

Chapter One

Andevin's Parting

A black, scabby rat scampered across the floor and took refuge beneath a table. Its nails scratched against the hay-strewn floor, digging for food. Nothing. It sniffed further along the ground, searching for anything into which it could sink its large teeth. Something moved, and the rat's red eyes latched on to it. It lunged and bit.

"Ahh!" Fordon cried. He looked beneath the table and, seeing the rat's oversized teeth gnawing on his boot, brought his other foot down on the rodent's head with a crunch. "I hate those things. Once they have a taste of blood, they won't relent. Knowing this place, it's probably what's in your soup."

Andevin looked down at his bowl as steam rose in wisps and swirls. He sniffed it. "It doesn't smell too bad."

"That's what two months on the road does to you," Fordon whispered behind his mug. "Aren't you getting tired of this? We haven't found one person sympathetic to our cause. How much longer are we going to be out here?"

Andevin stirred his soup and glanced around the dimly lit hall. The corner they were huddled in wasn't dark enough, he thought. Too many prying eyes and intrusive noses.

"We knew this wasn't going to be easy," he said, turning back to Fordon.

“I, at least, thought it would be possible.” Fordon took a sip of his cider. “Every city and village we’ve entered has turned us away. Some of them we’ve barely made out with our lives. This has been pointless.”

Andevin sighed and rubbed his eyes. “To be honest with you, finding allies wasn’t the only reason why I came out here.”

Fordon lowered his mug. “What are you talking about?”
“There’s another task that I must attend to.”

The mug in Fordon’s hand fell to the table with a clatter, drawing several of the patrons’ attention. Gathering himself, Fordon looked at them and smiled before leaning across the table to Andevin. “Your father said we were to look for sympathizers. I heard it from his own mouth. He mentioned nothing else.”

“Not to you,” said Andevin. “Because this task isn’t yours.”

“And when were you going to tell me this?” asked Fordon.

“I’m telling you now since this is where we will part.”

“What do you mean part?” shot Fordon. “You’re not sending me back home like some sort of dog! And you’re definitely not going on alone.”

“I have one more thing to do before I join you back in Arined.”

“What’s this task of yours?” snapped Fordon. “And why is it so secret?”

Andevin looked around the room. How dark this village seemed. How suspicious the people’s faces appeared. He sat thinking, not saying anything as he watched the men puff on their pipes and the women whisper in their corners.

“Not here,” he finally said.

“Then let’s go.”

Fordon pushed his chair out from beneath him and followed Andevin out of the inn. A thin layer of snow carpeted the ground and the dirt road was slush and mud. It was early spring, and the warmer temperatures had not remained permanently. The sky was gray, the air cool, and the breeze that came from the mountains only made it colder. The thatched roof houses, built from dark wood and painted with some sort of bright yellowish-orange color, were stacked on one another, leaving no room for alleys.

“We’re unwanted here,” observed Andevin as they strolled along the street. “And I think we’re being followed.”

Fordon glanced behind him. “You’re just paranoid. No one cares what we’re doing.” He paused. “What are we doing?”

“We’re not doing anything,” replied Andevin. “But I have to meet someone.”

“Who?” scoffed Fordon. “And why am I not invited? Is it a woman?” Andevin glared at him out of the corner of his eye. “It is a woman! I knew it.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Then tell me,” laughed Fordon. “What is it like?”

“I am to meet her in Ungstah.”

Fordon’s smile faded. He grabbed Andevin’s arm and yanked him to a stop. “Why Ungstah?”

“Business.” Andevin chuckled to himself. “I guess you could call it that.”

“It’s the city of the king. You know nothing good comes out of there. It’s full of smoke and darkness.”

“It may be, but that is where I’m going.” Andevin looked up and down the street as the feeling of being watched crept over him again. His gaze fell on a slinky fellow clad

in black with bug-like eyes, who was sitting on a bench. "Let's keep moving."

Fordon shook his head. "You truly are like your father. If that is where we're going—"

"I'm doing this alone," interrupted Andevin.

"You can't really stop me from following you, can you?" winked Fordon.

"And you say I'm the stubborn one. All right," relented Andevin. "Then we go together."

"When do we meet her?"

"At the end of the week."

They remained in Wester Village for another two days, staying at the Iron Pick and leaving their room only to eat and check on their horses. The stables were a bit of a walk from the inn, and a messy one at that: piles of brownish-black snow reaching to their knees lined the main road. On the night before they left, they made the trek once again to the stables. Halfway there, Andevin noticed a crumpled heap, half-covered in snow.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing.

