

# Chapter 1

## In a Pinch

A scream rolled down the ancient corridor. He stopped short. The clicking of his boots on worn cobblestones ceased. He cautioned himself, then moved forward again down the narrow hallway dimly lit by intermittent torches that hung from stone walls. He rounded the curved passageway, his ghostly shadow rippling before him. Heavy doors reinforced with thick iron straps and large rivets flanked the inside corridor every twelve paces. He didn't know or care where each one led; he just wanted out of wherever he was, and fast, but he hesitated at the screams, not wanting to run headlong into danger.

*Click, click, click.*

He moved slowly, boots echoing with the screams. Chimes jingled in the air, making an odd haunting background to the tortured cries.

Around the next corner, a light crossed the cobbled floor—a door left open. Grunts, screams, and the sound of a violent struggle came from inside. His heart thumped wildly and his breath quickened with the sounds of torture. The screams intensified as he drew near the doorway. He stopped and listened to the eerie chimes inside then craned his neck and peered through the opening. His eyes stretched wider at the atrocity before him.

A man with a goatee, wearing torn bloodstained clothes, stood fidgeting in a room built from granite blocks. Blood smeared his face, his sweaty hair skewed in all directions, and a wild look haunted his eyes—the screaming had been his.

Six barred jail cells formed a row on the left side of the room. The first cell stood open and empty. The other five cells were locked but also empty.

Abruptly, an unseen force threw the man into the cell bars then whipped him back in the opposite direction. He hit the granite wall with a sickening thud.

The man in the jail room struggled to his feet and stared at the stranger at the door. "Run!" he yelled. "It's loose. The beast is loose. *Run—*"

The man choked on his last word, and his hands grappled at his neck with something invisible that lifted him off the floor. His eyes bulged, and his face reddened.

The man at the doorway was too petrified to run, too scared to help, and too fascinated to turn his eyes from the slaughter in progress. Whatever was in the opened cell, this man was most likely responsible for unlocking it—perhaps tricked.

While the man dangled, a small irregular-shaped silver patch appeared in mid-air then disappeared. Another appeared just below, then dissolved, followed by another just to the side of that, then another and another until the air before the man blinked on and off in silver chunks like pieces of a puzzle. The chimes continued their soothing sound with the smell of sulfur in the air.

The man looking in became morbidly fascinated with the scene as his mind tried to put the bits and pieces of the floating puzzle together.

A jewel-covered hand appeared briefly at the throat of the man with the goatee before it dissolved into thin air. A shoulder piece showed, then a leg piece and a back piece. It looked as though the invisible thing was trying to materialize, and all the pieces together, he realized, made an intermittent image of an eight-foot-tall being.

Outside the cell, the man's face paled and his heart raced in rhythms too fast to count. For a fleeting moment, he thought he should help, but fear paralyzed him. He stood transfixed—unable to do anything but watch.

The man with the goatee suddenly flew backwards through the air, slamming into the wall at the end of the hall. He crumpled to the ground, and left a smear of blood on the ancient stones. The bits and pieces of the escaped creature, for a moment, ceased to appear.

*Where is it?* He couldn't locate the source of the chimes and thought his heart would burst from his body; fearing that the escaped beast would come for him next.

Inside the main jail door, a tall vase holstered swords like a bouquet of flowers. One of those swords pulled out from the center of the clay pot and hovered in the air; its blade gleamed in the torchlight.

His heart faltered, believing it was meant for him. He'd stayed too long gawking, and now he feared he was next. *Fool*, he scolded himself, but the sword paid him no attention.

The injured man, barely coherent, fixed his eyes on the charging sword. His eyes narrowed, his mouth distorted and a weak cry struggled through his bloody lips.

“Nooo ...”

The sword point advanced toward him. He crossed his arms in front of his face and cringed.

“Nooo ... ,” he whimpered.

The sword gave no mercy. It rose then fell swiftly. A scream pierced the air and the man's ear flipped to the floor.

