

UNDER THE RIVER

by

John P. Nordin
jpn@jpnordin.com

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CHAPTER 1

He struggled out of the water into a different world. He hadn't meant to go in the water at all.

In the second or two it took for his foot to slip off the rock and for him to plunge into the water and his life to change there were many things he did not do. His life did not flash before his eyes, either the life he fantasized or, still less, the life he had and hated.

Before he slipped he had been stuck. Endlessly he went around the events of the day, his anger growing each time. He was walking alongside a creek that ran in a tiny canyon. Cottonwood trees arched over the creek, providing cool, dark relief from the baking heat of the day. Walking hidden on the damp, firm dirt also offered relief from the work of another day spent avoiding the attention of the class bullies, getting through gym

class without being embarrassed, covering his shyness with girls, and of trying to hide what he was thinking from his teachers. "Damn teachers know less about stuff than I do."

Today he had failed in his efforts to avoid being noticed bringing a new conflict with the dinosaur assistant principal. He had gone to the river first instead of going home to delay telling his parents. He knew they wouldn't understand. They never did. He hated school, them, his life, his clothes, the whole human world. If only he was someone else, wealthy, better looking, smoother, or from a more connected family. He was moving abruptly, imagining that the fire in his brain would leap out and consume those he hated. Later, he wondered what he had been complaining about. Still later, he knew why it was important.

He fell headlong, stretching full length over the stream. Time stopped, every sense extended, wind roaring, he hung weightless for an infinite instant. It passed and he smacked the water. He was startled by cold, deep water, the creek was rarely even knee-deep, what was this? No swimmer, he trashed around trying to get his feet under him. A swift current grabbed him, spun him around and carried him rapidly downstream. He was getting excited, flailing about with little purpose. A frantic burst of paddling brought him to the surface long enough for a quick gasp of air. Before the icy water pulled him back a brief image of a starless dark sky, vast and indifferent, imprinted itself on him. He was spun wildly in some strong turbulence, lost track of which way was up and swallowed some water. Suddenly, his right side scraped against a wall. His disorientation resolved itself; he had been cast onto a hard sandbank when the river turned sharply. He forced his numbed legs to work, and on all fours crawled up the bank and half out of the water.

He remained on all fours, gasping and spitting. Gradually his pounding heart calmed and his surroundings came into focus. Standing up he splashed out of the river and on to a grassy bank. He turned around, confused. The river was twenty times the size of his creek. The wide valley and range of hills far beyond the river did not look familiar, and he had walked a long way downstream before. Had he been swept all the way down the tributary to the main river? That was at least as impossible as the deep and rapid current he had been in. It occurred to him to check the time and he got the biggest shock of all.

Not only wasn't his watch on his wrist but his clothes were different. His plain shirt was gone, replaced by a rough handmade affair with loose sleeves and elaborate embroidery. His pants were similarly altered, being now loose-cut, tied at the waist with a braided leather cord. His shoes were really moccasins. His glasses were gone but his vision was clearer. "What the hell is happening!" he said, looking around at nothing.

He walked slowly up the remainder of the grassy bank. It soon leveled out and he saw that there was a dirt road paralleling the river. But it was an odd sort of road, without the two or three ruts like all the country roads he was familiar with. It was just a single path but it was too wide to be just a cow path or foot trail. The individual trees, rocks and plants looked familiar but the total effect was one of strangeness.

He tried to calm down, be scientific and assess the possibilities. He could be dreaming. If so, this was the most vivid dream ever, with smells and touch going full blast. He could have knocked himself out, falling like that, and gotten amnesia. Except, he knew his name, knew his parents, remembered what he had done yesterday. Maybe all that was a

false memory and now he was awake! But, he could remember walking down to the stream, the fall into the water, thrashing around.

He had been walking on the road in the upstream direction, assuming that was the way he had come. He heard some noise behind him, spun around and saw that a rider was almost on top of him. All Gary could do was step hurriedly aside. He stood, rooted to the ground as the horseman came nearer. The rider was dressed in the same unrefined, loose fashion as Gary but not as richly. He was tall and rough, tanned, with a heavy beard. He stared at Gary from under a wide brimmed hat. The horseman never really stopped but for a moment the rider and Gary seemed frozen, looking at each other. Before Gary could form a question, the man started and stared, then wheeled about, spurred his horse and was off at a gallop.

What to do? He was going to have to talk to somebody sometime, he couldn't spend the rest of his life wandering around out here. He stood still a moment longer, then decided to climb a knoll that the road had been skirting. It took a couple of minutes to scramble up to the treeless summit and Gary was surprised not to feel winded. He felt his legs and stomach. He was definitely leaner and more muscular than ... than before but still no athlete. From the top of the hill he had a good view all around. The river flowed through a vast shallow valley, the road paralleling upstream as far as he could see. The land at first struck him as farmland or grassland but it had a wilder look to it than the farms he was used to seeing. He saw no sign of a city but thought he saw a few individual farm houses. Turning and looking downstream gave much the same impression but Gary thought he saw signs of a city far off. He stood there glancing in the direction of the sun.

At least it seemed the same sun, heating the same air that wafted about him, bringing the smells of a warm early summer day.

Should he go upstream, and approach an individual farm house hoping that hospitality outweighed suspicion, or go downstream to possibly a big anonymous city, where one could look around without attracting attention? But he was going to have to eat and he didn't seem to have anything that looked like money. Standing there, it sunk in on him that he was the only person he could see in the whole vast area. He felt exposed, a dark bug in the middle of a white floor. With a horrible pang of homesickness he charged down the hill to the river, splashing in and diving under. Take me back, he thought, I want to go home. He spent frantic time in the river looking diligently for the spot where he had washed up but nothing like that swift cold current appeared no matter how many times he tried. It occurred to him that he might have to fall in accidentally. Try as he might, he could find nothing and physical exhaustion soon led him to seek the bank and to lie in the sun. At least that still felt good, like home.

When he had recovered he felt resolved to make the best of it and decided to seek the farms. He set off up the road. The sun soon dried him and his spirits rose a bit. He had been walking some ten minutes when faint sounds behind him made him turn. A party of five or six horsemen were coming up the path from downstream, the direction the lone rider had gone. Cautious, Gary stepped off the track a ways into the grass and crouched down. It was tall enough to hide him but as flat as the land was, there was no point in running.

The men had stopped near where Gary had first climbed out of the river. That was now far enough away that he really couldn't tell what they were doing but it looked like searching. One horseman drove his reluctant horse to the top of the knoll and looked around. Gary crouched lower in the grass and began to try to slide sideways, away from the road. He thought that perhaps strange people walking about were not well received here. It reinforced his notion to try the farmhouse rather than the city.

The group was coming up the trail now and Gary decided he couldn't get much farther away without creating such a disturbance that he would be noticed. He lay down in the grass, trying not to flatten too large an area. He hoped he could watch the men go by and learn something. He was within earshot if they spoke up. The group trotted up the trail until they were almost opposite Gary when they slowed down and stopped. Coincidence? Don't move, don't even breath.

The lead rider turned to the next. "Do you think the prince has come this way?"

Two thoughts hit Gary simultaneously: The Prince! and they're speaking English! The idea that he wouldn't understand people had not even occurred to him but the relief was still tremendous. They said 'the prince,' so they weren't looking for him after all.

The second man spoke, rather loudly, Gary thought, "It's likely, my lord, that he kept on walking the way he had been. He must be getting tired and hungry though."

The third piped up in a strong voice, "I hope he isn't wandering, not knowing who he is."

"If he is carrying the royal emblem about his neck, as the rider said, it should remind him."

Emblem? He did have a necklace but had taken no notice of it so far. Hung on a finely worked metal chain was a round amulet. Gary looked at it but its symbols meant nothing to him. This was getting stranger by the minute.

"He may think we mean him harm," the man was practically bellowing. "But our carrying the same emblem should reassure him."

Suddenly Gary figured it out. They must have seen him from the hill with its view over the flat land and were trying to coax him out. They did seem to be wearing necklaces similar to his. Well hell, he thought, if this is a trick it's too good for me. He stood up and began to walk to the road.

"Prince Esgard! Your Highness!" the second man seemed genuinely happy. He was short and round, nearly bald, of middle age. He was wearing a long brown cloak that got tangled in his mount's reigns as he struggled to get down. He met Gary halfway to the road and fell to one knee. "It is Your Highness. You've come back! The Creator be praised!"

Gary was trying to absorb all this, uncomfortable at this show of deference. He didn't know whether to play the game or come clean. "Get up," he said.

The man stood and looked eagerly at Gary. When he saw no sign of recognition and no further question he ventured, "It is I, Bars. You remember me, Your Highness." There was a moment's silence.

"You did have quite a bit more hair when His Highness departed us," the leader of the group said, slowly and with no warmth.

"Bars," said Gary, not able to commit himself.

