

SAMPLE CHAPTER

THE  
SAVAGE  
WAR



BY  
ESTHER WALLACE



EMERALD LAKE  
BOOKS

*The Savage War*

*The Black Phantom Chronicles (Book 1)*

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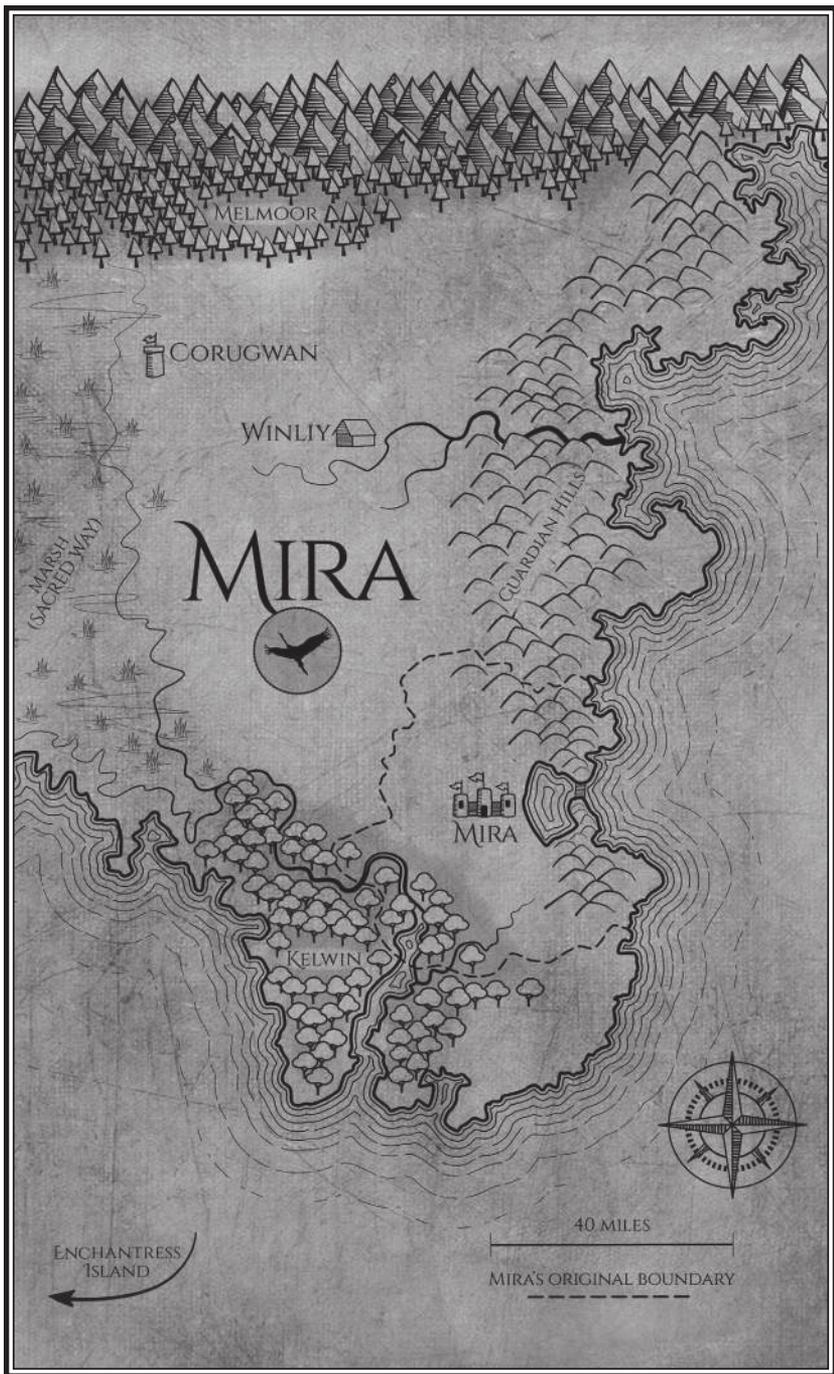
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*For my dear sister, Lia,  
even though you may  
never read Arnacin's story.*