Once again, the floating pieces sporadically materialized and dematerialized. Again, the sword rose. For a brief moment the man with the goatee stared into the eyes of the man at the door.

“Run,” he whispered hoarsely. “Warn the others. Can’t you see? It’s loose—run ...”

The sword dropped and sliced off the other ear. Before the weapon could strike again, the man outside broke from his trance and ran. Around the continuous curve of the corridor, he sprinted. The slapping of his boots echoed against the cobblestones and dust flew in puffs of gray, leaving ghostly footprints in his trail. A wretched scream from behind told him the man’s torture had ended. He muttered a feeble prayer and kept running.

At his age he couldn’t keep the pace up for long, but the adrenaline that pulsed through his veins pushed him onward. His lungs heaved as he tried to stay ahead of what he envisioned was hunting him, and he hoped the endless hallway wouldn’t lead him in a complete circle right back to the open door of the escaped beast.

He passed door after bolted door and began to think he could never escape this fortress. Just as he was about to lose all hope and crumple to the floor, a large auditorium opened before him. He stopped and, panting for air, surveyed the torch-lit hall.

He couldn’t believe it. A banquet room lay before him, filled with tables, each draped in a royal white cloth fringed with golden tassels that hung nearly to the floor. In the center of each table, a six-horned candle stand illuminated, of all things, fresh food, hot and ready to eat.

Desserts, vegetables, fruits, and salads lay on the tables on one side of the hall, and those on the other side

displayed meats of all kinds, steaming hot. The smell of the banquet nearly drove him crazy; he was famished.

The strangest thing in the odd set-up was the lack of people—not a living soul in the whole auditorium. No servants, no guests, not even chairs in which to sit. Save for the flickering of the candle flames on the tables and torches along the wall, the room was quiet.

A sudden sound from down the hall made his skin crawl and the hair on the back of his neck stand up—chimes! The sweet sound tried to lull him, but knowing what they represented, he shook himself awake.

He needed to hide, but where? The room had no way out except where he had entered, and that was no longer an option.

He wove his way between the tables, thinking neither of the food nor of his grumbling stomach. He simply wanted to save his scrawny old skin and find a place to hide as far away as he could from the chimes. He crouched behind one of the tables of meat. The food smelled heavenly, but the only thing he savored at the moment was staying out of sight of the beast.

The chimes grew louder. He turned his panicked gaze across the great hall to the corridor and fully expected to see a hideous beast barreling out—a creature of claws and fangs—but he saw nothing. Or did he?

Something caught his eye, but disappeared before he could focus. He remembered the escaped creature trying to materialize. His gaze darted about, but he dared not blink—he had to know if it hunted him.

Faint chimes echoed in the chamber. His heart sank, his pulse quickened, and his mouth went dry. Then something strange happened, the last thing he would have expected. A crowd of people entered: young and

old, families and singles, they poured into the banqueting hall and spoke excitedly to one another about a special event that would soon take place. For a moment the man's hopes rose, but he remained hidden among the steaming meats.

Where was the invisible beast, and where did all these people come from? Hundreds of them wandered into the great hall, chattering all the while, paying no attention to all the food; something greater occupied their mind.

And then it happened.

One pace ahead of the crowd, the air rippled: body pieces appeared then disintegrated in various places, lasting longer with every blink. The shape of the creature slowly took form. The people saw this and their hopes rose along with their voices. They smiled, pointed, and nudged one another like hysterical followers in awe of some legend.

The crowd continued to fill the room and the man crouched lower behind the table of meats. Would anyone notice him? Would they wonder why he wasn't in line with the rest of the people and suspect him to be an intruder, then lock him away in one of the many cells? Or would they give him over to the escaped beast to be tortured for its pleasure?

No one seemed to notice him at all. Either he was too far away to be seen, or the people were too occupied with the major event unraveling before their eyes.

Another body piece appeared in the air, this time lingering longer before it dissolved. Another piece floated and another. Each appeared in quicker succession and stayed longer. It looked as though the creature was about to take full form. The people were ecstatic; they even applauded.

