

It was well past midnight and the tavern had been quiet for the last two hours. Jackson sat with his back against the wall. The remains of a roasted grouse sat on the charger in front of him, his half-finished ale next to it. He picked up the tankard and downed the last of it, then licked his lips.

After five long days on the road, he was ready for a warm bed and a good night's sleep. In a few days, he would reach the castle at Baymore and he wanted to be well rested when he arrived. He planned to sleep late in the morn and then be on his way. God knew his poor horse needed the rest as badly as he did.

The door opened and five men entered, stomping their feet to knock the frost off their boots and beating their arms about their bodies to warm themselves. Their loud laughter disturbed the quiet moment Jackson enjoyed.

About to stand, Jackson overheard words that chilled his blood and froze him where he sat.

"That'll teach him, the goddamned sodomite." One of the men clapped another on the back and grinned. "It's a good thing we came along when we did, lad, to rescue you. He'll not be bothering anyone else now."

Jackson picked up his empty tankard and pretended to drink as he watched the men.

"How long do you think he'll last?" The man was no more than twenty, slight of build and fair-haired, but his darting eyes and twisting hands belied his earlier bravura.

"In this weather, not long."

The young man's face greened as if he were about to spew. The others formed ranks around him as their good humors slipped from their faces to reveal their true natures.

"Not having second thoughts, eh?" Another man put a heavy hand on the lad's shoulder. To Jackson it seemed as good as a warning.

"No, no." He shook his head with vigor and his eyes darted to an older man.

"You've seen what befalls men who lay with men, my son. Even suspicion carries a heavy penalty. Remember, you got a fine horse in the bargain, Raf."

"He attacked me, Father. The unholy bastard," the young man declared weakly, licking his lips.

Jackson had seen and heard enough. He pushed to his feet, gathered his cloak about him, adjusted the broadsword across his back, and made his way to the door. The men turned, now aware of him, and their eyes narrowed. Two of them stepped toward him, hands on the hilts of their short swords.

He gave them a look that stopped them in their tracks. His head, just short of brushing the timbers of the low ceiling, bent in a nod of recognition, then he turned his broad back on them. To be sure, the five were no threat. A mercenary by trade, Jackson could have killed them all before the first had drawn his sword.

He opened the door, ducked under the lintel, and stepped outside into the chill of the night air. Pausing, he took his reckoning and made his way across the yard to the stables. Bending low, he stepped through the door and straightened.

"Lad," he called as he cast about for the groom.

The boy lay asleep on a pile of hay in an empty stall, a blanket pulled tight around him.

"Wake up, boy." Jackson's deep voice echoed in the stable. Down the row, his horse nickered at the familiar sound.

The lad rolled over and opened his eyes. They widened and his head fell back as he took in the huge man standing before him. "Aye, m'lord!" He jumped to his feet.

"Saddle my horse." Jackson strode to the stall where his horse was kept, the boy racing to keep up with him. "Which of these animals did those five men bring in?"

"The black with the blaze, m'lord." He pointed to a box farther down the row.

Jackson watched the lad as he scurried around the great warhorse, preparing the saddle and bridle. "Saddle the black, too."

"M'lord?" The boy stopped and looked at him, eyebrows raised.

"I'm taking him to his master." Jackson was not a man to argue with, and the boy was smart enough to see it.

"Aye, m'lord." He nodded, led the horse to Jackson, and handed him the reins, then bolted to the black horse's stall. He brought the animal out in quick time. It was a fine, long-legged, glossy-coated mare, and its tack was of good quality.

Jackson held out a gold piece, more than enough to buy the boy's silence.

"Not a word. You were asleep and don't know who took the horse." Jackson swung up onto his saddle.

"Aye, m'lord. I was asleep." He nodded, knelt, and slipped the coin into his boot.

Jackson leaned down and took the reins of the mare from the boy, tied them to his pommel, then motioned to him. The lad ran to the door, threw back the bolt, and swung it open.

Jackson kicked his mount to a trot and rode out, leading the black horse. He joined the high street and followed it to the outskirts of town, where it became the road to the plains leading to the great castle of Baymore and his father.

The night was bitter cold, but no snow fell yet, and the full moon shone bright, casting sharp blue shadows on the light frost that coated everything. The horses' hooves crunched the thin layer of ice that covered the dirt road, their hot breath blowing clouds of vapor. He rode on, sure he would find what he sought before long.

