

Chapter 1- The Axe

The wooden shutters protecting the thin glass windows rattled back and forth as the wind blew with increasing ferocity outside. The floorboards creaked with an almost tangible sense of weariness as the elements bombarded the dwelling. Noren glanced up from the corner he was sitting in, his back resting against the unyielding wall. Old man Richards stood behind the counter, his eyes forever resting upon the entrance to the store. It was unlikely that the store would see any visitors on a day like this. Richards gave a heavy sigh and turned around with a grimace on his face.

“Best check the animals while there’s still a bit of daylight left. Gods know how long it’ll be before we get another rainy spell,” Richards said.

Richards ran a hand through his hair and glanced at the door leading out to the stables.

“It’d be good to give the animals their allotment of water for the day, same as yesterday,” he said, a tiredness in his voice as he knew fully well that it meant the animals would continue to suffer from water deprivation. “Three cycles and still no rain.”

Noren nodded and pulled himself from the floor and made his way toward the back entrance that led to the stables. The closed door greeted him, the wind pounding against the opposite side. He took a deep breath and put his hand on the door handle, pressing downward.

The latch came open and the wind came blowing inside as Noren pressed with all his weight against the door to force his way out. As soon as he made it through the door, he turned and closed the latch as quickly as he could. Noren’s eyes burned and his face stung as the wind blasted lifeless dust into his face. He made the short, familiar journey to the stables, which had been reinforced with large planks of shabby-looking wood that had been fastened together with ropes.

Before reaching the stables, he made a brief stop at the water tank and filled up a flask. The water tank was a large ceramic container that Richards had constructed to collect and store water when it happened to rain. Noren remembered the stories about the original settlers of Old Steorra, and how they had either the wisdom or the luck to found the town on top of a vast network of subterranean water channels, which is why having sufficient drinking water hadn't been an issue in the past, but all that had changed some generations ago. Now folks had to make do with the dwindling water in the wells and with whatever chanced to fall from the sky. They had to be certain to boil the water before drinking it, as everyone learned at a very early age, usually from traumatizing firsthand experience.

Noren slung the now mostly full flask over his shoulder and headed once again for the stables. He cracked open the stable door and slipped inside. Noren waited briefly to give his eyes a chance to adjust to the darkness. From inside the doorway, he could make out the resting forms of the animals in their stalls. The only animal standing was Sap, a brown horse with black spots, very visibly nervous because of the storm outside. Noren made calming noises and approached the horse. He slowly ran his hands down the horse’s face and neck.

“Hey Sap, don’t let the storm outside scare you. The walls should be stronger after the work we did on them. Don’t worry, okay?”

Sap seemed calmer due to Noren’s presence, but the rattling walls kept drawing her attention to them. Noren smiled, and emptied some of the contents of the flask into the horse’s water trough. He took note of the level of water in the other troughs, and a crease worked its way into his forehead. There just wasn’t enough water even to provide for the animals basic needs, and the effect it was having on the animals was evident by their withering frames. The dwindling rains and town wells that were drier by the month were not improving matters.

Noren emptied the remaining water into each trough as evenly as he could, and once again made his way outside. The winds had not let down, but at least they didn't seem to be getting any worse. Covering his eyes with his arms, Noren made his way back toward the store.

Richards was very tired and the pain in his right leg was worse than usual. It wasn't the usual stabbing pains that he had grown accustomed to anymore. It was as if all the insides of his leg were twisting and inverting, even when he wasn't trying to move it. Of course he did not show any of that to Gavin, who had wandered into the store not moments after he had sent Noren away.

"Evening, Gavin. What can I help you with today?" Richards asked.

Gavin set down a leather satchel that made a heavy clanking noise when it hit the counter.

"My axe broke again. It couldn't have happened at a worse time, I'd just gotten to Long's forest and ..."

Gavin emptied the contents of the satchel onto the surface of the counter. The oak shaft was in one piece, but true to his word, the blade's edge was chipped into a dozen fragments. The man gave an upset grunt.

"Well, as you can see, I won't be cutting any more lumber until this thing's fixed up."

Richards eyed the broken axe blade from behind the counter and did his best to conceal his amusement.

"Those must have been some pretty tough trees."

Gavin made a placating gesture with his hands.

"It was my fool of a daughter. Damned if I bring her along on the next outing."

Richards sifted through the remnants of the axe halfheartedly.

"Well, the blade is in really bad shape, it doesn't take my telling you that for you to know. We don't have any replacements, so we're going to need some time to work out a new one for you. There isn't any way around it."

Gavin cursed under his breath.

"I suppose I knew there wouldn't be a quick fix for this. How much time will you need?"

Richards kneaded his hands and gave the man a thoughtful look.