The man, more frightened than ever, slid down farther, barely peeking over the table between two plates of roast duck.

The procession continued filing in behind the materializing figure. Their cheers echoed in the chamber as its form became more solid with each pulsating piece of its body. The people bowed low in reverence, fawning at the solidifying body and rejoicing in its appearance.

The frame of the body appeared wide and menacingly tall, a good two feet taller than a normal man, robed and hooded in silver. It seemed proportioned well, but it walked strangely. Even when the creature had formed, pieces continued to pulse dimly in sections of its body. It walked stiffly from side to side, and with each awkward sway, yellow smoke twirled in thin wisps from its hood.

It stopped.

The crowd fell silent.

The man dipped lower still, steam from the meat shrouding his face.

The creature's robed arms stretched forward and bent at the elbows. Hands protruded from its gleaming silver sleeves. Elegant hands tipped with silver fingernails. Hands that shimmered, sleek and long, with multicolored gems seamlessly fused together in a matrix of gold.

It grabbed the hood and pulled it back.

A murmur ran through the crowd and, for a moment, the man stopped breathing. He was shocked. They were shocked. No one could believe their eyes. No one had expected—a woman.

The woman, beautiful beyond description, and beyond human, had hollow strands of gold hair that chimed with her movements. Eyes and lips of pure silver beckoned as she smiled, and her face of pearl was so clear you could

see deep into its unblemished layers. Every polished gem of her body sparkled in the flickering candlelight. She looked pleased with herself—confident, proud.

Abruptly, she turned; her pleasant features melted away. She glowered at the people then snapped her head to the side, golden hair rippling like waves with the sound of chimes. She meticulously scanned the tables of food that filled the vast room. The people stood silent; no one dared move. Blood drained from the man's face. He feared that, somehow, she could sense him.

Silver lips parted and her melodic voice rose like a harp's crescendo then became disappointingly distorted.

"|diots!" She inhaled the harsh word and marched swiftly to the rows of food, her gait so awkward that it drew the man's attention to her feet. He had to look twice to be certain—she walked barefoot on three gem-studded legs.

The female creature bowled through the first row of vegetables, throwing tables and food through the air. Table after table flew as she raged her disapproval.

"| told you, no vegetables!" Another table went sailing through the air as she purposely inhaled her singing words—a horrific and unnatural sound.

"|No salads!" she shrieked and tore into the tables of fresh fruit, dashing them aside like a spoiled child throwing a tantrum.

The people cowered to the far wall, but didn't run. The man, as fearful as the rest, had had enough of this nonsense. He was going to do something about it, something he was good at, prepared for. He hid under the table.

The draping tablecloth shielded him. Even though he shook to the core with fear, he felt safe. With so many

tables in the auditorium, the chance of her coming across him was slim. He breathed silently, listening to the cursing and breaking of tables, while wasted food scattered about the banquet room. Then all was quiet—the chimes stopped. Under the table, the man waited, ears straining. Adrenalin pounded his heart and quickened his breath.

*What's going on?* He placed a hand over his mouth and scolded himself. *Stay quiet.*

He couldn't take the mystery any longer and eased himself flat onto his stomach and tried to peek under the tablecloth. He heard it before he could see it—footsteps; the awkward slapping of three feet against cold stone. It was coming his way!

*Hold still; hold very still,* he coached himself. *Don't even breathe.*

The footsteps drew closer. With so many tables she could randomly go to, surely his wouldn't be singled out. What would the odds be? He tried to relax and had just started to feel secure in his hiding place when something thumped violently on the table above him. He jumped, but miraculously kept from screaming. The plates of meat banged on the table and rattled against each other.

"Flesh, I want flesh," she demanded, still inhaling her singing words. By the sounds coming from above, she was gorging herself with mouthfuls of the prepared beef, pork, lamb, and duck he had drooled over moments before.

"Meat-bones-blood!"