"I'm not sure," said Fordon. "But it looks like . . ."

They moved closer toward the frozen mass. Fordon grasped the hilt of his sword. The closer he got, the tighter his grip became. Andevin knelt in the snow and reached out his hand, touching the figure. As soon as he realized what it was, he jerked his hand away and looked up at Fordon.

"It's a girl."

She was slumped, emaciated and frozen, with her head bowed. She formed a scrunched up ball with her arms wrapped around her legs. They were bare, and one of them was branded with a dark purple scar.

"She's a Downer," whispered Andevin.

He knelt back down and touched the little girl on the chin. Her skin felt like ice. His fingers moved to her arm and traced the branding. He wondered how long she had gone without a single human touch. Men and women of the village, with their recessed eyes and faces fixed with scowls, stopped walking and stared at Andevin and Fordon, crowding around them silently.

“Let’s keep walking,” said Fordon. “If we do something, this isn’t going to end well.”

Andevin stayed next to the Downer for a moment, an urge to pick her up and bury her pulsing through his body. He felt the gaze of nearly a dozen people on him.

“She deserves a burial,” he mumbled to Fordon, who knelt beside him.

“I know. But if we do this, we’ll be the ones who need it next. Let’s just go and keep to your task.”

Reluctantly, Andevin and Fordon rose to their feet and pushed their way through the crowd back toward the inn. Little was said between them their last night in the village. They woke before dawn and made their way through the muck toward the stables.

The little girl’s frozen body still sat in the street. Andevin stopped and looked around. “Get the horses.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Bury her. Now hurry up before we’re seen.”

Fordon nodded and disappeared in the early morning darkness. Andevin snuffed out the torch nearby and waited in the shadows next to the body. When Fordon returned, Andevin placed the little girl on the horse, covered her body with a blanket, and then climbed onto his horse, Wintercross.

They rode through the village and stopped outside of it just as the sun broke over the horizon. The soil was rocky

and the fields were colored in mud brown and faded gold with pockets of green. The ground was still hard from the long, harsh winter and Andevin knew he wasn't going to be able to break it.

"Find as many rocks as you can," he said as he lowered the girl off the horse.

Fordon searched the outcropping for stones and brought them to Andevin, who placed them gently over her body. When he had finished, they stood motionless over the cairn. From high above, a chilling squawk sounded. Fordon squinted upward and observed a murder of crows circling over them. They were large, evil birds with red eyes and black feathers, and known not to wait for someone to die before they began feeding.

"We should get going," said Fordon.

Andevin agreed.

They rode westward along the Middle Road and, in two days' time, crossed the Viadental River, where they found a grove and set up camp. The mountains formed a line along the horizon to the south, a deep shade of blue in the distance.

"I don't particularly like camping this close to those hills," admitted Fordon.

"We have little choice," Andevin said as he tied Wintercress' reins around a tree. "We can either build a fire and risk being seen by men or not build one and risk being hunted by hurags. What do you say we do?"

"Build a fire," said Fordon.

The wood sizzled as the fire burned the water out of the logs. Fordon and Andevin laid on the stony ground and watched as the stars lit one-by-one, each of them thinking of home.

“So, where did you meet this woman?” asked Fordon as he chewed on a stalk of grass.

“I haven’t yet,” confessed Andevin. “I’m doing this for my father. He told her to expect me. That’s all I know.”

“And he didn’t say anything else about it?”

Andevin shook his head and lay back to watch the stars sparkle above. Despite this bright sky, the night felt darker than ever. The quiet unnerved him, and so he spoke in a soft and airy voice.

“I had a dream last night. I dreamt it rained all over this land. It rained and didn’t stop for weeks and months, flooding the Northern Reaches. The rivers breached their banks, the mountains let go of their snow, and the Bholding Sea swallowed us all.”

“It was just a dream,” Fordon said.

“No. It was a warning. This land is dark; that much we know. But I fear what is about to happen will unleash a darkness that will leave none of us untouched.”

“What are you saying? We should turn back?”

“No,” muttered Andevin, throwing something in the fire. “Just that we should be prepared.”

“You sure know how to tell bedtime stories,” Fordon smiled. “Well, I had a dream as well. But it wasn’t of a storm. It was of Lyellia. She was dancing, spinning in beautiful twirls. She had this long, blue dress on, and it just billowed out as she went around and around. She was celebrating and happy.” Fordon looked up at Andevin, his smile a little weaker. “She was waiting for me.”

“I bet she is,” said Andevin. “How long has it been?”