"I'll try and salvage what I can of the old. Give us one week and you can expect a new blade. The usual payment would be nice, if you have any of your harder woods."

Gavin simply nodded.

"I just did some repairs for the Canavans, used up a lot of my supply, but I'll see what I can do. One week then, Richards."

Gavin gave a wave and promptly exited the store.

The wind outside still rattled the shutters, but had waned in strength. Noren sat in the back room listening to the deep rumble that was Richards' voice. It sounded like a customer was speaking with him, and Noren didn't want to interrupt. The back room was mostly just a place where they kept finished orders before returning them. Even during Richards' time as a hired sword, he had worked extensively with metal shaping, so it was only natural that he handled most of the repair related tasks.

To that end, Richards had constructed a basic workshop housing a smithing anvil, a furnace, and a large table for repair work. Noren remembered how procuring the anvil had been somewhat of a difficult feat. The anvil itself was a slab of solid stone, pulled from the depths of

the mountains of Kimin and transported to Old Steorra by a trade caravan. It had taken Richards three years of savings to purchase, but it was the cornerstone of their trade, so it had been well worth it. Noren had always done his best to learn what he could to help the older man out and was a quick learner, which had helped him to develop a well-rounded knowledge of metal and repair work.

The sound of Richard's pained breathing awoke Noren from his reverie. Richards came walking into the back room carrying a worn looking burlap sack. Noren got to his feet and approached the older man.

"Ten guesses as to what Gavin's brought us this time," Richards said, dropping the satchel on top of the counter with a thud.

"Gavin says it was Ayana that did this, but I think we know better."

Noren glanced down at the shattered pieces of the axe.

"This is what, the third time this season? I don't get it. For someone who makes his living off of the woods..."

Richards rested his weight fully on the counter to take off the pressure on his leg.

"The metalwork is shoddy and the quality of the metal is even worse," Richards said. "We're going to have to melt down some more metal afore we can remake the blade. I think we have enough stone and fuel left, last I checked. A satchel of ore and fuel should do it."

Noren did the calculations in his head, and nodded.

"I'll go start the fire and get the workshop ready."

He reached down and gathered up the broken pieces of the axe back into the satchel and started for the door. Richards forced himself off the counter and followed the boy out, their paths diverging as the older man worked his way over to the shack that housed their crafting supplies. Together they spent the following days in the exhaustive process of turning chunks of ore into metal.

Noren awoke to the dim glow of the early morning sun pouring through the window, and allowed himself a moment to relish in the calmness that surrounded him. He could hear the chickens clucking in their stalls, and the bare tree branches scratching lightly against the exterior of his room as a light wind found its way through cracks in the window frame, breezing past his skin. He kept his eyes closed and savored this peace, for however wearisome the rigors of daily life were, these moments belonged to him and him alone.

His body was accustomed to the heavy work of coaxing metal out of chunks of earth and the labor of bending and shaping metal to his will. He knew that it was right of him to do whatever he could to help if only to show his gratitude to Richards.

Noren took one last deep breath before opening his eyes and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. It was not a large room, but there was enough space for a sturdy bed on which to sleep, and next to it a trunk in which he kept his few belongings; a heavy fur cloak for the colder season and a few books that Richards had procured during his travels to Umyer. A small closet was built into the wall where he stored items that he barely used. Next to the doorway was a small table where Noren frequently sat and read. Tucked underneath one of the legs of the chair was a folded piece of cloth that kept it from wobbling. He didn't mind reading the same books over and over; stories of Sterling Onin, the great artifact hunter, going on daring adventures to distant lands, always in search of more prized treasures, or stories about absconders who had devised clever means of digging to the bottom of monoliths, only to be stuck in a never-ending descent. These

stories opened up his mind and sparked his imagination, freeing him to explore strange and distant places.

There had been a dearth of visitors as of late, which made work scarce, but whenever he could, Noren enjoyed helping Richards with the shop. Whenever they were fortunate enough to have travelers passing through in need of their services, Noren was accustomed to working in the kitchen and prepared meals for the both of them. However, Noren's responsibilities had grown in recent times, as it was becoming more difficult for Richards to complete even simple tasks. Although neither said a word about it, Noren could tell that the pain in the older man's leg was getting worse. What was there to gain by talking about it, as even Douvia, the person with the most knowledge in town about ailments of the body couldn't figure out what the problem was? It was bothersome enough that his impairment was common knowledge amongst the town's residents. The last thing Richards wanted was to give anyone something more to talk about.

Noren stood up and clasped his hands together, then stretched his arms upward, forcing the tiredness from his bones. His task for the day would consist of delivering the result of many days of labor, the newly forged axe, to Gavin. To him, it was a day off of sorts, for the entirety of the day to be dedicated to such a simple endeavor. He opened his trunk and reached inside, grasping for the familiar cloak that would protect him from the chill of the day. As it was particularly cold for the time of year, he was very thankful to the trader who had sold them the cloak in exchange for new wagon wheels last spring. Thankfully, they had sufficient wood, and Richards knew enough about wagons to properly construct the wheels.