MELMOOR

CORUGWAN

WINLIY

MIRA

GUARDIAN HILLS

MIRA

KELWIN

ENCHANTRESS ISLAND

40 MILES

MIRA'S ORIGINAL BOUNDARY

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

- Arnacin . . . . An islander and the protagonist of this story.  
Bozzic . . . . Arnacin's father.  
Carpason . . . Lord of Tarmlin, first Miran friend of Arnacin.  
Cestmir . . . . A Miran duke.  
Charlin . . . . Squire to Lord Carpason.  
Charlotte . . . Arnacin's sister.  
Cornyo . . . . One of Duke Cestmir's knights.  
Darien . . . . A councilor to Miro.  
Erlund . . . . Another councilor to Miro.  
Firth . . . . . Son of Gagandep.  
Gagandep . . . An adopted native and a skilled healer.  
Garak . . . . . A Miran earl.  
Hadwin . . . . A Tarmlin knight.  
Krisno . . . . . A councilor to Miro.  
Memphis . . . High Councilor to Miro.  
Miro . . . . . King of Mira.  
Raymond . . . Arnacin's childhood friend.  
Rosa . . . . . Princess of Vemose, neighboring kingdom of Mira.  
Samundro . . . A Miran sailor.  
Sara . . . . . Valoretta's nurse.  
Shashidha . . . A native boy.  
Tevin . . . . . Arnacin's childhood friend.  
Valoretta . . . Princess of Mira and heir of Miro.  
Voninath . . . Master swordsman.  
Wilham . . . . Captain of a rowing vessel.  
William . . . . Arnacin's younger brother.



## PROLOGUE

**D**UST BLEW INTO THE AIR as Arnacin's father, Bozzic, carefully brushed his hand over the crackling parchment. Beside him, his son watched, eyes round with wonder and anticipation.

"Do you remember, Arnacin," Bozzic almost murmured, "the day you convinced a group of older, rowdy boys to cease their mischief? That was the first time I thought this had been saved because of you."

"What is it?"

Slowly unrolling the parchment onto the table, Bozzic replied, "My father gave this to me on my wedding day, as he received it on his. The fear was, I suppose, that we would run off if it was given to us before wives kept us accountable."

As Bozzic finished flattening the parchment out, Arnacin stepped near, beholding the faint scratches of an ancient plan. "It's a ship," he breathed after a second.

"Yes, it is the only documentation of an ocean-faring vessel in all of Elcan. See how different it is from the coastal vessels you grew up with? It has been passed down from father to eldest son since its creation nearly a thousand years ago. This is the best representation anyone could make of the enchanters' ship as it was carefully ripped apart, beam by beam. And now, it is yours, to recreate the ship drawn here or to save it for your first son."

Brow furrowed, Arnacin looked up at his father. "Why are you giving this to me now?"

Sinking into the nearest chair, where he could look his son squarely in the eyes, Bozzic placed his hand on Arnacin's shoulder. "I believe this was made for a purpose and that it came to me for a reason, as have you. You might only be eleven, Arnacin, but you are marked with leadership in your humility, compassion and intense feeling of responsibility, whether you are responsible or not..." He smiled. "Yes, even in your pride you show leadership—nothing can make you surrender unless you are completely convinced it would be wrong not to. If it stopped there, I would just think you will make one superb father and villager, but it doesn't. There are your stories.

"So, Arnacin, why don't you tell me why almost all your stories are of men and women who frequently die for honor, love and complete dedication to righteousness?"

"I don't know. The stories just come and I tell them. If other stories did come, I don't think I'd find them worth telling. But if there was a reason... I guess—I guess I want to be those men. I want that test of trust in the Creator's authority and power, and I want the triumph of knowing I did not fail."

"If I asked you today to pick a career on this island, which one would you choose?"

His gaze moving toward the open door and the village beyond, Arnacin inquired, "Must I?"

"If you can picture yourself as anything here, what would it be?"

After a long silence, the boy nearly pleaded, "There's nothing... costly. It's all... village life."

"If you think there's nothing important, Arnacin, you should remember that we have no government here. We need each other to keep us all accountable to morality, to provide every aspect of village life and, if ever it's needed, to supply our own defense. Is that not service enough?"

"Father, I..." Arnacin sighed. "It's too easy. Where's the triumph in that?"

Nodding as if he had known the answer long before he asked, Bozzic concluded his pursuit. "Then if you could pick a career out of all the ones you know exist, what would it be?"

Somber blue eyes flicked to Bozzic, yet they roiled in churning thoughts—thoughts that were likely far too serious for a boy Arnacin’s age, yet needed to be thought.

“A martyr,” the boy eventually replied, causing his father to bark in laughter despite the fact that it had been said with the deepest amount of conviction.

“Oh, Arnacin,” Bozzic sighed. “That is the last thing I would ever want for you.” Despite the pain that joined that fixed gaze, the seriousness did not waver and, leaning forward until their eyes were only an inch apart, the boy’s father asked, “And if that option were given to you, would you take it, even if it meant separating yourself from your family for as long as you lived?”