"Do you remember me, Your Highness?" the leader turned to Gary, and Gary thought the words "Your Highness" were said with a sneer.

The jig's up, he thought and was a hairsbreadth from saying "No," when out of the corner of his eye, he caught Bars gesturing. Bars was saying very faintly, "Locar, Locar" Hoping that it wasn't all just one long name, Gary looked at the leader and said, "Locar?"

It apparently was close enough because the leader impatiently drew his horse around. "Let's go, I want to be back by dark." He forced his horse through the group and waited at the far side facing the downstream direction.

Bars nodded happily, smiling, giving him some equivalent of the "thumbs up" sign, or so Gary supposed. Again, Gary thought that if this was a scam it was a good one.

Bars said, "We have brought your favorite horse, Sire." He hustled on back to the road, rounding on the left side of a brown horse of medium height. He stood there, his back bent, his hands knitted together, as if to help Gary up.

Finally, something that made sense, Gary thought, I do know how to get on a horse. As he approached, he looked over the bridle and saddle arrangements. At first they seemed completely different but by the time he had come near the horse, Gary had figured out that there really were things that served as stirrups, saddle, reins, and even a saddle horn. Gary ignored Bars, put his foot in the stirrup and swung up in one easy motion, helped by the unexpected strength and agility of this new body. "Let's go," he said to a dumfounded but admiring, Bars.

They set off down the road. On the way Gary and Bars talked a great deal. That is, Bars volunteered a great deal and Gary tried to keep the conversation going with

noncommittal responses. Gary learned that his name was Esgard, commonly Esgard the Younger, though who Esgard the Elder was, was not made clear. They were riding to the King's castle. Everyone would welcome Esgard back, he had been gone more than 18 undetermined units of time. And while learning this, Gary-Esgard felt he had learned nothing. He was a prince but who were the other princes and king? And while this place was beginning to sound like medieval kingdoms he had read about, what if it wasn't exactly the same? What if this surface similarity hid a utter alienness and he'd fallen into a trap? Some of what Bars was saying sounded like a summary of recent events but Gary had no context in which to understand it.

Gary's confusion was still strong when they came into the outskirts of town. It was not very big and was dominated by a large stone castle. Bars volunteered that the castle was their destination. Gary-Esgard got the feeling that he must have vanished before, from their point of view, because it sure seemed that Bars was trying to cover for his "amnesia." Further evidence of that came from Locar who occasionally turned and murmured comment to his companions. The words were always phrased respectfully but Gary had the feeling that he was being laughed at.

As they passed up the final blocks to the castle, small groups of people pressed against the buildings to stay out of the way and looked at the riders. To Gary they didn't seem overjoyed to see the return of Prince Esgard the Younger, though Bars assured him, while urging him to wave, that they had longed to see him again. Everybody took off their hats or made a slight bow as they passed. Once inside the castle, his discomfort grew. It

was obvious that the workers were not impressed by royalty and he felt watched, examined, evaluated. Yet everyone was outwardly polite and kept bowing as he passed.

They got off the horses and the prince was escorted to a room in the upper reaches of the castle. Apparently the whole set of rooms in this wing was his but it seemed a lot of people lived with him as there was a steady traffic up and down the long corridor. As they entered his room Bars said, "I know you must be tired after your long journey, I will leave you to freshen up before the council meeting." With that he withdrew, leaving Gary to wonder what council meeting and when.

He inspected his quarters. He was in a large room, furnished vaguely like a living room with tapestries hung from stone walls and massive, rude chairs and tables set about. It had a shuttered window that when opened revealed an expansive view of the town and the fields beyond it. Gary crossed to the side and saw that what had at first appeared to be a narrow tapestry on a wall, in fact covered a doorway. He pushed it aside and went into a bedroom. A high huge bed dominated the room. There was a pitcher of water, a basin and some towels. He washed and then went back into the main room in time to hear a knock at the door. He went to open it but before he got there it was opened by an astonished servant girl who immediately dropped to one knee and let fall the pile of blankets and towels she was carrying.

"Oh, it is you, I mean m'lord, you have come, begging your pardon."

"Let me help you," he automatically had bent over to help her pick up the blankets.

"Oh no, Sire, don't sully yourself, I will do it, I thought I had time. That is, before you came back." He backed away from the door and gestured for her to come in. She ran

inside, put everything away, and ran back to the door, stopping only to drop another curtsy before backing out and pulling the door shut behind her. She couldn't have been more than fifteen.

Gary was estimating his chances at passing for Prince Esgard, and had just discovered he couldn't lock the door when another knock sounded. He opened it with some irritation. It was Bars. "Oh Sire, you needn't do that, just say 'come', you needn't bother yourself. Well, it is time to dress for the council." He stood there expectantly.

Oh nuts, Gary-Esgard thought, just wishing to be left alone. Aloud he said, "I don't know what to wear." As soon as he said it he regretted its crudeness and directness. Bars' eyes lost some of their luster. "May I recommend, sire?"

"Yes, please."

Bars led the way to the bedroom and to a closet behind another tapestry. How many false walls did this place have? Bars began a long incomprehensible discourse on the history and significance of each garment. At last a garment was selected and he was outfitted in a heavy floor length robe of green and yellow. "Your colors, m'lord," Bars assured him. Around his neck went several medals hung on chains, also very heavy. The new prince felt ridiculous. He suddenly wanted to sneak down to this council, hide in the back and say nothing, like he would have done at any meeting back home. This fantasy was rudely shattered by the arrival of three gentlemen all wearing matching but less elaborate versions of Gary's outfit.

The three new arrivals escorted the reluctant prince down to the central part of the castle. Gary-Esgard had wanted the helpful Bars along but was ever so gently reminded

that the council was for nobility only. His new companions were silent the entire trip. They entered a large meeting room to a fanfare and an announcement. "His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Esgard, Duke of Westvail and Knight Commander of the undefeated faithful!" So that's who he was. The title's heavier than this gown, he thought.

They walked into the room and Gary became more uncomfortable as he realized that everyone was standing and looking at him. There were three rings of chairs in a semicircle facing five more elaborate chairs in a row. Chair number two was occupied by a young man, wearing the same style of outfit as Gary but done in red and yellow. He was sitting in a chair with a high back also done in red and yellow. Since chair number four was done in green and yellow, and his entourage was bearing down on it, Gary supposed he would have to sit there. He was horrified, he'd be in the open with not even a table to hide behind. He made to sit down but had the uncomfortable feeling that the ten or fifteen people in the audience were waiting for something. He nodded briefly at them and sat down. After a momentary hesitation and exchanged glances, they did likewise. His companions went and sat in the third row. Gary turned to the other man and said in a low voice, "Hello."

The man turned slightly and said with little warmth and without directly looking at him, "Welcome." Thus rebuffed, Gary turned to examining the room. It told him nothing. Another fanfare sounded followed by an announcement for "His Royal Highness, King of Kelfar, Esgard the Wise, Guardian of the Warriors, Maker of Laws, Beloved Master of the Realm, Defender of the True Faith." All stood, Gary lagging a bit behind the man in chair number two. A middle aged, bearded man strode in, making light work of hauling what

must be the combined weight of Gary and his silent companion's clothing. Esgard the Wise made for the chair between the two, acknowledged the crowd with a wave and sat down.

The King immediately turned to Gary and said in a soft, friendly tone, "So you are back, my son. I regret there wasn't time to see you before this. I will come to you later." He turned back before Gary could reply and announced, "Let the council begin."

Some official arose and began to talk. However, Gary was still reacting to "my son." Eventually, he began to focus on the debate. As best he could make out, Kelfar (was that this country?) was being threatened by the Nakfis, the "foul, evil, despoiled, repellent, debauched Nakfis" to be exact. Various responses were discussed but since he didn't understand the geography, the situation or the governmental departments it was very hard to follow. At one point Locar—he was here too—stood and asked what Esgard the Younger recommended. Gary froze, staring wildly at Locar, his mind a total blank. But before Esgard the Younger was found out, King Esgard interposed with a firm statement that Esgard was just returned and couldn't be expected to commit himself to a view. Thank you, Sir! Gary thought.

The council went on for hours, or so it seemed. Without a watch Gary-Esgard had no way of telling. Servants came after a time and lit candles in stands on the wall that gave a gloomy, flickering light. The King seemed not to want war but to have no ready alternatives. The other man sitting on the King's right was urging that they take the initiative. His voice was rising with impatience. Some people in the body of the council, Gary guessed they were from near the invasion route, appealed for help. Eventually the

meeting broke up without agreement. He was escorted out second, after the King but before the other man, so he couldn't find out who he was.

He was afraid he would have to eat in some big dining hall with everyone watching every mouthful but was relieved when it turned out that a privilege of royalty was private dining in his own rooms. He was worn out even though he was relieved to have escaped the meeting without saying a word. He ate sparingly of the plain but generously supplied food. Halfway through the meal the door was flung open and the King came through. Uncertain how to receive him, Gary stood awkwardly until pressed by the King to sit. The staff was dismissed with an authoritative word from the King and the two were alone.