Noren fastened the cloak about his body and headed out the door, down the hall towards the common room. Glowing embers were all that remained of the fire in the fireplace, and Noren could still feel heat emanating from the ashes. A leather satchel containing Gavin's new axe was lying on the counter, with a note from Richards pinned to it. Noren unpinned the note from the satchel. The note read:

Noren, was up late working on the Leiks' order. Please take this to Gavin first thing in the morning. Ask about the wood too.

Noren scribbled a reply on the back of the note and placed it back on the counter top. Noren slung the satchel over his shoulder and took one last look around the common room before leaving the store, taking care to make certain that the lock on the door was secured.

The cold air stung Noren's face as he stepped outside. A thin coat of frost blanketed the landscape, and the ground gave way making a soft, crunching sound with every step he took. He looked across the hardened dirt road in front of Richards' place that led to the town's center. Richards had picked this spot because it wasn't that far from the town's center, but was far enough away to escape the commotion of the town. Initially, Richards had wanted to plant crops, but due to the lack of rain and appropriate weather, he started offering repair services instead. Richards made several attempts to make use of the land, but eventually he gave up, leaving the land unused.

The Canavan's place was a short walk to the east, and Gavin was some distance beyond that. Noren figured that he would be able to make the trip in roughly twenty minutes at a spry pace and still make it back to the shop before Richards awoke, but on a whim he decided to take a detour through the center of town. It wouldn't add too much time to the trip, and truth be told, it felt wonderful to be working his legs.

He started down the road at a brisk pace, not caring about the weight of the satchel slung over his shoulder. When he reached a fork in the road, he took a right turn instead of going left and slowly the center square came into the limits of his vision. He could make out the central well and the dark obelisk that marked the town's center. The well was large and big slabs of smooth stone

were stacked on top of each other to form a circular wall around the opening.

Noren walked over to the well's edge and rested his arms on top of the stone surface and peered over the edge into the blackness. He couldn't quite make out the water level in the low light, but he could feel a draught of dampness and cold emanating from the depths of the well, which reassured him somewhat that there was still some water left. The stone blocks were very cold to the touch, which further reinforced the chill he felt throughout his body. Still resting against the stone blocks, Noren looked up at his surroundings.

The town monolith stood beside the well. It was not very wide, but it was tall; a good couple meters taller than Noren was. It consisted of an unbroken piece of pitch black stone that had five edges at the bottom and grew narrower towards the top, forming a point. Noren had always been fascinated by the marker, like other children, but he had quickly outgrown the amusement that came from trying to find ways to scuff its surface. He also remembered the way that other children tried their best to either burn, stab, scrape or hack at the stone; but nothing ever worked. Every town had such markers apparently, and although Noren had never ventured very far from town, he had heard Richards speak of such things on different occasions.

These were the kinds of thoughts that Noren was having when he realized that a glow was coming from inside the depths of the marker. A shiver progressed up his spine and his ears were filled with the sound of his heart beating rapidly. He remembered the old stories of the gods and how men had intruded into their realm, precipitating their own doom. Like Sterling Onin who dared to invade the great Ark of the Elders to rob it of its secrets, who broke through all of the church's best defenses only to be captured and slowly devoured by the gods over the course of a millennia.

But such stories were simply that. Stories. What Noren now stood face to face with was something he had no explanation for, like when you were seeing something terrible happen, but you knew you were dreaming, only you couldn't wake up from the dream. He rubbed his eyes again for good measure, unable to rid himself of the eerie prickling sensation he felt running up his spine.

A voice from behind nearly caused his heart to stop.

"Ho, who's there?"

Noren jumped without meaning to and turned his head in the direction of the voice. A woman was holding what looked like a basket full of bread in her hands and stood a few meters away. She came closer, and Noren could see that she was squinting in an effort to make him out.

Noren replied in a voice that was much less steady than he would have liked, "Good morning, Ceressi. Sorry to scare you. It's only me, Noren."

The woman visibly relaxed and moved closer to Noren, then set her basket down on the ground.

"Oh, Noren! Good morning, lad. It's cold something fierce today." Ceressi shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Gods, you've grown. From afar I thought you might be Gavin, and I was preparing to give you a quite a mouthful. I've about had enough of his excuses as to why he hasn't fixed our granary door yet."

Noren did his best to focus on the conversation.

"Oh, Gavin you say? I'm actually heading over to see him right now. Would you like me to talk to him about your door?"