“Almost two years. It’s hard to believe she’s been gone that long. I’ll see her again soon. If what you say is true, we all may.”

A heavy silence rose between them and lasted for the rest of the night.



They woke the next morning before the rising sun and continued along the Middle Road toward the Darkwood Forest, home of the largest trees in the Northern Reaches.

Inside the woods, where the road was less formed, the brush and weeds overtook everything. Lamps lining the path burned with a white fire. The air felt heavy, almost suffocating, and was thick with moisture. Darkness denser than a moonless and starless night covered the forest beyond the road. The huge leaves overhead stopped all light from entering the woods and a musty smell hung within the realm, for it had been ages since fresh air penetrated the deeper parts of the forest.

“The Dendron still keep the lamps burning?” asked Fordon, riding behind Andevin.

“It seems so.”

It was eerily quiet. There were no crickets or birds, not even the rustling of leaves. It was as if the air didn't move within the woods. Andevin had a sense that they were being watched from just beyond the darkness, but when he looked toward the tops of the trees he could see nothing.

“They're up there,” said Andevin. Fordon followed his gaze. “They're watching us. Let's keep to the road.”

They pushed through the forest, and dusk was approaching when they emerged from the other side. The sun still gleamed across the western line of the sky, casting long shadows of trees over the road and nearby fields. They rode for a bit before rounding a bend. There, sitting on a stone off

to the side of the road, was a small boy wrapped in a cloak. It was quiet, and unease settled in Andevin's heart.

"Something's not right," Fordon said.

Wintercross whinnied and shook her mane, seeming to sense it as well. Andevin yanked on the reins, pulling her to a stop, and dismounted. Furtively, and with his hand on the hilt of his sword, he walked to the boy and pulled the shredded, moth-eaten cloak off his head.

"Are you all right?" he asked. The boy lifted his face toward Andevin, terror flooding his eyes. "What is your name? It's okay. You can tell me."

"J-J-Jak." He shivered.

"It's nice to meet you, Jak. My name is Andevin. How old are you?" The little boy shrugged. Andevin scanned the fields surrounding them, his hand clenching his sword. "What are you doing out here? Where are your parents?"

"I-I don't have any."

Andevin swallowed and glanced back at Fordon, who was sitting on his horse with his sword resting across his lap.

"I don't like this," grumbled Fordon.

Andevin raised his hand and nodded before turning back to Jak. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to check something." The boy flinched as Andevin reached toward him. "It's okay," he whispered. And as he pulled up the sleeve, Andevin revealed the fleshy, red scar that decorated Jak's shoulder. "You're a Downer?"

Jak nodded, but couldn't bring himself to look at the man.

"Where is your owner?" said Andevin, standing. "Is he nearby? Did he leave you out here alone?" He looked around. "Let's go before he returns. I have some food for you."

Taking Jak's hand, Andevin tried to lead him off the rock, but the boy yanked his arm free. "I'm sorry," he

whispered, tears now spilling down his cheek. "He made me do it."

"Fordon!" cried Andevin, leaping backward and brandishing his sword. "Be on guard."

Clink.

Andevin spun around and saw Fordon's sword lying on the gravel road, and an arrow's shaft sticking out of his chest. His friend's eyes were wide, his breathing labored. Fordon looked over at him and pointed into the field behind a tree. Andevin ducked and ran to him, but felt a sharp pain pierce his back. Unable to catch his breath, he stumbled toward Wintercross, who neighed and stomped her front hooves. Jak's cries echoed across the field, carried by the westerly breeze. Andevin, using his sword as a cane, was limping toward his horse when another arrow pierced his side. He grabbed hold of Wintercross's reins and tried to keep himself from falling to the ground, but the pain pulled him down like a weight.

Andevin collapsed onto his hands and knees and saw Fordon was already lying in the gravel, blood seeping into the sand. A slinky figure, dressed in black with bug-like eyes and holding a bow, stepped out from behind the tree. Trailing him was a crooked, grey-skinned old man with a cane, who had long, white, wispy hair that fell down to his shoulders.

"Search his things, Leelack!" ordered the old man, who was pulling someone at his side.

"You," said Andevin, seeing Leelack. "I saw you in the village."

Leelack smiled and kicked Andevin to the ground before rummaging through the satchels that hung from Wintercross's saddle. He pulled out a leather pouch and held it up, shaking it with a jingle.

“Kilvar!”

“What is it?” grumbled Kilvar.

“At least several pieces of silver,” smiled Leelack.

“Very good.” Using his cane, Kilvar rapped the young man’s ribs. “Crik, bring it here. How did you know about it?”