Sinking into those dark pools in his son’s eyes, Bozzic read the full understanding of the question, the knowledge of the sacrifice, and also the sincerity as Arnacin slowly nodded.

Straightening, Bozzic rolled the parchment back up. Placing it into his son’s hand, he exhaled. “Then it is time, Arnacin, we prepare to send you to sea. Only out there will you discover the reasons you were given all your passions and talents and yet were not born in a place that could use them.”



Arnacin grew while he and his father, along with his younger sister and his closest friend, Charlotte and Raymond respectively, toiled at building a sea-worthy ship. Just as the ship neared completion, his father died.

Suddenly, Arnacin held responsibility as man of the household, a task that halted any voyage for life. Darkness descended on him, a darkness of lost hope and emptiness, until the day Charlotte and Raymond secretly pulled him back into finishing his ship, thereby rekindling a hope that stirred in the depths of his now fifteen-year-old heart...



## Chapter 1

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### THE RUNAWAY

**S**LEEP REFUSED TO COME FOR Arnacin of Enchantress Island. Beside him, his brother's warm, toddler body was a sticky reminder of what he was about to abandon. From the other side of their one-room home, he could easily hear the whispered conversation between his mother and sister as they finished drying the dishes.

Their words were the only barrier between him and the guilt, fear and anticipation pounding through his veins. He was leaving. It had to be tonight, lest he lose the courage to ever leave his family. Even after his mother fell asleep, he lay there, staring undecided at the toddler beside him. As usual, William slept with his fist in his mouth.

It had not been uncommon for Arnacin to be suddenly whacked in the face at night by that wet fist. This night, he just shook his head, whispering so low that he hardly heard his own words as he used his mother's fond name for her youngest. "Farewell, Blue-fire. I don't know when I'll return, but I know you will not be the same when I do." With sadness and love, he ran his fingers through the thick black hair on top of the toddler's head, and slipped off.

Arnacin jumped as he nearly ran into Charlotte, who stood in the doorway. She, however, only turned silently and he led the way to the ocean, where the small ship awaited him.

Charlotte did not speak until they stood by the water, where moonlight cast over them in an almost eerie light, like the last glow of a funeral pyre.

“Arnacin,” she called softly. She paused uncertainly as he turned to her before smiling innocently. “You know how I hate you.”

He did not answer, but stared off to where the moon shimmered across the sea.

“Why must you go?” His sister’s teasing suddenly broke loose into temper. “While I’m told I can’t because I’m a girl, you know you will be told the same thing for another reason! That is why you are sneaking away in the black of night like a criminal!”

Turning to her in surprise, he snapped back, “Were you not the one who insisted that I had to go, that I was meant—called—to leave, when I said I couldn’t?”

“Not like this!”

Nodding in comprehension, he jibed, “You’re just jealous.”

Charlotte flicked her head hotly. “Perhaps I am jealous. Jealous that, unlike me, your bow is not your truest companion. But more than that...” she released her temper in a long sigh. “I have the feeling I will never see you again. We fight, I rebel, but I love you anyway.”

Those words pierced him with a sick feeling that even then he knew he would never forget, but he answered, “I will return, I promise. If I’m out there so much as ten years, it will be excessive. Besides, my leaving will give you the freedom you want. Someone has to look after the sheep. Raymond promised to take care of anything else Mother can’t. Who knows, in a few years, you might not even care,” he shrugged, “...when you’re married.”

She laughed, a sound of deep hatred and malice bubbling out of her. “I’d murder the first person who tried making me.”

Arnacin stared at her in disbelief. Was she the same girl who stroked William’s head at night and rocked him to sleep, who drifted silently through the woods alongside wild deer?

“Charlotte, I would never betray you or Mother or William, but I need to go. You know how it calls me, its mystery and...” His voice dropped off as his gaze sought the open sea, whose whispering waves sounded like a beckoning. Turning back to his sister, he implored her, “I’m nothing here. Father thought this adventure would reveal my purpose. As long as I stay—”

“I know,” Charlotte whispered. She glanced away. When she looked back with a forced smile, her voice was commanding once again. “Go. Find your meaning.”

Arnacin briefly threw his arms about her before climbing aboard his small ship. He did not dare tell his young sister to wait until the right man came along, for on that day, he was sure, she would be only too happy that she had not set sail with her brother. He simply wished for her heart’s healing.