"How are you," the King asked, staring directly at Gary-Esgard.

"OK, fine I guess."

The king paused. "You were away a long time. Some had begun to give up hope of your return."

"Oh," he didn't know what to say to that, reluctant to lie but not willing to unburden himself with the truth.

"Do you remember any of this?" the king was still staring intently at him.

Unsure if the King meant the trip or what now surrounded him, Gary hesitated, looking around. "Ah, I mean, you mean this?" He heard a slight waver in his voice.

The elder man seemed to make a decision. "You don't remember us at all, even me." It was a statement, and now that this fact was out on the table, Gary was overcome with a desire to tell somebody his dilemma. It was too much, he wasn't going to be able to keep up the illusion, even though they seemed to expect him to need help.

"It's not that I don't remember this, I mean I don't, but I do remember something else. I mean, this morning I got up, on Earth, not here, I went to high school, I came home. I went walking along a river and I slipped on a rock and fell in. The river kinda took me under and when I got out I was here. In this country, I mean. And I was wearing different clothes, and didn't have my glasses and here I am. Who are you? Where is this place, anyway?" He stopped, conscious that he was blathering and that his voice was cracking. He was most ashamed that tears were welling up and tried to hide them. He looked at the King, daring him to say something, feeling not like a rich young prince but a small boy.

The King turned his head, and intently studied a piece of fruit on the table, giving Gary a chance to quickly wipe his eyes. He spoke, "You say that you have never been here before?"

"Never. I've never been here before. Is this Earth? Ah, I mean, what planet is this?" What a stupid question, he thought.

"Some of your words are strange to me, planet, earth, high school."

Oh great, he thought, I could get burned at the stake like Galileo or something. History had not been his best subject. He suddenly became afraid that the King's calm manner was a way of drawing him on to more and greater indiscretions. He temporized, "Everybody acts like this has happened before, my disappearing. Has it?"

"Yes, several times." The King bent forward, picked up the same fruit from the table and began turning it over in his hands. "Ever since your mother died when you were nine you have been running away. Sometimes for a few days, sometimes longer. Each time you came back it was a different story, sometimes that you couldn't remember,

sometimes that you had been kidnapped, different stories. The last two times you were seen heading east towards Nakfis and this caused concern and resentment. Many have doubted your stories. But always you have remembered and come home. Before this."

Gary was trying to absorb this. His mother dead? East to Nakfis, into the enemy land? More disappearances? "How long was I away this time?"

"Eighteen months. A year and a half."

That's odd, he remembered that before they had used a word he couldn't understand, now it was a year and a half. Anyway, the king didn't seem about to call the guards and have him hauled away. "Well something different happened this time. It's not just a new story. There must be some way to prove it. What was Esgard good at? In school? And what was he bad at?"

The King seemed amused. "Children of royalty do not go to the common schools. You had a tutor, when you would listen to him." He smiled at Gary-Esgard, eyes alight with some private amusement. "You were not a good student but perhaps your best subject was singing and your worst math."

Gary took heart, he certainly couldn't sing and his math was all right, especially here, he figured, where they must be a thousand years behind earth. "Well, I'm all right in math and science so maybe I can show you. . ."

"Not me," the king laughed, "but I will have your tutor test you. What counts more to me is your speech and your attitude. My son would have picked a fight with me already, and would have spoken loudly, often and ignorantly at the council. If you are Esgard, you have changed greatly. And if you are not. . .", he let the sentence trail off, making a gesture

Gary had never seen and yet understood to be indicating that such a problem would be dealt with at the appropriate time.

"Well, I'm not Esgard, my name is Gary Jackson, and I don't understand any of this. You're my father, right? Who was that other man at the council, sitting next to us?"

The King turned and looked at him again with the appraising look. "That was your younger brother, Thandar."

"Oh God." Younger brother, he was elder. Were there any others? Didn't look like it. That made him the eldest son. This raised a much bigger question but one he couldn't come out and ask directly. "I'm the eldest son? There aren't any other brothers and sisters, right?" The King nodded. "I mean, when a King dies . . . I mean. . ."

The King interrupted. "When a King dies, he is succeeded by his eldest child. In this case you."

"I hope you're real healthy."

At this the King really laughed, roaring until Gary-Esgard was embarrassed. "Yes, I seem healthy." He stood. "But there is a different more immediate problem. While you were gone, Thandar got used to being the eldest. He will resent you and your behavior which has always been rather, shall we say, erratic. The nobles will speculate wildly to decide with which of you they should try to ingratiate themselves. The ordinary citizens will be happy you are back. But if what you say is true, there is much you must learn, and quickly." He turned and faced Gary-Esgard, looking intently and under that gaze, Gary-Esgard shrank to just Gary. "I think it would be wise if you said nothing to anyone, anyone," he emphasized, "of what you just told me. Tell those who press you that you are

tired and confused. You have said that before. People will be expecting you to sulk for a few days."

With the King's words, thoughts of politics, conspiracy, and spying came to Gary's mind. The security he had hoped he might feel with a high position and wealth was not there. Instead he felt a target. "Can I trust anyone?"

"Bars, your servant, is devoted to you and would do you no harm knowingly but he is not the most discrete. I will find a teacher for you who can be trusted. And I hope you will trust me."

Gary wasn't sharp enough, or smooth enough, to pick up on this opening, instead he asked "What about Thandar?"

"Let me talk to him first. His loyalty to me, our family and our country is fierce. But he should be more than a good soldier; he should be your friend. That will take time." He moved abruptly. "I must go, I have meetings yet tonight. Stay in your rooms. I will insure that no one bothers you tonight. In the morning I will send a tutor. Goodnight." He left softly and Gary was alone and the room seemed a little darker.

Gary finished the meal and said nothing to the servants who carried it away. Bars came and asked if he needed anything but Gary was now reluctant to say anything to anybody so he sent him away. Night had fully come and the room was lit by several smoky candles. Gary saw the ceiling was absolutely black with soot. He went to the window and looked out and was startled not to see the city lit up. But of course, there were no electric lights.

He turned, suddenly restless, and looked about the room. In one corner a desk that caught his eye for the first time. On it were several books. He sat at the heavy wooden chair and pulled the first book to him. It was a substantial volume, large and thick. It had not been used for a long time; dust coated its leather binding. Gary's first surprise was that it was hand written. No printing press. His second shock was that he could read. Still, the problem was the individual letters, which when studied closely failed to look like English letters. It wasn't just the handwriting. Finally he figured it out. He was reading but he wasn't reading English. This was the native language and alphabet but with his new body had come new skills. There was some leakage, because Gary could remember, or thought he could, what English looked like. He traced an alphabet just to make sure. That must be why he understood the king to say eighteen months the second time. It took a little while to make the switch. So this was what learning another language was like. Only this wasn't like learning it, rather like remembering knowledge he'd forgotten.

But although he could read the book, he couldn't understand it. It seemed to be a story but it could be history, myth, anything. The other books were similar. He was too overwhelmed by all this to sit and study any one in particular so he roamed about his two rooms, looking under every tapestry for doorways. He discovered a few more books and blankets but not much else.

He returned to the desk and looked again. There was something funny about the stories. He sort of remembered them, as if he had read them a long time ago but couldn't remember how they came out. They were what he would have called fairy stories. Tales

of brave knights, fair ladies. All that junk, he thought. I bet there isn't any good sci-fi in the place.

He supposed that a hero would now sneak out of the room, explore and discover some terrible secret hidden in the castle. He opened the door and stepped into a dark hallway. Of course, no candles. He went back and picked one up and holding it above his head, looked up and down the hallway. A bundle of darkness at the far end stirred and got up. "Yes, Your Highness." A servant.

"No, no, nothing." Gary retreated inside. Nuts. Some hero he was. He'd had enough adventure for one day. After another look around he blew out the candles, undressed and went to sleep.

The King walked down the hallway towards his own chambers, not sure how to interpret Esgard's words. Could this really be true? A different person returned in what was undoubtedly Esgard's body? Certainly the chronicles contained far more dramatic stories of magic than this although he couldn't recall an exact parallel. It would not be wise to consult the court magicians, he didn't want this problem spread all over the castle before he knew what he was dealing with.

He felt his son to be telling the truth, or at least the truth as his son understood it, but he had learned through bitter experience not to jump to conclusions. A tutor might be advisable regardless of what was going on. If what his son said were true, the boy desperately needed a tutor. If he was lying, a tutor might discover it. Esgard had two tutors. One had been older, a stiff, precise man of the old, old school, impervious to Esgard's tricks but totally without warmth or sympathy. That wouldn't be satisfactory now.