The chimes sang with the motion of her head as she feasted. The table rattled so hard above the man, he feared it would come apart and crash down upon him. Not daring to move, he lay on his stomach with his hands

over his head and hoped the table wouldn't break or be thrown into the air when she had eaten her fill.

Something pinched his side. He tried to ignore the irritation, but the thing kept scratching at his ribs. To move now would make a sound, and if he made a sound, the creature might hear, investigate, find him hiding, and then eat his flesh instead. The scratching would have to be endured.

But what if a rat gnawed at him? He wouldn't be able to stand it if it was a rat. Rats really scared him. He'd seen what the nasty little rodents could do to a living body. It was cruel, even by his standards.

The irritation turned to pain, and he felt his shirt mat up with blood. It had to be a rat. He didn't dare move, but not knowing was killing him.

Slowly, he turned his head, trying not to shift anything else or make a sound. He craned to see, and then wished he hadn't. His head swooned at the sight. Every muscle in his body seized up—he'd never been so frightened in his life. The sight was worse than the image of a gnawing rat.

It was the woman!

The toes from all three of her legs protruded under the tablecloth. While the creature feasted above, rattling the table as she gorged, her feet rocked back and forth and scraped her silver toenails into the side of the man. He couldn't move now; she would notice the difference and investigate. The pain must be endured.

He watched in horror as the gem-coated feet pinched and scratched at his side. Of all the things he should have been compelled to do at that moment—jump, scream, run or fight—instead, he counted her toes.

*One, two, three, four, five ... Six? Strange.*

The middle foot: *One, two, three, four, five ... Six—again?* Through the scratching pain, he counted the last set of toes just to be sure.

*Six!*

His skin pinched one too many times. He told himself not to move, but his body disobeyed—he flinched.

The beast stopped feeding.

The chimes went silent.

All was quiet.

The man felt he would pass out from the blunder. White spots of panic floated before his eyes. He'd blown his cover. Right when he thought he would lose consciousness, the beast's middle foot disappeared behind the tablecloth.

*She's leaving*, he thought. *She's stepping away from the table.*

He couldn't believe it, but it was true. He relaxed his head onto the floor—he had evaded the three-legged creature. She had eaten her fill and was leaving. He couldn't believe the luck.

He closed his eyes and let the cool stones soothe his sweaty face. Then suddenly, the table flew up, scattering the remaining meats across the floor. An inhaled shriek curdled his nerves. Before he could react, her middle foot returned and slammed into his side. Menacing eyes of silver penetrated his soul.

From her meat-splattered mouth, a song rich and clear spewed from her silver lips. Yellow wisps of sulfuric smoke lingered with its distorted melody.

“*Sp̄y!*” She inhaled the word then slammed her six-toed foot into his side, knocking out breath and cracking bone.

“Treason!” Her outside foot kicked next, and the man rolled several feet with the blow.

“Thief!” She stepped forward with her middle foot and swung her two outside feet, delivering a double blow. He rolled twice more, moaning. Again she came at him. This time she planted an outside foot on top of his back to hold him steady and kicked relentlessly with the middle foot. The silver-tipped toes, like daggers, pierced bloody holes in his side over and over again—slashing, gouging, ripping, and beating, until the man in all his horrifying nightmare finally woke up ...

## Chapter 2

### Razor

“Get ow da way, ya bloody drunk!”

*Wham!* Another kick planted on his side. Erikson buckled with the blow and heaved for air.

Another morning, another bruising, and another rotten day to endure until he could beg enough money for another drink.

The captain hated mornings. He never knew where he would find himself, and didn't like the fact that he had gotten used to rude awakenings. The morning sun didn't help his throbbing head either. He looked at the feet of his abusers and felt relieved to find boots instead of gem-coated feet with six silver-tipped toes. He squinted up, shading his eyes from the sun with a hand.

“Go on,” a rough voice scolded from above, “get yer scrawny butt off the street, ya hear? Git!” Another kick smacked into his side.