Arnacin’s original thought was, by allowing the wind to guide the ship wherever it would, he would soon hit land. Obviously, many lands existed. Yet summer’s warm winds turned cold. Storms blasted the ship, tossing it about. Still, Arnacin persevered, caring for his vessel as much as he knew how, marking down each day as one less to travel, all the while calling himself an optimistic fool. Only his need to succeed kept him going, while he watched his stores shrink.

Finally, he again traveled through warmer seas. If it was not technically spring back home, he still thought of it so. With fewer storms, he spent his days on deck, cheered despite the small amount of food left.

One especially warm day, he slid his arms under his head and closed his eyes against the brightness of the sun. There he dozed until thick rain drops slapped him awake.

Dark clouds blew overhead, leaving him only seconds to move. As the black spray lashed, Arnacin slammed the cabin door shut against the storm. His last image of the outside world was that of enormous waves amid the crack and roar of thunder.

Throwing his blanket around his shoulders, Arnacin could still imagine the sky spilling its evil contents into the dark abysses that the waves formed time and again. The sea thrashed in torment from the biting hail, driven by the whim of the wind whipping about it. Caught without aid inside those rearing whirlpools of water, his ungainly little ship careened through the waves that forced it onward with unrelenting demand.

In the background, he could hear the creaking and groaning of the ship, a sound so inferior to the might of the tempest. With every heave, Arnacin braced himself between the wall and his bed to keep from rolling around the floor like the objects that were doing their own clinking dance as they knocked into each other. Yanking the blanket more firmly around his shoulders, the boy sighed in frustration.

How long had he been out here? He had lost track. Several weeks, a few months, half a year, a little bit more... It did not matter. Day in and day out, it had been the same constant routine, now only altered by the lack of food and water and, of course, by the current storm—only the fifth during his voyage. Still, nothing had broken the endless sight of sky and water. His book, created for navigation purposes, had become a mixture of navigation and doodles of sheep, wooded mountains, and cloud formations. At least his constant sketching had replaced his artistic ineptitude with a tiny bit of skill.

The ship lurched onto its side. Slammed into the bed, Arnacin could feel the ship rise upward, a sensation like it was about to leave the earth entirely, and then... he was thrown off his feet, his back hitting wood while his pillow, blankets and other objects rained about him. Something broke with a loud crack and Arnacin looked up just in time to see water rushing in from every crack around the door, the cabin stairs now above him.

In a flash of reflexes, the islander shot to his feet, ignoring the deluge of unyielding saltwater as he fought his way to the door. It would not open or budge for the pressure heaving against it, yet the water had already filled the cabin to the boy's waist and was still coming, raining down over his shoulders and head, swirling about his ankles.

He felt his feet slip from the force against them. With a splash muffled by the roar of water, Arnacin seized the only option left to his panicked mind. Rising into the disappearing space between the new roof and water for just a second, the boy drew air, coughing up the water he had swallowed. Inhaling as deeply as the rising

water would permit, he plunged back into the torrent, clawing for the cracks between the slats of the door.

As he felt the swirling of the water decrease around him, he knew then that his cabin had become a large fish bowl, without air pockets. With one last futile yank as the burning in his lungs shot to his head, he felt the wood give way beneath his fingers. Desperately, he kicked upward, bumping his head into something hard. His ship's deck blocked his escape and blackness started to descend. Only the waves rescued him, sweeping him from beneath the ship. Surfacing, he gasped, just catching his foot on the rail so as not to be dragged away.

There, waves pouring over him, he shivered, spluttered and choked. The storm threatened to rip him from his hold however, while his ship continued to float like a giant, overturned basket.

Arnacin dipped back beneath the surface, finding one of the trailing sail lines. It took several submerges to twist it around the top of the rail, fighting constantly against the waves. Then, with fingers too stiff to work anymore, Arnacin climbed onto the bottom of his ship with the assistance of the waves, slid down the other side and found another sail line.

Using the last of his ebbing strength, he once again gained the bottom of the ship, now armed with both ropes, and tied himself to the boat. His mission finished, he let the darkness envelop him.



In the early hours of the following morning, sunlight beat onto a sandy spit escaping the wooded coast. For the first time since dragging himself there earlier, Arnacin painfully stirred. He trembled in the light breeze that ruffled the tangled shreds of canvas on the wreck of his ship, beached nearby. Stifling a cough, Arnacin finally pushed himself slowly into a sitting position, sand sliding off him as he shifted.

Pulling his sodden clothes about himself, he dropped his chin onto his knees, glaring at what remained of his ship. It lay there on its side, its broken mast dug into the sand as if trying to

impersonate a lean-to, its railings and cabin smashed through, stripped by the sea of many of its possessions.