The second tutor had been a young teacher named Sonjar. She had taught his son several years ago but it had not gone well. Esgard found her serious intellectual demeanor and her slight, thin, shy presence to be an irresistible target for teasing and pretended flirting. It would be interesting to see if she now provoked the same reaction. If not, it would be more evidence that his son was telling the truth and that this was not his son. She would also be a good tutor, intelligent but more gentle and flexible than the older man.

His son's return came at a bad time. He admitted to himself that he had a brief hope this afternoon that the report was false, and Esgard wasn't returning. They were going to be attacked by Nakfis. He knew he was a good king, able to resolve an argument, get agreement, inspire. He looked out for the peasants, controlled the graft but he was not a war king. Thandar had the drive, self-confidence and aggressiveness to be one. In Esgard's absence, no one would object to Thandar leading the army while the king stayed behind and concerned himself with logistics and the economy. But with Esgard here, he would be expected to lead the fight. And Esgard was the worst of choices, self-centered, unreliable and probably a coward. So the King would have to lead the army himself to avoid giving it to Esgard. He didn't look forward to it. He had no ready answer if Esgard really was a stranger.

He had several ministers clamoring for meetings with him yet tonight. He hadn't been king for so long without learning how to avoid worrying about that upon which he had no facts to act. So for tonight he thrust Esgard out of his mind.

CHAPTER 2

He had fallen into the river again, and the same cold swift current laid its chilling grip on him. But this time, when he bobbed to the surface, drew a breath and saw the dark sky he did not sink again. The water was viscous, heavy as mercury; it supported him with his head and neck clear and dry, leaving him floating in the middle of a vast sea. Everything was shades of dark gray. To the horizon in every direction the water stretched, dim and unmoving, flat as glass. Overhead was the full hemisphere, broken by no cloud or moon, containing only a few weak stars that provided the barest glimmer of reflection on the water. The air was still. He knew he wouldn't sink, and he knew that nothing would change. Here he would stay, conscious and unsleeping, for all eternity.

Gary woke with a start and sat up in bed. He reached for the bedside clock and then remembered where he was. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed. It was dark in the room, as dark as his dream, and there were no lights to turn on. If he wanted light, he supposed he would have to holler for a servant to bring a candle. He got up and peeked around the heavy window curtains at the indistinct outline of the town below. There was nothing to see, so he fell back into the bed.

When the morning light woke him, he was groggy beyond toleration. Gary usually woke suddenly; he was proud of getting up just minutes before the alarm went off. He was beginning to wonder what else he had inherited along with Esgard's body. Yesterday he had felt like the same old Gary but this morning alien thoughts played around the edge of

his mind. I should have sent word for Elisera, or Sheya or both. He shook his head wishing it would clear. Who were they? Servants, relatives or lovers? He didn't know.

A hearty knock sounded at the door. He scrambled to throw on some clothes before yelling, somewhat uncertainly, "Come!" It was Bars again. With the now expected buoyant good cheer he led Gary through dressing, breakfast and suggestions for the day without Gary once having to look the fool. Bars left, and Gary sat and waited. Bars had said that a tutor was coming within the hour. He wasn't sure how this was going to work. In class he usually just let it all go by until he could have a chance to be alone and work the problems. He was also afraid to let slip what he knew, since their science here wasn't that advanced. But if he was going to convince everyone that he was from somewhere else, he was going to have to use his earth knowledge.

Another knock more tentative this time and in came Sonjar. She was tall and slight, somewhere between late adolescence and early adulthood. Blond hair reaching below her shoulders framed a face with sharp features. She stood clutching two books to her breast. When the King had come to her room last evening she was frightened. No one even close to that rank had ever been down that corridor before, let alone to see her. Though she had taught royalty and nobility, she, like all servants, vanished with the day's end.

The King had gently asked permission to come in and she could only nod. He closed the door carefully behind him, moved a couple of books from her rickety chair, sat down and explained his request. His son was back, he said in a soft voice, but it was not his son and he needed her help. He asked if she was willing to tutor Esgard not only in academic subjects but about life in Kelfar as well, and she felt it really was a question, with

an answer of 'no' as well as 'yes'. She said yes and he smiled and thanked her and explained that she must be absolutely sure not to tell or imply to anyone but him how the studies went or why there was anything unusual about this tutoring. While he was saying this his voice lost its softness and acquired a tone of finality without becoming harsh. She had blurted out a nervous question about her other classes and had been told this would now be her only duty.

She had encountered some skepticism from her headmistress, a severe woman who saw it as her first duty to keep the frequent contact with nobility from giving her commoner staff ambitions above their station. But Sonjar, taking resolve from the Kings' visit, had told her to go see the King if she didn't believe her, and the old woman, whose bullying of those below her reflected her fear of those above, capitulated.

So Sonjar was here. Esgard had not been her favorite student. Quick in all the unimportant ways, he had shown aptitude for card tricks, flirting, music, to be sure, but little else. She had not been skilled at fending off his advances, embarrassed even though she knew full well that they were done only for the sake of embarrassing her. But that was two years ago. And he was not Esgard, or so the King thought. It seemed unlikely but the King was not often fooled.

She looked at him. He stood behind a chair, hand on the top cross member. He didn't look like the old Esgard, he looked surprised at her entrance and uncertain what to do. "I'm Sonjar," she said.

"Yes. Ah, come in please. I'm, ah, Esgard, I guess." he blushed at his awkwardness.

They sat down and she began to find out what he did and didn't know. It soon became apparent that he really seemed to know nothing of Kelfar geography or history, so she told him about Kelfar and its three neighbors. Their country was of roughly triangular shape, formed by the lower drainage area of the river from which Esgard had come. It was bounded on the West by the sea, and North and South by two mountain ranges. The northern kingdom beyond the mountains was long an ally of Kelfar but now ruled by a weak and vacillating king. The southlands were also an ally and in strong hands but sparsely populated.

The east was a different matter; the proverb had it that "the river and trouble comes from the east." Before the triangle was fully closed, the valley floor gave way to hills and then to mountains. This was the beginning of Nakfis, a high cold land of sharp-peaked mountains and gray skies and it had been an enemy of Kelfar for as long as history could be remembered. Over the years many wars had come and gone, destroying what the previous generations had built and leaving a fresh set of graves to grieve over. The Nakfis rulers were obsessed by the desire for an outlet to the sea and to gain control of the port at the river's mouth and the command over commerce it held. Diplomacy in Kelfar consisted largely of keeping the northern and southern kingdoms as allies to offset Nakfis. Since neither neighbor was blessed by good lands and were often poor, keeping them happy was often expensive to Kelfar.

Trouble was brewing from the east like one of the Nakfis storms. Nakfis was again in the hands of strong and ruthless men, as testified by the occasional murdered body that would float down the river to beach itself on a Kelfar farm.

There were other lands, farther away and only dimly known. Whatever the word for globe was in this language, Esgard couldn't get the idea across. Sonjar, despite her obvious concern for accuracy in many things seemed incurious about what lay beyond those countries that affected Kelfar.

Esgard thought that this sure felt like a medieval kingdom. He had no idea if he had gone forward or backward in time or simply sideways to a different place, but in substance this was a feudal land. Everyone had a place, determined at birth. With that place went clothes, actions, jobs, type of house and even food. A small group of hereditary rulers and their genealogy seemed to comprise all of recorded history. What happened to intelligent people from the lowest class, Esgard inquired. Sonjar said with no trace of mockery or self-consciousness that they became teachers, clerks to high officials, or went mad. It had never occurred to him that most people in these countries were peasants or servants.

The two of them also studied science and math together. Here Esgard was a quick study, if that was the right word for somebody who seemed to be remembering as much as or more than he was learning. To Esgard, their science seemed primitive and disorganized, being more observation than theory. His head seemed to have two sets of knowledge in it, Earth's and Kelfar's. Sometimes he got them mixed up, sometimes he brought Sonjar up short with some question from a completely different perspective. Their math seemed very familiar, yet different, as if everything he had known had been arranged in a different way. Despite these problems it was obvious to Sonjar that this Esgard knew much more in these areas than the old one. Not only knew more but learned faster. The king had alerted her to

watch for things like this. "Anyone can feign ignorance; few can feign knowledge," he had said.

As the days went by Esgard fell into new routines. While he came to be more a Kelfarian he never forgot Gary and Earth. As first he had lain awake nights trying to remember everything, afraid he would forget who he had been. Sometimes the homesickness would grow and he would sob into the covers but he hadn't been that happy in school or at home and had few friends. More often he simply tried to figure out why this had happened and how. Where was this place? Where had the real Esgard gone, if anywhere? And what was he supposed to do here?

It had not simply been a transfer of minds, that was obvious. He had evidently acquired the ability to speak the local language and to understand some expressions and gestures he knew were foreign to his previous life. While everybody agreed that he looked like Esgard, those few who spent more time with him saw subtle differences. His face seemed a bit more serious, the languid smirk that was characteristic of the old Esgard was no more.