Leelack smiled. “I listened. I hear things others don’t. They were on their way to Ungstah. Said it was for business. No one does that without silver.”

Kilvar hobbled over to a rock and sat down as Crik grabbed the pouch from Leelack’s hand. Andevin struggled at the Downer’s feet, blood dripping from his back and the side of his body. He glanced over at Fordon, whose body was still, his gaze staring unblinkingly up at the sky. There was not a doubt in Andevin’s mind that his friend was now dancing with Lyellia.

“Bring me that sword as well!” shouted Kilvar, a pipe dangling from his mouth.

Andevin’s vision was growing cloudier, but he watched as Crik tiptoed to the sword. As he bent down and wrapped his fingers around the hilt, Andevin grasped his wrist. Crik froze as their eyes met. Andevin whispered to him.

“What’s wrong?” said Kilvar. “What are you doing?”

“He’s saying something,” said Crik.

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

Wrenching his arm out of Andevin’s grip, Crik stepped away. Andevin collapsed. Rising from off the rock, Kilvar hobbled over to him, pushing the Downer out of the way.

“What did he say?” asked Kilvar. “Huh? What did you say?”

Stooping over, Kilvar slapped Andevin’s face, which seemed to awaken him. He lurched upward and gripped

Kilvar by the back of his neck and held him there. Andevin's lips started to move. His voice grew louder:

*“What lies in the light shall take you.
The forgiveness of man shall forsake you.
Like the earth that drowns in the rain
Are the strong that fall by the lame.
You shall perish by my sword
And the one who bears my name.”*

Andevin released Kilvar. The old man staggered backward, his hands shaking, his lips moving without sound.

“What?” cried Leelack. “What happened?”

“Kill him!” yelled Kilvar.

“Kill him?”

“Now!” roared Kilvar.

Leelack grabbed his dagger and rushed around Wintercress. Just as he approached Andevin's body, ready to drive the blade into him, Jak cried out and shoved Leelack to the ground.

“Get back here, you stupid boy!” shouted Kilvar.

As Leelack was about to get back up, he felt a pain shoot through his chest. He looked down and saw the handle of a strange blade sticking out from below his ribs. The bug-eyed man swayed on his knees, finally collapsing onto the ground next to Andevin. Kilvar fell backward and crawled away from Andevin as fast as he could. Crik ran over to Jak and dragged him off the road into the tall grass. Except for the crickets chirping in the field, the road was still.

Andevin's breath stuttered. He turned his head and felt a slight breeze blow across his face. Kilvar rose to his feet and grabbed the doubled-edged blade from the road. Its

hilt was black and gold with two wings spread out from it, as if they were gliding.

“Let’s see how far this thing can fly,” cried Kilvar, tossing the sword in the brush. “Now, get out of those weeds, and come and get this stuff.”

Crik and Jak surfaced from the field and began collecting Andevin and Fordon’s belongings.

“You won’t be needing these things anymore,” said Kilvar, taking hold of Wintercross’s reins.

Andevin blinked as a tear leaked out of the corner of his eye and streamed down his cheek. Kilvar grabbed Wintercross’ reins and tried to mount the horse that was now stamping the ground with its hooves.

“Beast, I’ll cut your throat right now if you give me any problems,” he warned. “I can sell your meat for a fair amount.”

As if Wintercross understood, she bucked Kilvar off into the weeds and galloped eastward, along with Fordon’s horse, down the Middle Road. Kilvar moaned and rolled in the grass, his coins spilling out onto the ground.

“I should’ve just knifed it,” he groaned, pushing himself off the ground. “Get over here, you two, and pick up these coins.”

Jak and Crik picked the coins out of the grass as Kilvar wobbled back to the road. When they had finished, they marched after him and stopped at Andevin. Jak’s lip quivered as Crik stared into Andevin’s dying face.

“Crik! Jak!” their master roared. “Keep up.”

Jak scampered off, leaving Crik alone with Andevin. His breaths were more sporadic and difficult. The young man knelt and touched Andevin’s shoulder and, with a trembling grip, Andevin latched onto Crik’s hand.

“I’m sorry,” mouthed Crik.

“Are you stupid, boy?” shouted Kilvar. “Let’s go.”

Crik pulled away and ran off, leaving Andevin alone. He didn’t know how long he lay there, but each time he opened his eyes the night grew a bit darker.

The sky was littered with stars when a face appeared above him. It was pale with long green hair. The twig-like figure gently touched Andevin’s forehead with its spindly fingers and brushed the hair back from his eyes. It said nothing as Andevin closed them one last time.