Ceressi made a puffing noise. She reached down into her basket, grabbed a piece of bread, and waved it at Noren before giving it to him.

"If you're to talk to Gavin, best not to do it on an empty stomach. The old gods themselves

know how long winded the man gets.”

Noren tried to conceal the shakiness of his hand as he reached out and took the bread from Ceressi.

“Thanks. Now that you mention it, I haven’t eaten yet.”

Ceressi bent down and picked up her basket, and shifted it into a more comfortable carrying position.

“Don’t mention it. I’m going to go drop off the rest of these over at the Canavans’ place while they are still fresh. They have travelers staying with them, and this morning’s order is pretty large.”

She walked by Noren and turned around to face him once more. From her vantage point, Noren guessed that the marker should be clearly visible to her, and consequently the glowing light. He waited for her reaction, but was met only by her words, “Take care, Noren. Stop by sometime. Rotha has been going on about some new songs he would like you to hear.”

She smiled, waved and then continued on her way. He waited until she was out of sight, then turned back to face the monolith and cautiously approached it, placing the satchel containing Gavin’s axe on the ground. As he moved closer, the glowing light pulsed and increased in intensity. Noren found himself standing in front of the marker, and without knowing why, he reached out and placed his hand on the glowing surface. He gasped as a torrent of symbols appeared in the darkness directly in front of him, combined with a rush of sounds unlike anything he had heard before. Noren closed his eyes and tried to fight the sensory onslaught, but the sounds did not fade. He involuntarily withdrew his hands from the marker and opened his eyes. The symbols were gone and Noren was surrounded by the still and quiet of the early morning.

He felt the ground spinning beneath him and fell to his hands and knees. Fighting a deep wave of nausea, he took a deep breath in an attempt to collect himself. Fragments and whispers of what he had just experienced were still echoing in his mind. It felt as if something had exploded inside his head and filled it with heavy stones. As he glanced up, he saw the pulsing pattern of the light beckoning to him.

The ground felt cold beneath him, and solid at last. He realized that he was sweating and that his whole body was shaking, but a hunger to understand what was happening forced him to his feet. He faced the marker once more. A sudden gust of wind swept through the square, filling him with renewed energy and resolve. Shaken but determined, Noren braced himself and put his hands on the stone surface. Symbols materialized before him again and he was surprised as some of the symbols had transformed into characters he could read.

But he still couldn’t make sense of the sounds, which ranged from popping noises, much like pebbles splashing into a quiet stream, to harsh rasping noises mixed together with strangely soft and gentle cadences. Symbols continued to flash before him, and kept changing more quickly than he could keep track of. Suddenly, he was able to read all of the characters. No sooner than this happened, he heard a gentle voice in his head saying the words, “Greetings.”

“Who said that?” Noren asked, looking around at his surroundings.

“The connection to the pathways has been lost. Systems have fragmented eighty seven point six percent since the last maintenance cycle twenty two million, five hundred twenty three thousand, eight hundred and forty one point three years ago. Awaiting further input.”

“I don’t understand,” Noren said.

Two transparent spheres appeared in midair and were floating close to each other. Upon closer inspection, he saw that something was written inside of each of them; one read resources, and the other, interface. The spheres were perfectly round and looked like glass that was still

molten and forming. The sight of the spheres was so mesmerizing that Noren reached out his free hand to try and touch one of them. As his hand neared the sphere labeled resources, it seemed to grow slightly larger and shifted a little closer to him. The moment he touched it, both spheres disappeared, only to be replaced by more spheres. This time, the labels read medical, nourishment, seeds, storage, and tools.

Noren held his breath. He touched the sphere labeled “seeds” and watched as all of the spheres faded away and was replaced by a small cube. Tiny seeds were dispensed from the cube and planted themselves into the ground. Within seconds, the seeds had grown into fully formed wheat. The wheat vanished, and different seeds came forth from the sphere. These seeds grew into unfamiliar leafy vegetables. The same pattern repeated, and this time trees formed that had large green leaves sprouting from their centers with small crescent shaped fruits hanging from their branches.

“What’s happening?” Noren asked numbly.

The same voice from earlier responded, “You are viewing a nanocube that is capable of producing genetically engineered seeds of your specification.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Noren asked.

“Genetic engineering is the direct manipulation of biological organisms to bring about desirable changes and to prune away undesirable traits,” the voice intoned. “This device is the result of generations of careful engineering, and the seeds were created to thrive in even the harshest of environments with minimal human intervention.”

Nore’s head was spinning. As he was looking at the small cube floating in the air before him, he was consumed by an intense desire to know more about it, and to touch the seeds with his own fingers. He focused intently on the cube, and a tearing pain shot through his head. An overwhelming dizziness came upon him, and the last thing that Noren saw was the ground rushing up to embrace him.