There was no way around it. Despite the care and logic put into the boat's creation, Arnacin was stranded. Now, there was no way to return, as far as he could see.

"Charlotte," he croaked amid shivering hisses. "Fine, I concede defeat. I can't return."

If honest with himself, however, he never considered defeat an option. With that reminder, he lifted his head. He had barely begun to lurch to his feet, though, before he looked again at his ship and reality washed away his renewed determination.

Even if he found some form of food and water, he had no way to rebuild his ship. By himself, he could never replace the mast. Furthermore, he did not know if he had even built it correctly and, if he had not, another storm might completely sink the thing if he rebuilt it.

With that thought, he dropped back onto the sand.

For hours, Arnacin sat there, trembling and coughing, beyond all care for his own well-being. As the sun set, to be replaced by night's full moon, the only difference was that he lay on his back in the sand, his eyes closed and his tongue pressed between dried lips. The only sound came from the pounding of the surf and the wind in the trees.

A scream shattered the night. Arnacin jerked up, his face pale. More screams followed, or perhaps shouts. It made little difference to Arnacin. To his sheltered ears, those sounds were the most blood-curdling, horrible noises he had ever heard or even imagined in his sixteen years of life. As if only to add to his terror, the din, now from tens of voices, drew closer. Then, almost as quickly as they had arisen, the sounds ended, leaving only the hiss of the waves in their wake.

Momentarily distracted from his cold, starvation and thirst, Arnacin slowly climbed to his feet. Heart and blood pounding, his gaze never left the dark of the redwoods where the screams still seemed to echo.

Like a coyote that prowls noiselessly through the forest, he set off in the direction from which he'd last heard the sounds, led by that morbid desperation to know all dangers. Before long, he saw a spark of light in the distance and he angled toward it. Almost as if mocking his hearing, crickets chirped in the underbrush and, somewhere, an owl hooted.

It was as if nothing had happened, and yet—the normal noises were almost a façade. Somewhere, un-pinpointed, the woods still retained a deadened sound, as if the crickets were simply putting on a brave front, while the owl—

As a hoot came again, Arnacin stiffened, realizing that it did not quite sound authentic. Only a few feet away, the light flickered like many torches.

Just as he realized that the hoots could be a signal of some kind, a dark shadow rose from the base of a nearby tree. Before he could move, the shadow grabbed him around the neck. The arm tightened, forcing him forward. In his weakened state, that was all it took. Blackness descended. He could remember no more than the feeling of his attacker's grip slackening.



Lord Carpason of the ruined city of Tarmlin looked up as a commotion erupted along the edge of his troop's encampment in the Melmoor forest. The sounds of shock and exclamation, even slight exasperation, piqued his curiosity, prompting him to investigate. Several of his cloaked men stood around a sickly-looking boy in his mid-teens, with the deepest dark hair. It was that hair that caused Carpason's eyes to widen as his gaze shot to his men for explanation. All the men around him possessed golden to light-auburn hair—he had never even imagined hair could be brown, much less black.

Meeting his lord's gaze, one man, Sir Hadwin, shrugged. "He was sneaking through the woods by our camp. I almost didn't see him."

"But—where did he come from?" Only the same confused hum of speculation met his question. "Could it be dyed?" Carpason asked, looking again at the dark hair.

“If you’re asking if it could be a savage ploy, my lord, it no longer matters. This boy’s as good as dead.”

“You’re not supposed to attack without cause.”

“I didn’t do anything. He just fainted.”

Ignoring his lookout’s defense, Carpason knelt, taking the boy’s wrist between his fingers. A fast beat pounded under them, easily felt beneath the meatless skin covering sinew and bone. Thoughtfully, the lord looked again over those pale, flushed cheeks and parched, swollen lips.

Sighing, he ordered, “Give him some water, but don’t jostle him. In his state, he needs the rest. We’ll take him with us back to Mira. The king can decide what to do with him once we have time to interrogate him. At the moment, I’m not going to disregard the fact that he might be one of our enemy’s cleverer ploys. Death might lie in such an assumption.”

“Should we bind him?” Hadwin inquired, causing the lord to pause before turning away.

Looking again at the boy, however, Carpason shook his head. “Should he be a spy, he is still no threat physically. Do watch him, but should he truly be innocent, I don’t wish our caution to create instant enmity.”



As soon as the first rays of sun splattered through the canopy of trees, Lord Carpason commanded his men to break camp. Only the perimeter patrol and the mysterious boy, unconscious in the middle of the encampment, did nothing to help.