He also learned that magic and the supernatural were thought real here. But Sonjar seemed not to believe it or thought it exaggerated. What had surprised him was how calm everybody seemed to be at the thought of one person suddenly being exchanged for another. He shouldn't say everyone, so far Sonjar, the King and maybe Bars were the only ones aware that something strange was going on. Sonjar told him that the chronicles had stories of magic, wizards and dragons from an island far to the west, but she wouldn't say

more, or obtain them for him. On this subject alone she seemed not to be telling all she knew.

He had pressed her on the question of magic because he was excited at the thought that it might be real. Many times he had wished he could escape the limitations nature placed on him. But magic, however readily believed here, seemed just as remote and elusive. It was frustrating.

Undeniably real, but just as frustrating were the official responsibilities of Esgard. Fortunately the old Esgard was no slave to duty, and many obligations could be dismissed by sending a message that the prince was not feeling in the mood. The events that couldn't be ducked were rehearsed carefully. Sonjar wasn't allowed to attend, so the King was the only one who could rescue Esgard when he got stuck, which happened often since he had no talent for improvisation. Esgard's old friends had drifted off, and that was just as well, since they seemed thoroughly uninteresting.

One evening, after neither of them could stand to study any longer, they climbed up one of the towers to the top deck and sat on the stone floor. Spread below them was the town. The tower was little used in times of peace, still less did anyone bother to climb all the way to the upper-most story. They talked and watched the sun set and the stars come out.

"I wonder if one of them is where I came from," Esgard said. Sonjar looked at him in the faint light. There was such longing on his face. She had come to like him, come to feel safe with him but seeing his face now staring at the sky, she knew that part of him was never going to be at home here.

The next day they went on another tour of the castle. She was struck that this Esgard, unlike the former Esgard, and unlike any member of the nobility she had ever encountered, took more interest in the storerooms, workshops, servant quarters and horse barns than in the high ornamented ballrooms, function rooms and royal living areas.

That was the definitive evidence for her. She summoned up her resolve that day, and sought an audience with the King and told him flat out that this person who looked like Esgard was not Esgard.

The three of them were standing in the King's private hall, the door shut, the servants dismissed. This was another place she had never been before. The King regarded Esgard gravely, "So you are not my son."

"No."

The King was not unduly surprised. Accepting the verdict, he turned to consequences. "Sonjar, can he pass as my son?"

She had thought about this. "To the commoner, yes. To the nobility, yes, if we control the subjects and the time, but they will start to speculate. To Thandar, no." She took a breath and continued boldly. "There are also policy issues."

King Esgard was amused at the thought of her among his counselors. Amused that is, at the irritation his other counselors would show. He had thought she had a clever head on her young shoulders and her conduct in this delicate situation had confirmed it. There must be some better way to use her skills, perhaps promote her to be Esgard's personal clerk. He couldn't recall any example of a female clerk to male nobility but neither could he recall any prohibition against it. "What policy issues?"

"The war. Who is going to lead the army? Esgard, don't be angry, you're very bright but I don't think you can lead an army."

Esgard shook his head, "I don't know how to fight and I don't want to lead an army. I don't like getting shot at . . . that is, with arrows."

The King regarded each of them as he thought. "This is true. So I think it's time Esgard, that we met Thandar."

Though he had been here the better part of a month, Esgard had not met his only brother, save for a few ceremonial occasions like the initial council on the day of his return. This was not as odd as it sounds. Thandar could hardly stand Esgard at the best of times, thinking him a vain, weak, whining, useless fool. And Esgard, the old Esgard, thought Thandar was an uncouth, crude, pushy fool. The King had asked Thandar to stay away from Esgard without telling him the real reason, and Thandar was only too happy to comply.

Yes, Thandar was only too happy to avoid Esgard. He was avoiding everything these days. At the same moment that the King, Sonjar and Esgard were facing the truth of their problem, Thandar was getting drunk. He found it a convenient way to avoid thinking about how his world had dissolved. He was sitting in his room alone, getting quite drunk. He really didn't like how he felt drunk but it seemed the only thing he wanted to do.

Damn it all, why did Esgard have to come back? In the year and a half he had been gone the King had gradually gotten over his grief and had come to accept Thandar as heir. He had taken Thandar into his confidence. They had discussed personalities, policies, strategies, the whole range of affairs of a national leader. His father had confided in him,

told him of his hopes and plans. They had discussions as between equals, he had been told things even the ministers didn't know. But Thandar had been most touched by the times his father had come with an unsolved problem and asked to talk it over together. It was a heady experience and Thandar had applied himself intently, studying laws and records of council proceedings. He had gone on tour to meet and take the measure of area administrators and have them come to know him. And now it was all pointless.

Thandar unsteadily poured another drink. He ought to stop, this was going to be painful tomorrow. He was also getting a bit puffy around the waist. Time was when he had contempt for those who'd let themselves go. Yes he ought to stop. "Why bother," he said out loud to the wall. "I don't have any future." He had been going to be everything, now he was going to be nothing. The second son was nothing.

Long before all this he had been more or less content to be the number two son. He could lead a division of the army which he did well and he didn't have to waste all his time going to stupid meetings to exchange nonsense with people who would be terrified to walk over the ground of last year's battle. At least that is what he had thought. His father had opened a world to him he never knew existed, brought him to see wider and more subtle fields of action than a battleground. He had risen to it, begun to think in broader terms. "And then, poof," he snapped his fingers, "Gone." Losing this dream was worse, much worse, than never having had it at all.

Shit. Great mounds of shit, what was he going to do? He regarded his drinking glass. I am master of this, he thought, and threw it violently into the fire place.

The past several nights he had spent with his friends, drinking, laughing, telling each other stories, saying outrageous things to the ladies to watch them elaborately pretend to be outraged. But last night a wave of boredom came over him and he left early. Some of the stories he'd heard twice before, the smoke began to bother him and his laughter seemed forced. He also began to wonder about these friends. Some, he was sure, used to run with Esgard and probably sat around and laughed at him then. He never saw them except at parties, they weren't the people he worked with, in fact, he wasn't really sure what they did.

He stood up with some difficulty. He couldn't, wouldn't, be Esgard's assistant, nor would he take a secondary job dressed up to look important. Lately he had been toying with the idea of just taking off. "Worked for Esgard," he mumbled, "might as well work for me." And he'd be damned if he was going to go crawling to his father. It really hurt to think how his father had withdrawn from him when Esgard returned. Oh, he was one for the proper thing, Thandar thought. Wouldn't be right for the king to confide in the number two son. More like number zero son. He sat down on the bed and stared at the wall.

The next day, a different threesome stood in the King's rooms, the King, nervous Esgard, and tense Thandar. The King explained about Esgard while Esgard stood staring at his feet. At first Thandar thought this was some new, more complicated devilment of Esgard's but was eventually convinced by the King, and to some extent by Esgard himself. Thandar stood silently, contemplating this.

"Look Thandar," Esgard began, almost pleading, "I know you didn't much like the old Esgard, but I'm not him, and I don't remember what he did. So can we at least start out not hating each other?"

Thandar shook his head. "It is not that simple. Even if I totally believed you," he raised a hand as the King stirred. "I don't disbelieve you but it is a lot to absorb. There are other problems. Since both of you seem convinced to try and pass him as Esgard it still means we have an eldest son who is totally incompetent for the duties he should assume."

Esgard felt his face grow hot. "We'll see about that."

The King interjected, speaking to Esgard. "He means we have traded arrogant inattention for well-meaning inexperience."

Thandar chopped at the air impatiently, "Call it what you like, you still have to lead," he indicated Esgard, "It's your place by birth, and you can't do it."

Even though what he was saying was true, Esgard was getting angry.

"Enough," the King said firmly. "Many people saw Esgard return, commoner and nobility alike. He has been among us for weeks, without our saying anything. What are we to do, announce that Esgard is dead, and have him go about wearing a disguise for the rest of his life? People know what Esgard looks like, and this man looks like him! Further, this man bears you no ill will and has in fact, done no ill to you..."

"Except by existing as my elder."

"Look," Esgard said, desperate to get out of this fight, "can I step down, or aside, or something?"

"It has never happened and there is a tradition against it," the King explained, "so as to prevent younger sons from blackmailing elder ones."

"Doesn't that encourage murder?" Esgard asked.

"If the eldest living child dies by murder other than in battle with an outside enemy, all other children in the line are also disqualified."

"So I'm stuck. But look, is there a rule about duties? If he is so fired up about going to war and getting shot at, can't we let him?"

"What's the matter, afraid?"

"Thandar!" The King was really angry, his voice snapping at his second son. "I begin to wonder if what you really want is to argue rather than to lead. You're angry that he would try to lead and angry that he would stand aside. Remember, I can lead the army myself and keep you both at home doing the laundry." Then he turned to Esgard and spoke quietly. "There is no law about duties but the soldiers wouldn't understand or accept being led by anybody but the King or his immediate heir."