“I'm goin', I'm goin'. No needs ta kicks me no more.” He fumbled to his knees and struggled to get up. “Please, no mores kickin's, I be goin'.”

A pair of callused hands grabbed hold of him, brought him to his feet, and then shoved him aside. A swift boot to the pants helped him along the way.

Erikson tripped ahead on skinny legs, trying to steady himself with arms spread and waving about like a young bird freshly kicked out of its nest. Once balanced, he stood erect, casually brushed mud from his coat, and pulled straw from his beard. With one eye, he squinted to

the sky.

“Blasted clouds. Ya spits on me all night, now wheres ya be when me head needs ya ta hide the sun?” He paused to cough up a piece of mud, then wiped it away with his dirty sleeve. “Least I be grateful the bloody dream be jus’ a bloody dream.”

He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the nightmare, then with a skinny hand, rubbed his itching chest. Five mystery scars made their home over his heart but he couldn’t remember how the indented holes came to be.

“Ah, now,” he said, still trying to get the nasty taste of mud from his mouth, “me thinks a drink’s be pullin’ me together mighty fine rights about now.” He forced his chin up, adjusted his coat, and looked about. “Pray tell, captain, who be we preyin’ on today fer a coin or two, hmm?” He tried to look dignified, and staggered forward.



Way south of Misty, where its peaks look like jagged teeth against the distant sky, the small town of Pandemonium sat on the banks of the Misty River. Meager veins of gold ore laced the nearby hills while glittering dust peppered the streams. Neither supplied much nor satisfied; it just teased the treasure hunters, never producing anywhere near a mother-lode. It produced enough, though, to hold the interest of the scavenging miners.

Claims were staked on the riverbanks and hills surrounding the city where a yellow haze of pollution lingered in the air, even after a good rain. The miners brought the extracted gold to Pandemonium’s smelting

furnaces where the precious metal was melted, purified, and poured into molds with the King's insignia embossed on their surface. They stacked the gold on barges and floated them down the river to merchant ships to be carried across the sea to their mother country.

News, mostly exaggerated by the ship's crew, told of fantastic riches to be found there. These hyped reports led a flurry of treasure seekers to venture back to the New World.

Theft, crime and killings were a part of the daily existence in Pandemonium. People fought over claims and stole each other's goods. This town was not a place for women, but women came anyway—mainly for man's pleasure—and fights broke out over them continuously. Anarchy best described the way of life here—a survival of the fittest.

Ever since he'd found his way off Misty, the captain wandered aimlessly about the streets. Sometimes he mumbled about a murder he had committed—one of many—but mostly he held the heels of his hands to his ears and hummed. No melody, only a loud annoying, "*mmm*." Everyone thought him more obnoxious than crazy—a kind of derelict the children loved to mock, tease, and throw rocks at.

Erikson tried to remain drunk; it eased the screams rattling through his mind. He begged for money to support his habit, but when none could be found, he held the sides of his head, flailed about, and pleaded with an unseen tormentor to stop. The residents believed it a pathetic sympathy ploy to get someone to buy him a drink. Sometimes he'd get lucky, but more times than not, he'd wake up beaten and bruised in some muddy back street.

This particular morning, a stranger sat outside a room-and-board. His long, buckskin-clad legs extended to the rails that bordered the wooden patio. His leathery face matched his weathered brown hat and he held a pipe to his mouth, puffing clouds of dark smoke. The most unusual thing about the stranger was his nose—he didn't have one. Cut off, ripped off, bitten off—no one knew for sure. Some said he was born that way. Only a menacing stub with two dark holes remained with the bone protruding slightly from the flesh. He didn't try to hide it, but wore it proudly like a crown, and used it for intimidation purposes.

Below where his nose should have been, a thin mouth tipped sideways above a freshly-shaven, square chin. His mind was cunningly sharp, and his heart, evil, even for this town.

