looked away towards the horizon once more. He didn’t know how she could know, but he still trusted her word, simply because he trusted her. She had shown herself to be a very talented individual. The first time she had shown her abilities was when he had first met her. It had been nearly two cycles ago, on an evening not too unlike the one they now shared.