"Isn't there something to do besides the army?" His question triggered a new idea in the King's mind and eventually to agreement among them.

Missions to the allies north and south were needed to consult on how best to respond to the latest threats from Nakfis. Because the north was populous, but so weakly led, serious negotiation would be needed to shore them up and guarantee their cooperation to raise a powerful army. The army would have to be raised on the spot, led by either a Kelfar general or by a competent northerner and sent to assist Kelfar's troops. The south

was stalwart but sparsely populated so no army to raise and no worries about differing views so the mission would be no more than a courtesy call.

Because these were missions to Kings, nobility had to lead them. So Thandar would lead a delegation north and thrash out policy and logistical issues with the northern king, Bojar IV, and perhaps lead a combined army. Esgard would go as ceremonial head of a delegation to the southern king, Jacos III. In Esgard's delegation would be a number of technical experts who could deal with the implementation of policies long agreed on. Esgard should have little to do. The King would stay in the city, organize defenses, keep up morale and wait for responses.

They presented this agreement to a second council, agreed to leave in two weeks, and immediately sent messengers to advise of their impending arrival.

CHAPTER 3

Esgard's caravan headed south. He was still used to old ways of doing things on Earth and so expected both that it would be a small group going and that, as nominal leader, he would have to help plan and organize it. The party turned out to include some 40 people and a trip master took care of all the details. Esgard's only contribution was to insure that Bars and Sonjar accompanied him, a request that met no objection. He needed both of them to keep him from obvious mistakes. Even more, he needed them because they were the only friends he had, other than the King.

Leaving the castle, they traveled east along the river's north bank, passing where Esgard had first entered Kelfar, and continuing for four days until the road forded the river and turned southeast. This ford was also the junction with main roads heading east and north. Once across, they traveled southeast for three days through rich agricultural land. Esgard stared out of the coach for hours at gently rolling hills covered with green crops, lying warm under the yellow sun and took in the intense smell of vegetation. Like his first day in Kelfar, the sight reminded him of home and left him so homesick he could hardly stand it.

There were only two roads across the mountains to the south. One hugged the coast and was a narrow track used mostly for local traffic. They were on the other road, climbing toward the pass, near the southeastern corner of Kelfar where the mountain range lowered to allow a reasonably easy crossing. This route had its risks since it passed within a hard day's ride of Nakfis but they were not yet actually at war and there were armed guards

patrolling the frontier both in Kelfar and in the south. Also, their trip, while not a complete secret, was certainly not public knowledge. Thus, they should be safe.

The normal day consisted of a late start followed by three hours of marching in the morning, a long lunch and three more hours of progress in the afternoon before stopping to make camp before the light failed. Esgard alone of the company was supplied with a carriage; all other officials rode horses. Servants walked. Sitting in the coach all day while others labored in the dust and sun made him feel guilty, so he would get out to walk—until some officer insisted Esgard take his horse. He was less often successful in persuading Sonjar or one of the three diplomatic officials on the trip to join him in the carriage.

At first he had nothing to do but quiz Sonjar and the officials about the country through which they were passing or discuss southland politics. He tried to learn as much as he could about everything but it seemed hopeless. He didn't like exposing his ignorance too openly with the officials so often he let it be him and Sonjar alone. He certainly felt more comfortable that way.

She was very circumspect, deferential, and rather awkward, unlike their easy conversation in the castle. He guessed it was the public nature of her being in a royal carriage. He had, at least, cured her of calling him 'm'Lord', in private anyway. He found himself trying to come up with more questions to keep her in the coach longer. The conversations were tutor and student but as they proceeded farther there were more and more moments of friendship and connection. At first she was shy about anything that might seem to be acting above her station but over the days she got more comfortable assuming a more equal role.

They had been talking one day about nation's leaders and the coming war and the conversation had taken on a gossipy turn with him prodding her for tidbits about the lords and ladies of the castle when she suddenly blurted out that "Thandar seems to hope he can defeat Nakfis with wine bottles." She stopped abruptly and looked horrified at her breach of etiquette until Esgard broke out laughing and then she laughed also. Esgard's hand strayed out on its own until it touched her leg and he, instantly aware, pulled back as if he'd put it in the fire. Nonetheless, he had liked that laugh and spent more and more time trying to get her to laugh.

At the top of the wide pass they crossed into the southlands after a small ceremony at the border. Esgard was still acutely uncomfortable at these public exhibitions but now at least understood the rudiments of what to do. They descended the other side into a different country and geography. This southern mountain range they were crossing was deceptive. Viewed from Kelfar the mountains seemed to lie on an east-west axis but, when viewed from the southlands, the mountains were seen to be a north-south coastal range that widened at its northern end like a knob on the end of a staff to form the border with Kelfar. East of the coastal range lay a large plain. Because coastal hills caught the rain coming from off the sea, the plain was a mostly a desert. The track south of the pass led southeast skirting the desert by staying hard against the inland escarpment that formed the eastern edge of the desert—and the border with Nakfis. Close to two weeks from the pass on this trail would be needed to bring them to the distant capital of the southlands.

They had traveled just over half this distance and had stopped for the night in their usual fashion. Scouts had earlier gone ahead and found a suitable field on the east side of

the trail. This was a wide strip of grass sloping gently up from the trail toward the first line of trees before the escarpment began in earnest.

There was an hour to kill before dinner and Esgard, as was now his tradition, was taking a solitary walk away from the campsite. After all day with the crowd and being constantly on display he had to get away for peace and quiet. As usual, he had stubbornly refused a guard. He walked back along the way they had come until he came up against a small creek. It came flowing rapidly and noisily down the wooded escarpment, leveling off to flow more gently in a shallow depression before crossing over the road on a shallow ford and into the desert.

He was standing at the edge of a small pool of quiet water where the stream bed widened out, watching the late evening light play on the surface of the water. He heard a commotion behind him, cries mingled with the clang of metal on metal and the stamp of hooves. Puzzled, he turned around and walked up out of the shallow depression to look back towards the camp. He was stunned to see that the camp was being attacked by a large mounted band. They were having no trouble overrunning the surprised camp; an armed escort had accompanied Esgard but it was not on constant alert. He didn't know what this attack meant or what he should do.

Once Esgard got over his initial surprise he thought he should run to join the camp and help defend it. He was the nominal leader, even though it really just ceremonial. But the bandits had clearly overrun the camp and he had no weapon. It occurred to him that he was highly visible here and he began to be frightened of the possibility of capture. He crouched down and slithered sideways back to the stream's edge and walked, still bent

over, at a half run till he was up to the first row of trees. He went into the woods a distance and then turned to approach the camp through the woods. He got just close enough to see without risking being seen.

Whatever battle had occurred, it was now over. The bandits had lined up the camp members and seemed to be questioning them. He didn't want to abandon Bars, Sonjar and the rest but he could think of nothing to do. He figured that he would wait, see what would happen and follow the group if they departed.

Something about the bandits' uniforms kept nagging at him, he had never seen them, but he was reminded him of something he had heard about. Eventually it came to him. The men were wearing Nakfis military dress! And then he knew for certain, this was not a band out for robbery; they had been waiting for his party to attack it and that meant they were after him. A whole group of soldiers had been sent to get him. A shiver ran down his spine. He turned around and walked away from the camp and deeper into the woods, constantly casting backward glances to check for pursuit. He meant to go slowly and carefully but fear for his life and being caught up in a situation where the effort of an entire nation was turned against him was too much and he broke into a wild run.

He ran until he encountered the stream and turned to plunge into the woods. The escarpment grew steeper, the stream bed narrower and deeper, the trees thicker and taller. He was eventually forced to run in the rocky stream bed itself, scrambling over rocks, slipping and barking his shins, getting chilled by the cold rushing water. When his breath grew short he splashed out of the creek on the side away from the captured camp and

struggled up the steep bank using both arms and legs. The bank began to level off and he plopped down behind a thick clump of trees to catch his breath.

He sat there, his back on the rough tree bark, straining to hear sounds of pursuit over the pounding of his heart. He hoped he'd escaped but if they were looking for him, he couldn't imagine that his absence would go unnoticed or that they would just give up.

When his breath had returned to normal he thought he should get farther away. He had no idea which direction was best but he had started east and thought he may as well keep going that way. He walked up the bank until it was completely flat and then turned parallel to the river and headed away from the road. He was going cross country through a thick wood, having to push his way past branches. After ten minutes or so he had crested the first line of hills. The woods thinned a bit, and by peering through them he thought he could tell that there was a wide, shallow valley before the second, much more imposing densely-forested line of hills. The valley was an open meadow and he thought to walk to the edge of the wood and look around.