Behind him, a tall silver-cloaked being stood, with a jeweled hand resting on his shoulder. A cloud of yellow gas swirled inside its shiny hood, dancing, it seemed, to the sound of chimes that bounced through the air. For brief moments, the silver-clad being looked as if it was fading away but then became solid again. Sporadically, it faded in and out, apparently trying to remain solid.

With great interest, the man and creature observed the ritual taking place between the children and the drunk.

"Ahoy, Captain!" one of the children teased the staggering man. "Are you lost at sea again?"

"Na, he ain't lost at sea," said another. "He's just lost his bloody oars again."

Amused by the taunting, the stranger chuckled to himself and drew in a breath of smoke. The jeweled hand of the creature patted his shoulder reassuringly, then slipped into the opposite sleeve of its robe.

“Hey, Captain Erikson, I think we’ve found one of them glowing, breathing stones you’ve been talking about.”

The captain turned quickly to the boy. His eyes grew wild and his hands shook. “Get rids of it, lad; run, or Misty’ll drive ya crazy with it, he will. Drive ya bloody crazy, I tell ya. Its luster, scent an’ sound will do it—I knows; I’s seen it, heard it, held it, I did. Run! Throw it away. Though it be worth all the gold in the world, run I say. Run—*Run!*”

The stranger took the pipe from his mouth, his brows narrowed above dark, hawk-like eyes.

The boys laughed and stomped dirty puddles of water at the drunken man.

“Oh, we found one, all right,” a boy said, “but it’s broken, Captain.”

“Yeah, and it’s rattling around inside your *bloody brains!*” They laughed and threw rocks, and kicked and spit on him.

Erikson tried feebly to shoo them away before staggering off in humiliation.

“I wants the treasure,” he mumbled to himself. “Needs it, I do. But I can’ts have it, oh no. It don’t like me. Beautiful it be, aye.” His eyes lit up. “Rich beyond a king’s dream it be too, aye ‘tis.” He scrunched his face. “But it screams at me. Make—it—stop—its—bloody—screaming!”

He put his hands to his ears, hummed, and spun in dizzy circles until he collapsed in the street where he lay in the mud, whimpering.

Two large leather boots stepped into his view. A rough clasp on his shoulder yanked him easily to his feet. In fear of another beating, Erikson cowered with his hands

in front of his face, but the hand that clasped him held like iron.

“Here,” a voice hissed, and its owner shoved a flask of whiskey into the captain’s stomach. The thrust nearly knocked the wind out of him.

Erikson looked at the flask and then up into the leathery face of the noseless stranger. He was tall, seven feet at least. Erikson’s stare fixed into the nose holes. He swallowed hard.

“You will sit with me,” the stranger said.

Still clutching the captain’s shoulder, he escorted the troubled man up the porch and forced him into a chair beside his. The scent of sulfur intermingled with the smell of tobacco, and the faint sound of chimes lingered in the air.

Nerves rippled all the way up Erikson’s spine to the base of his skull. He searched for the source of the music. Had his nightmare come to life? Was there really a three-legged beast? Relieved at not finding what he looked for, the captain sank into his chair, cradling the flask of whiskey as a mother would her newborn. He tried not to look at the stranger’s face but couldn’t help himself and laughed awkwardly.

“Thank ya, mate,” he said, patting the flask. “It be mighty kind of ye, ‘tis. Oughtta hit the spot mighty fine, it should.” He lifted the flask in salute to the stranger, then forced himself to look away from that hideous spot in the middle of his face. “’Ere’s to yer nose—er, health, I means.” He put it to his parched lips and took a good many swallows. He breathed at last, tipping his head back. “Aahh. Good whiskey, mate. Aye, mighty good whiskey, ‘tis.”

He went for another drink, but before the flask

reached his lips, the stranger caught his arm and pulled it down. Without looking, he pried the flask from his muddy hands. Caught in a cross-eyed stare at the bone-rimmed holes in the stranger's face, Erikson cringed and fought to tear his eyes away.

The stranger held the flask on his knee, taunting—Erikson's eyes followed.