Sudden shouts of alarm from the patrollers caused Carpason to whip out his sword. Around him, the hiss of swords leaving scabbards echoed. Yet the men of Tarmlin had no time to organize before they were rushed by savages.

Carpason had one glance of their bright yellow hair, vengeful faces, and pillaged spears, swords and axes before his need to defend himself cut off his peripheral vision.

Freeing himself, he leapt onto a horse, calling to his sub-commanders, “Hadwin, Alten, Lindan! Gather your divisions! We mus—”

Above his enemies, he had an advantage, but he was forced to wheel his steed toward an attack. Atop one of Tarmlin's horses, a savage rammed the beast into Carpason's own, lunging at the lord. Carpason instantly sidestepped his mount, but proving their reputed horsemanship, the savage moved with him.

Still, there was a second's respite and in it the lord dropped to the ground, fleeing to a weapons cart. There, he yanked out a spear and flung it into his attacker's throat.

A glow on the edge of the camp caught his attention as the savage fell off the steed. Carpason barely registered that it was a large fire before a blazing arrow whooshed overhead. Crackling, it embedded itself into the weapons cart next to the lord, the first of many.

"Water!" Carpason cried while more arrows found other supply carts. Men rushed to fight the fire, yet smoke soon filled the air, blinding and choking everyone. Coughs and terrified shouts sounded around the lord. His own lungs clenched in pain.

Suddenly, the attack ebbed.

Taking advantage of the lull, Carpason renewed his assault while one of the knights nearby ordered, "See to the wagons! Shovel dirt over the fire!"

Wordlessly thanking the man, Carpason also gathered a group, found the remaining savages still fighting, and cut them down. Only when the sound of battle no longer echoed through the smoke and the lone shouts were of those trying to save the supplies did the lord call his men together. As one, the men attacked the fire that roared over their supplies and filled both lungs and air with its stench.



Afternoon sun shone through the last of the smoke as Carpason helped his blackened troops load the surviving supplies onto the salvageable wagons.

"Don't worry about the rest," he rasped. "Our water's gone along with half our supplies, if not more. Line up."

His order, although hardly heard, was spread through camp and, little by little, men began assuming their traveling formation.

It was not until the lord hauled himself back onto his horse that one knight questioned, "We must leave the dead behind, of course, but what of the boy?"

"B...?"

Carpason turned sharply back toward what remained of the camp. The dead cluttered the bases of trees and blood soaked the leaves, but there, buried under a savage corpse, Carpason spotted the stranger's black hair. Huffing, the lord snapped, "Retrieve him."

Finally, with troop readied and motionless boy safely in one of the mounted men's arms, Carpason started them back toward the capital in the long-rehearsed practice of infantry, followed by knights, then the remaining carts of armor, weapons, tools and tents, more knights, and then Carpason, followed by the same pattern in reverse order.

They stopped once by a small trickle of water to clear their throats of smoke. There, the lord approached the dark-haired stranger, whose unconscious form rested on the ground. It seemed almost ominous that the natives had not attacked him as well, yet that chest continued to rise and fall. Perhaps the enemy simply had not paid attention to unmoving lumps on the ground.

Stirring as the noble watched, the boy opened his dark blue eyes to stare at the trees overhead. Carpason stepped nearer, crouching beside the weak newcomer. "Our attackers do not wait for a proper introduction. We must be on the move before the hour. Can you ride?"

A sharp, indiscernible croak answered him, while the boy attempted to sit up. Every muscle quivered, yet he somehow managed. Watching for only a moment, the lord hailed one of his men, asking softly, "Are there any canteens remaining that can be filled?"

"There are spare canteens on the saddles, my lord," the soldier replied. "Would you like me to fetch some?"

Carpason nodded and a minute later he was gently supporting the boy to prevent him from choking while he sipped the reviving water.

“We’re ready, my lord,” someone informed Carpason from behind, receiving a nod.

“Line up, then.” As the man turned to relay the order, another brought the lord’s steed forward. Helping the boy to his feet, Carpason eased his support away only when he felt his charge steady beneath his hand.

“Come, you may ride,” the lord began to offer, halting in surprise as the boy shook his head.

“I don’t know how to ride.” Although still hoarse, the words came across clearly. Those words were contrary to the savages’ horsemanship, but it was the boy’s foreign accent that convinced the lord that his fears of a trap were unfounded.

“You don’t need to,” Carpason said. “I don’t think you are capable of walking beside the footmen, however.”