At the meadow's edge he cautiously bent over and walked slowly forward through the thinning trees that allowed thicker low vegetation. He looked across and up and down the valley. Just to his right lay an encampment and his blood ran cold. More Nakfis were lounging around it. He crouched down and studied it more carefully. He should probably run the other direction but he was fascinated by the presence of danger so close. Nakfis troops had entered the southland, camped boldly in the open and raided an official party on a major highway. They either didn't worry about being seen or they knew where the patrols

were and where the herders were that used this meadow. Either way, they were displaying impressive power in what was supposed to be a secure country.

The base looked far larger than needed to support the few people now walking aimlessly about it, so Esgard supposed that it was the main camp for the group of raiders that had attacked his caravan. The sun had not yet set but it was late afternoon and shadows were lengthening. That may have been why it took him a while to notice the column of soldiers making their way from out of the woods some distance to Esgard's right, and heading toward the camp. The raiding party was returning, presumably via an easier route from the highway than Esgard had taken. Would there be prisoners or would they have killed everyone?

He searched the column urgently and eventually saw several well-guarded figures walking with their heads down, their hands bound behind their back. Esgard thought he recognized Bars and Sonjar and several others but was too far away to be sure. He was sure that only a fraction of his group was alive. He was gripping the tree so hard it hurt.

The column went into the camp, guards were posted at the perimeter and the prisoners pushed into a corner. They seemed to be roped together and were well guarded. Esgard hoped the Nakfis would make their camp here tonight. Perhaps after dark he could sneak up and free one or more prisoners without waking the camp. But the Nakfis immediately set about the camp, packing and moving supplies. Despite the lateness of the hour they evidently intended to break camp and march. They were on foreign soil, an act of war. Perhaps they intended to try to return to their own country by night. That meant they either had what they came for, thought they did, or were giving up. So maybe he was

safe from immediate danger. Under the steady drive of an overseer's bellowed commands the camp was soon on the pack animals.

But there was to be some more questioning of the prisoners, Esgard thought, because they seemed to be lining some of them up at one side of the camp. Judging by dress, those singled out were servants. There was some discussion among the Nakfis about who should be in the group because there were one or two changes. Then a Nakfis soldier went down the row of silent, passive prisoners and systematically killed them with swift sword thrusts. This done the Nakfis set out across the valley to the distant mountain range at a fast walk leaving the bodies where they fell.

Esgard was stunned. When it became apparent that the Nakfis were leaving, and he was safe for the moment, the relief that swept over him was intense. After the first killing he had dropped to his knees and hid his face in his hands with the horrible knowledge that his safety had been purchased by the death of many. He crept along the edge of the trees trying to get closer to the dead, revulsion competing with an urgent desire to know who had been killed. The dead were all men so Sonjar wasn't included, but was Bars? He was opposite the bodies, the Nakfis were making steady progress and growing small in the distance. Still, he would be instantly visible if he came out from the trees so he just stood in the shadow of the trees and looked in horror. He had never seen a person killed, and never seen a dead body. Reality wasn't as cut and dried as the TV shows. He was relieved to determine that Bars was not among the dead and then felt ashamed at his relief. Why should Bars have priority over anyone else? There were nine dead in front of him, and even though he had never known who they were, each had family to mourn them. They

were innocent, he thought; they died for me. He couldn't understand that, it was as if he was dreaming.

Apparently he had spent a few minutes lost in himself for he became aware that the Nakfis were some distance away. He had another decision to make: should he follow the marchers? He wanted to, the prisoners were the only friends he had in days and days of marching and his friends the only point of reference in an incomprehensible world. But the valley was clear of trees and, while darkening, there was plenty of light left. He couldn't enter the meadow without immediately being seen. He peered after the group and his heart leapt when he when he realized one of the retreating forms had long blond hair and he knew that it was Sonjar. He stared intently at her until his eyes were blurry with tears.

By the time the Nakfis were across the valley, it would be dark and he could follow, but he would have to catch up with the caravan in the dark and in the woods on the other side. He could probably do that but then what? They were headed into Nakfis and Esgard had no illusions about posing as a Nakfis peasant, he had the wrong clothes and the accent was different. He would have to follow without anyone seeing him, free the prisoners without using a weapon or by stealing one, and then march everyone back while living off the land and avoiding being seen, let alone recaptured.

He thought he had to try, that it was the courageous thing to do. A real hero would figure out a way to do it but he wasn't the sort who was going to sneak up on professional soldiers in the dark and strangle them quietly like in the novels he used to read. He had no athletic skill in general and certainly no skill with sword or spear. He had tried his hand at

a sword once or twice at the castle and been astonished at how heavy it was. Obviously it was not a skill acquired in five minutes.

Another consideration was making itself felt. Most likely the Nakfis were after him specifically and the others were inconsequential. He was not a private person, he was a high official, his face known, at least to other officials, and his clothes marked him as a member of the nobility. Even if the raiders weren't after him, he still would be a prize catch. He should try to get to safety, not run deeper into trouble. But going to safety meant abandoning his best friends to captivity, probable torture and maybe death. He thought, use your head, their fate is already decided, you're not going to save them. Get to safety and report what is going on.

He resolved to leave, mentally saying goodbye. But he couldn't. He stayed rooted to the spot watching the enemy carry Sonjar, Bars, and the others farther and farther away, watching the light fade. He told himself he was preserving his choices, he could still decide to follow after it got dark. He wondered what was going through the minds of Bars and Sonjar, were they happy he had escaped, confident he would come to rescue them? He spent the time torturing himself with how they would feel as it became apparent to them that he wasn't going to save them. It occurred to him that it was getting late and he could be trapped in the dark here before he even got back to the road, if he was going back.

What should he do? He cried out and then felt horrible that he might have betrayed his presence. But the Nakfis were out of range of even the loudest shout. He should save his friends, he should try, it was just cowardice that made him think of going back. NO! He couldn't save them, he didn't know how and he was the target, not his friends, why the

Nakfis would probably just let them go or exchange them for Nakfis prisoners. Just like they let go the ones now decaying right in front of you, he told himself savagely. You are a coward, he thought, you have been all your life and you still are one here. Here you are in this fantasy, you don't know if it's real or a dream, and you still can't do anything. If you die here, you probably will just go back to Earth. Yes, he thought calmly, I am a coward and because I am weak and cowardly there is no way I can rescue them, so at least make the best of it and get back to the King as fast as possible.

He wrenched himself away and turned back into the woods. The shadows were deep now and he had to go slower than on his last journey. He also rediscovered the truth that it is often easier to go up a hill than back down it. By the time he had arrived back at the spot where he first saw the invaders it was dark.

Even though he was unlikely to encounter any more Nakfis on the road he stayed inside the woods as he made his way to his caravan's camp. He had decided to try to pick up some food and supplies there, then he would have to decide how best to get help.

Arriving at the abandoned camp site, he looked around with the aid of the very last glimmer of daylight. Nobody seemed to be around, hardly surprising given how empty the country was but he trod carefully. Since leaving the site of his friends' captivity he had been aware of how alone he was. He had only one chance and he couldn't blow it by being careless and revealing himself. He no longer knew where or who was safe. He had to look behind every bush, anticipate every problem, trust nothing.

After circling around the wooded side of the camp and seeing and hearing no one, he ventured across the camp. He went quickly to the highway, going past the burned out

tents, the overturned mess kits, the trampled grass, and worst of all, the dead bodies covered in blood and the cloud of flies above them. He looked up and down to satisfy himself that no one was coming. Then he turned back for a more careful examination of the camp. Was there anybody still alive? It soon became apparent that there wasn't, the Nakfis had been very thorough on this point. Despite the grisly scene he became aware that he hadn't eaten since noon and so started looking for food. The invaders had evidently been after the people rather than their supplies because they had left everything behind. He found and ate some fruit and then started collecting things he thought would be useful.

Useful for what? He hadn't really faced the decision about what he was going to do. Obviously he was going to be on his own for a few days and so he needed food, shelter, a knife, some ordinary clothes. . . He didn't really know but the list kept growing. He found a pack and started to put his selections into it. The sun had sunk over the horizon and it was night. He didn't think he should sleep near the camp, and he didn't want to see or deal with anyone just yet. The bodies were making him nervous as well. So he took his pack and some bedding and went a ways from the camp into the woods to sleep.

The next morning he felt better. The decision to go back had been made now, he just had to decide how best to do it. Last evening while walking around the desolate camp, he had wished that he had slipped while climbing that rocky stream and plunged into the water and gone home to Earth. This morning he realized that was only a half wish. He was curious about this world, he wasn't ready to say goodbye to Sonjar, the King, even Thandar, just yet. He also was anxious, after yesterday's events, to redeem himself. Leaving now would be quitting.

He wanted to bury the dead but couldn't find anything like a shovel. He thought of burning the bodies but couldn't face that. Finally he faced the fact that he was just going to have to let them be. He had abandoned the living yesterday, so why should he worry about abandoning the dead? A more pressing question was which way he was going to go. What would be the quickest way to get help?