Not far from town, he found the bravos handiwork. Anger churned in the cauldron of his chest, and he swore soft and low. Jackson dismounted, tied off his horse, and climbed over the low rock wall into the field.

The man, left to die in this cold field, still lived. Naked, his leg muscles quivered with the strain of staying on his toes. His arms, lashed by his wrists beneath crossed poles, were unable to support his weight. A noose circled his

throat. Jackson's gaze followed the rope as it stretched up over a high tree limb, then was tied off on a lower branch.

Once the man's legs gave way, he'd slowly strangle, hanged by his body's weight.

Part torture. Part lynching. Certain death.

Small, desperate puffs of vapor came from between swollen and torn lips, hands fisted in futile effort, head raised to keep from choking. He'd been beaten, evident even in the moonlight by the dark marks that covered most of his blue-tinged skin. A long gash over his left eye had bled down his face to dry in the light hair that dusted his chest.

Jackson pulled his knife from its sheath and approached the man. One blackened eye slit open and watched as he approached.

"Here to finish it, then?" a hoarse voice whispered.

"Aye." Jackson raised the knife to the man's throat.

"Make it quick." To Will, a blade seemed a better death than the noose.

The dagger cut the rope that held his neck and his head fell forward. "God's tears," Will rasped. The stranger cut one wrist binding and his arm fell free. He slumped forward, caught in large, strong arms that held him safe as his cheek rested against a broad shoulder. His other arm was cut loose, and the man lowered him to the icy ground and pulled the noose from his neck.

"Where are your clothes?"

He swallowed, his throat raw and hurting, and jerked a hand toward the tree. "Over there, last time I saw them." God, he was so cold and every inch of him hurt. His teeth chattered as he curled around his belly and a sick wave pushed up what little was left in his stomach. He retched onto the ground.

Jackson strode to the tree. The man's clothes lay scattered beneath it. They'd left his boots, despite their being well crafted. Most likely, they fit none of

the men, but they'd taken whatever weapons, vest, or cloak he'd worn, and left his bloodied shirt and torn breeches. Both pieces had been finely made, with elaborate embroidery on the sleeves of the shirt. This man was no commoner.

Controlling the rage that boiled inside him, Jackson thought of going back to the tavern and confronting the men, but that would serve no purpose. Right now, he needed to get this man as far from here as possible.

Jackson glanced back at him. Half frozen, half beaten to death, he'd be in no shape to travel hard or far. Jackson looked down the road. Ten miles away, the low mountains began, rocky peaks covered in evergreens and scrubs. The road rose through them in a narrow pass, then dropped down to the plains. Thirty miles beyond it stood Baymore.

No choice. He'd never make it safely to Baymore with the man in this condition. Once the others found him gone, they'd begin to search. Being caught on the open road was not a good plan. Jackson would have to hole up, wait for him to heal, then they could make their way to Baymore. His father would have to wait, he decided, as he returned to his new charge.

This stranger, this savior, returned and helped Will to ease into his clothing and pull on his boots. His sword and father's dagger were gone, taken by his tormentors, along with his crest ring, cloak, and purse.

"Can you stand?" The man's dark eyes searched his face, brows creased.

"I'll try." With an arm supporting him at the waist, the man led him to the wall. Will had to sit down and catch his breath before swinging his legs over to stand on the other side. His horse waited for him.

The man's broad shoulders and powerful arms easily boosted him into his saddle. Where the man had come by the animal, Will was too tired to ask. Gathering the reins in his shaking hands, he dug his feet into the stirrups and hung onto the pommel of the saddle.

"We need to go quickly. Can you ride hard for a little ways?"

"I'll try." What choice did he have? Ride and live, or stay and die.

The big man kicked his mount to a gallop. Will started at a trot, which jarred his bones and started his head wound bleeding. Wiping blood from his good eye with his sleeve, he urged his horse into a smooth canter to spare himself further damage and keep up with his rescuer.

The moon illuminated the road that wound through the rolling farmlands. On they went in a desperate dash, until Will thought he'd drop from the saddle. Clinging to the reins and his horse's mane, barely able to catch his breath, he pulled his mount to a grateful stop beside the warhorse. His battered body screamed like some wounded animal and tears blurred what vision he had left.