The boy’s eyes flashed and, with a slight flick of his head, he corrected the lord, “I walked here from the shore, and I prefer to be in full control of my direction.”

A minute passed in which the lord considered the boy. Carpason’s command had never been refuted before, however politely. Could the boy be that ignorant of authority, or that obstinate?

“Very well,” the lord finally decided. “We shall see if you can keep up with the pace. If not, the choice shall be taken from you. Is that fair?”

Once again, while his words were stated partly as a question, they were anything but. The boy’s dark blue eyes fully registered that with a challenging reply, but he simply inclined his head. Seconds later, they were again on the march.



The world seemed to tilt around Arnacin. He had counted on walking with difficulty, yet it proved even harder than he imagined. Concentrating solely on each laborious step, he noticed little else.

A horse’s piercing whinny was his only warning before something rammed into him. His knees gave way and he landed with a gasp in the leaves. The world turned black and he was only aware of what felt like hundreds of feet rushing around him.

As consciousness returned to him, he heard shouts, screams and whinnies amid the crunching of disturbed leaves. Slowly raising his head, the islander noticed a swarm of hide-bundled, thick-set opponents all hurrying directly toward the army's commander, ignoring everyone else in their path. His horse lay dying a few feet away, an arrow in her neck, while her rider fought for his life. The rest of the army engaged a wall of attackers both behind and in front of the commander and Arnacin, who remained unnoticed where he fell.

Despite the horrific skirmish writhing about him, unreality seemed to pass over the boy. He felt like one watching reflections in water. The daze broke as, with a scream that seemed to echo directly in his ear, a body thumped to the ground beside him. Blank eyes stared into Arnacin's and, with a gasp, he jerked away, wincing as something bit into his side. A blade lay beside him, blood trickling down its edges and running into the leaves.

Closing his eyes to the hideous sight, Arnacin turned back to the commander's struggle. The attackers were forcing their victim into the depths of the woods. Without backup against the mass pressing upon him, he could do nothing to gainsay their attempts at swift and easy murder. With a hasty glance at the rest of the troop still struggling futilely to break through their enemies, the islander knew he was the only one in any position to aid the commander.

With that in mind, Arnacin heaved himself to his feet and, lifting the cumbersome sword as best he could, he stepped toward the nearest ambusher.



Realizing that he was stepping farther away from the center of the fray, Carpason dropped to the ground and rolled toward the rest of his army, locked in battle with their opponents. This threw his own assailants off fleetingly, hardly allowing him to regain his feet, let alone free some of his men as he had intended. Now, trapped between the savages attacking him and those mutilating

his men, Carpason used his position to the best of his advantage, sidestepping in order to force his enemies' thrusts upon each other.

In the confusion that ensued when his attackers accidentally collided with their own men, Carpason dispatched a few more of his attackers, leaving him with only two. Yet it did not free his men.

His glance toward them betrayed him, as his feet were knocked out from under him. Swiftly, he blocked the sword flashing downward. The blades clashed inches from his neck. No room existed for parrying the next attack, which struck for his stomach. Death had arrived.

Mid-swing, the savage turned sharply, whirling his slashing blade with him. In a flash of green and black, the savage dropped to the ground, his turn unfinished. A blade protruded at an odd angle through his stomach. Scrambling to his feet to attack, Carpason paused. There stood the strange foreigner. Using the killing sword's hilt as a crutch, he was striving to keep himself on his feet.

"It's idiocy to keep routines—tells them exactly where to attack," the boy breathed, just before collapsing over his fallen opponent.

Ripping his gaze away from his unconscious rescuer, Carpason searched for the second attacker. That savage also lay dead with a jagged, faltering slice across his throat.

Glancing only once more in disbelief at the still boy at his feet, Carpason sought out the rest of the battle. His questions had to wait.



Night had fallen once again and the army had been forced to quit their hard march, light fires, and set guards. The attacks had not abated throughout the day. There, by a stream, they finally had the opportunity to look after their injured, although nothing could be done about the many bodies left where they fell during the day. Canteens were refilled at least, and the troop's thirst quenched.

"It's a treacherous business, my lord," one knight sighed, wincing as their field surgeon prodded his slashed shoulder. "I wish the savages would find a less effective method, but every time, they create a ruckus simply to entangle us and then launch their real

attack. At least it's likely safe to say that they had not prepared their normal poison today."

"I think they have lost their supply for the time being, during this manhunt for our group," Carpason said in weary agreement. "Once we return to the city, that respite shall be at an end. We can count on it. They will regrind whatever it is they use, mix it with whatever else—I don't even wish to know... But today..." He puffed in slight amusement. "Today, someone protected us."