He could continue in the direction in which his party had been proceeding, come to some southlands official installation and report in. He had a grudging feeling that was the quickest way to gain help but it held no attraction for him at all. He told himself that the road could still be dangerous, that if one Nakfis group could enter the country another could as well, that he didn't know much of southland customs, but he suspected the real reason he didn't want to go farther south was that it was heading further into the unknown. And, despite his curiosity about life here, he had enough of the unknown just now.

The second option would be to return to Kelfar. He would walk the road in the direction he had come until he got to the border. Customs officials had the same bad reputation here as on Earth but now he had diplomatic privileges and he should have no trouble reminding them who he was and crossing to home territory.

Of course, both of these options meant he would continue to walk parallel to the border with Nakfis, not a pleasant thought. He could take off more or less due West, into the desert and away from Nakfis. After crossing the desert and the coastal range, he would come to the coast road and could turn north. But that too was unknown territory. It was also wide open, he would be visible a long way off. Here he had the woods to hide in. He also knew that he was going to have problems with food even on the road and the desert

would be worse. Taking the desert route would also mean deferring getting back to Kelfar for a long time.

So finally he had made his decision and set off north. He walked on the road with every sense alert to the approach of people. He knew the rational thing would be to run off the road at the approach of anyone and look them over. If they were native to the southlands, as they almost surely would be, then he could go back to the road, and ask them for food or help. But he knew that he would do only the first part. He just had an overwhelming desire not to face anybody other than people he already knew.

The first day he spent in a low grade nervous state, constantly looking around and jumping at the smallest noise, thinking it meant that someone was approaching. Every couple of hours he had to take shelter in the woods to let a group go by. Since he was being very cautious he spent much of the day waiting. Sometimes the tension just got too much and he walked in the woods along the road. He wanted to hurry, feeling that every moment he sat still made it more difficult to rescue Sonjar and Bars.

As that first day wore on towards dusk, he calculated again how long it would take him to get to the border. They had been traveling nine days going south, and those were hardly long days. Even walking he should be able to do better going north, say seven or eight days. He resolved to try for seven. That was a swift pace but it still seemed a long time for his friends. He walked on until it was almost completely dark before going into the woods to make camp. He tried gathering a bit of brush for a small fire, to heat up some meat he had brought. The wood was green, the fire took a long time to get going, and the

meat was unevenly cooked. It lay, leaden, in his stomach, giving him a sick feeling. He worried about food again and again until he fell asleep.

The next morning he debated just staying where he was all day, and walking at night. That would mean fewer encounters and not having to set up camp in the dark. He tried to go back to sleep but really couldn't just sit, he was anxious to cover some ground. After an hour or so he got up, packed and set off again. The fact of being outdoors, having to sleep on the ground without even a tent, didn't really bother him. He had been camping enough not to be afraid of that.

Food was a different matter. He was no hunter or trapper. He knew some of the local edible berries and had brought enough meat that it would spoil before he could eat it all but the last few days of this hike were going to be all vegetarian if he didn't catch anything. He tried to calculate how much he would have to walk to get there in five days but there were too many unknowns. He worried about living for a few days without meat, he was no nutritionist. He tried to think about all the stories he had read about heroes on the march. They always seemed to have enough money to buy food at conveniently located wayside inns, to find means to work for their keep, to hunt or fish. Either that or there was some miracle berry that provided everything that was needed. None of those ideas looked likely here.

The fourth day out he came upon a camp of a group of southlanders coming down from Kelfar. He detoured into the woods and approached them, walking parallel to the road. He sat down behind a rock and watched them. They were joking, drinking, enjoying each other. And they were eating. On Earth he had quite a sweet tooth and just couldn't

resist food. The hunger he felt while watching them eat, and the friendliness and companionship they seemed to have for each other made him long to join them.

Twice he made to get up to go join them. He knew he wouldn't have to explain anything. He had picked up clothes from the camp that would identify him as a teacher, stuffing his royal emblems in the back pack. He could just say he was a wandering traveler from the north and could he share their fire for a night? They would feed him, trade news and jokes and make him forget his troubles. They might question him and he could just invent something. But he knew that while some people could make it work, he couldn't. The normal person would fear being alone in the woods and unafraid of people; he was the reverse. If he joined them he would be nervous and silent. To a perfectly ordinary question he would stumble and so arouse their suspicions. He didn't move.

He fell asleep watching them, waking the next morning with a stiff neck and clothes soaked by the dew. What had awakened him was a conversation the group leaders were having with some military men on horseback, southerners by the look of them. He wondered if they were looking for him. After a brief conversation the soldiers headed south on the trail.

Esgard waited for the group to pack up and leave. Afterwards he scavenged their camp, picking up leftovers from their trash pile and hungrily consuming them, like some urban beggar.

The fifth day, he had to face the food issue as he had run out of supplies. He had come to another small stream. As he went farther north the countryside was getting lusher. More water was in these little streams that came from the escarpment to his right. This one

had enough water to sustain a riparian woodland for a distance into the otherwise barren desert. It looked like as suitable a location as any to try trapping and fishing. The problem was, he had no idea how to do it. He made a noose from some long grass and tried to bait a trap. It was hard to keep still. When nothing came for half an hour, he couldn't stand to wait any longer and quit in disgust. He tried walking in the clear river water, looking for fish but only got chilled. A few swam by but easily eluded his grasp. He went back to trapping with no more success. Eventually he gave it up and walked on, hungry and frustrated.

Later that day he identified the cause of an uneasiness that had been bothering him for a day or so: the traffic had stopped. In fact, the group of soldiers and the travelers they were talking to were the last people he had seen. Since there were no towns in this stretch, and no side trails, this would mean that no travelers were entering the trail from Kelfar. He had no idea why that would be.

He also noticed that he was falling into the rhythm of the trail. His thoughts were slowing down, getting less jumpy. More exercise seemed to require less food, not more. He occasionally found some fruit; that and water from streams seemed almost adequate. In fact, as the memory of other foods faded, what he was eating seemed to grow in flavor. No miracle berries, but the miracle was that he needed so little. He was sleeping easier and sounder. He felt more fit. While worrying about his friends and wanting to run to safety, he knew that slow and steady would yield better progress than a headlong rush.

On the seventh day he realized he was approaching the border and the end of his travels. At first he had been willing to run all day if need be just to get here. Now he

wasn't so eager. He was embarrassed to contemplate his reception. They might be glad at his salvation, they might be angry that he had abandoned his people. Still, being on the trail had no future, he had to go home. But some suspicion still lingered. Figuring he was close to the border he cut to the left from the trail and headed northwest. He was in the pass now and mountains reared up on either side of him in a series of steep slopes alternating with shelves. He climbed up the western slope, hoping to catch sight of the border and the tiny collection of shops that huddled around it before he arrived.

He scrambled up to one of the shelves and began carefully walking parallel to the trail. Soon, the pass made a bend to the right and he could see up the pass a good distance. He could see why traffic had died off on the road. A large contingent of Nakfis had made camp in the tiny village and had thrown a barricade across the trail. He lay down and wriggled forward to peer over the broken edge of the ledge. The hillside dropped away at about a forty-five degree angle. His ledge petered out before the border. The barricade stretched up the hillside on either side of the trail until the angle became too steep to climb. There were easily forty Nakfis guards patrolling along the barricade.

He sat for a moment, absorbing it. He sighed and lay, face down, on the rock. He edged away from the cliff and tried to figure out his options. It was afternoon and shadows were starting to march across the valley. He certainly couldn't identify himself and demand to cross over, that would asking to die. He decided to edge his way long the shelf further and try to see the actual border crossing. Maybe local traffic wasn't being harassed and he could get some farmer to claim he needed an extra hand for the trip into Kelfar.

He crawled along the narrowing ledge. He could see the actual border and there was no chance that some bluffing by a farmer was going to save him. The border was shut and shut totally. No traffic of any sort was crossing, the size of the barricade and the location of the troops made that obvious. So he would have to cross by stealth. He looked ahead of him, gauging the prospects of crossing along this ledge. It ended abruptly ahead of him and the walls of pass were steep. Even in broad daylight, with some climbing gear, it would be slow work to creep along this cliff; at night, with no equipment, it would be impossible. He looked across the valley at the opposite rock face and saw a similar situation.

The border was sealed off and he was on the wrong side. He could see past the border down deep into Kelfar. It was a clear day and he could see the river plane. It was peaceful, and calm: Home. At least the only home he had any hope of ever reaching, and now this one may as well be on Earth. He rolled over on his back, staring up at the sky. He was thrice lost: lost from Earth, lost from his friends, now lost from hope. At each stage his universe had gotten wider but his possessions and sources of help fewer. He was now one small person alone in an entire country. Once again, he was defeated and wondered, Now, what am I going to do?