They had arrived at a little stream that crossed the road. The horses went into the stream and turned downriver, splashing through the icy water until they'd rounded a bend, hidden by trees.

"Now, we go up." The man pointed up the side of the mountain. "I know a place where we should be safe."

Will bent his head back. The top of the mountain was clearly visible in the moonlight and the side of the mountain looked to be straight up. He prayed that he could just hold on and not fall off. They started up.

The horses blew and strained at the steep climb, hooves scraped over rocks, haunches bunched and flexed as they ascended. He clung, bent over his horse's neck, gasping as badly as the animal. Each bone-jarring scramble reverberated in his body, sending waves of pain and nausea through him; flickers of darkness threatened to unseat him and betray him to the rocks below.

Breathless, at last they reached a flat clearing. His good eye made out a small stone building, nothing more than a goatherd's hut, tucked away into the side of the rocks. The man led him to it, dismounted, and tied off his horse. In a few great strides, he was at Will's side to receive him as he collapsed from the saddle with a groan.

Again, strong arms cradled him, carried him into the hut, and laid him on some crude but sturdy cot. His battered body slumped into the bare ropes of the bed with nothing between to soften them. He didn't care, as long as he was off the mountain, off his horse, and lying down.

If the shivering would just stop, he'd be more than happy. Closing his eyes, he hoped nothing more would be required of him, because he was going to give in to sweet, pain-free darkness.

Jackson, hands on his hips, looked down at the man. He'd fallen unconscious. Well enough. It would give him time to prepare the fire and wrap him in a blanket. Then, he'd begin the work of cleaning those wounds. The gash over his eye had begun to bleed again and required being sewn.

He left the hut and tended to the horses in the small pen behind the shack, rubbing them down as best he could as they scrounged on old hay left by the last tenant who'd made this place his shelter. Then, he searched out wood for the fire. Returning from the sparse forest that surrounded the hut, he dropped his bundle, knelt at the hearth, and glanced over to the cot. Pale and shivering, the man slept. He needed heat as soon as could be managed.

Jackson lit the fire and the hearth sprang to life, light and warmth pushing into the small room. He dragged the cot closer to get the benefit of the heat, and then opened his bedroll and wrapped his blanket around the man like a caterpillar's cocoon.

Next, he went back out into the cold to collect some water from the small rill that spilled down the side of the mountain, runoff from the upper levels where a sprinkling of snow covered the peak. He used the wooden bucket from the pen to collect water, and poured it into a shallow trough for the horses. Filling another bucketful of water, he carried it inside. Jackson's back ached, but he wouldn't rest until his chores were done.

Sitting on the floor next to the cot, he dipped a cloth into the water and began to clean the deep gash over the swollen eye. He pulled his saddlebag near and rummaged in it for his needle and thread. He'd sewn many a man's hide back together on the battlefield and in the camps. Closing one eye to see, he pushed the thread through the eye, knotted it, and took his first stitch.

Good thing the man was out. He'd seen men, fierce in battle, cry and howl like babes when the needle pierced their skins. Three neat stitches later, the wound was pulled closed and the bleeding stopped.

Now, for the rest. He could do nothing for the bruises, but the raw red scrape on the man's neck, he could help. Digging in his bag, he pulled out a small jar of ointment sold to him by a healer woman and dabbed it along the rope's mark. It might leave a scar or it might not; only time would tell. Then Jackson applied it to the red rope burns ringing his wrists.

He felt the man's ribs, his hands practiced at finding broken bones. One, two, three cracked, at the least, but his arms and legs appeared sound. The man was shorter than he was, as were most men, well muscled and, despite the damage on his face, fair in looks. His long blond hair was tangled with blood and mud.

He pressed the rag, chilled in the cold water, to the man's lips to ease the swelling, then dipped it again, wrung it out and placed it over the eye that had swollen shut. Dark purple ringed that eye from brow to cheek; the other eye had purple only underneath it. He cleaned the rest of the scrapes and did his best to rinse the man's hair clean.

Stretching out beside the cot, Jackson tucked his saddlebag under his head and pulled his cloak around him. He'd been well trained in taking rest when and where he found himself. For now, they were safe.

How long that safety would last, he couldn't say.

But if they were found by those men, Jackson would be fighting for both their lives.