Smiling himself, the knight joked, "After we lost about ten Lord Carpason's this afternoon..." He received a guilty glance from his lord but plowed on anyway. "I dare say, *someone* protected us. You say it wasn't your idea to switch the order and put other men in your place?"

"Not entirely," Carpason whispered, glancing over his shoulder to where the surgeon was now bending over the still, dark-haired boy. "I wonder where he came from and how he wound up on our shores."

His musing was not really meant to be answered, but, following his gaze, the knight shrugged. "Why does it matter, my lord?"

"Idle curiosity. Yet if not for him, I would lie dead. Some may call it 'luck,' but I wonder. He has no skill at swordplay and seemingly no knowledge of... politics or warfare. Yet he can sense a weakness in a plan without thought, so it appears, and possesses all the lightness of foot and keenness of eye that most of us lack without training. How so, I ask myself. How so? What distant land, homeland of the black hair, breeds such natural skill into its men, and why do they know nothing of the world?"

"I'm afraid he's the only one who could possibly answer and, somehow, I doubt he will," the knight supplied.

Noncommittal, Carpason groaned as he pushed himself to his battle-aching feet and joined the surgeon beside the motionless boy. "Is he all right?"

"I think so, my lord. He's starved and extremely dehydrated, but under careful and patient ministrations, I think he will be as good as new within a month or so."

"Will it be safe trying to feed him?"

“We’ll work up to it, I expect.” That said, the surgeon moved on to help other injured men.

Carpason watched him go and, when he turned back, found two dark blue eyes coming into focus on him from the haze of unconsciousness. Pain crossed those foreign features as the boy tried to push himself up.

“No, don’t,” the lord whispered, gently pushing the boy back down.

Too weak to protest, the boy submitted to the light force, closing his eyes again. Regarding him, Carpason attempted, “I realize I don’t have a name for you, or know anything of who or what you are...” He left the sentence invitingly open, waiting.

Almost contrary to his expectations, the boy breathed, his voice clearer although just as soft as before, “Arnacin. I’m a shepherd boy.”

Carpason could feel his eyebrows rise in surprise as he replied, “Really?” With a teasing smile, he added, “I suppose your flock was stolen and so you hired the first ship in hopes of finding them. You must own good wool.”

A slight smile flickered on his face as Arnacin admitted, as if it were simply a fact, “The best.”

Those dark eyes again met the lord’s, this time with a sad or scared glimmer Carpason could not discern. “The ship I came in is my own, though—and it’s lying off the coast... of wherever I was last night... if it was last night.”

For another minute, the lord was stunned speechless. Then he muttered, “Captain of your own ship!”

“Not really.” Arnacin smiled. “Not in those terms, just sailor of my own ship—but you’re not likely to understand unless you see it.”

“Still, Arnacin, son of...”

“Bozzic, of Enchantress Island.”

Carpason nodded his gratitude, finishing, “Son of Bozzic the shepherd. You are the most unfathomable boy I think I have ever met. Shepherd boy, sailor, captain and not captain, and whatever else. I have the feeling I’ve only broken the surface.”

Blushing slightly, Arnacin mentioned, "My sister would instantly add 'fool' to that list."

"Well, she's wrong then," Carpason mused and Arnacin glanced away.

Silence fell for a minute, while the lord continued to regard the boy thoughtfully. Then he pulled his short sword from his belt, offering the weapon. "Here, this may help you."

Glancing at the gift, its gold-covered sheath patterned with a canopy under which the long-necked bird of Mira stretched its wings, the boy shook his head. "You should know from earlier that I cannot use one."

"On the contrary..." Carpason started before, grinning, he compromised. "More or less. But to my knowledge, shepherds don't protect their flocks with their bare hands."

"My family is comprised of archers."

"Quite skilled ones, I'd guess."

"Well, my sister and I pride ourselves as such, if that is any answer from people who think too highly of themselves."

Unsure if the boy was joking or not, Carpason laughed uncertainly. "Trouble is the day a girl counts herself good—"

"Deadly, sir," the boy swiftly corrected, a sudden coldness in his eyes and tone. "Her skill is not to be taken lightly."

Again regarding the boy, Carpason nodded. "As you wish, Arnacin, son of Bozzic. Perhaps I can see your view." Indeed, looking at the boy, a deadly sister did not seem all too unlikely. "I'll bring some water and then you should go back to sleep. When we reach the capital, I'll see that someone retrieves the remains of your ship."

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