"Tell me, what troubles you about the mountain and all its treasure, *Captain Erikson*?" The stranger never took his eyes off the nervous old man.

Erikson eyed the captured flask, licked his lips, and considered the question and how the stranger knew his name. "Aye ... the mountain gots treasure, if'n that be whats ya mean, it does."

The stranger remained silent, waiting for more. His eyes never wavered from the captain's face. "Ah ... the river-beds be lined with gold, they be." Erikson's words came out as if dragged from him.

The stranger's glare made Erikson fidget in his seat. He needed the flask, but it was being withheld, kept as a reward for information. He felt those eyes staring at him as if to drain every thought from his troubled mind. Yet he couldn't think of anything except the skeleton-rimmed nose hole which, in an odd way, helped the screaming inside his head subside.

"Ahh ... who ya say ya was?"

"I didn't say," the voice hissed smoothly. "The natives—go on."

"Aye, the natives, ah ... hey, how'd ya be knowin' 'bout any natives?"

"The natives—*Captain*—go on."

Not liking his stare, Erikson shifted his eyes and found the flask more comfortable to look at. He ran his

tongue over his dry lips. “Perhaps another swig be helpful, if’n ya gets me drift?”

Still as stone, the stranger made no effort to grant his request.

“Well, now ... ah ... let’s see.” Erikson shifted in his seat, trying not to look too needy. “Aye, yes ... there be natives that dwell up there, all right. Peaceful they be, too. Quite unfamiliar with trouble, ya know. An’ unattached to them golden riverbeds too, I’ll warrant. It’d be like takin’ candy from a baby, it would. If’n it’d be that hard, that is. Hee-hee-hee.”

The stranger sucked on the inside of his lips, narrowed his eyes, and studied every wrinkle in Erikson’s face.

“And?”

“Aye, that not be half of it. There be a wild girl that flies with them eagles up there, too, there is. They says she was raised by ‘em, she was. An’ them eagles raisin’ her grows thrice the size of normal ones—mighty they be, aye, and fierce, too.”

The stranger leaned back but held his stare. “Why should anyone believe a mumbling drunk like you?”

The captain sighed and slid back into the chair. “Aye, that be the problem.”

The stranger passed the flask of whiskey to the captain. “Tell me more about the girl.”

Erikson’s eyes widened and he shamelessly took the flask, grinning. “Aye, the girl. Never seen nothin’ likes it. Never heard such wondrous things about a person before neither.” He took a swig and wiped his mouth with his dirty sleeve, leaving a smear of mud in his beard. He felt more in control, crossed his legs, and tried to act relaxed. “They says she rules the mountain an’ knows its secrets.”

He sat forward and looked around suspiciously to see if anyone was listening, then whispered out the side of his mouth. "Legend has it that there be a cavern hidden somewheres in the mountain that's bloomin' with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, an' other spectacular riches." He laughed, stopped short then looked around with a finger to his lips. "*Shhh*. The Eagle Girl could bloody well know where it be, she might."

"And?" The stranger remained emotionless.

"And, mate?"

"The stones. Tell me about the stones."

"The stones? How in bloody—" He looked up at the stranger, stopped short at the sight of his nose hole, and quickly looked away. "How in bloody 'ell ya knows about them—"

Off in the distance, children laughed in their play, and he understood. "Aye, the little sweethearts—they be sportin' with me about it again." He sank back in his chair and relaxed with the flask. "Don't likes talkin' about it none, ya know? Beautifully horrible them stones be. No matter how glorious they be to yer purse, health, an' youth. Ya best leave 'em alone, I warn ya."

"Tell me about them." The voice held a hint of impatience. His eyes narrowed.

Erikson drained the flask and, handing it back to the stranger, stood. "I be going now, mate. Thank ya fer the drink. Good day to ya, sir."

He intended to make his way off the porch, but before he took a step, a cold blade touched his throat, and the heat of the stranger's breath hissed in his ear. "You drank my whiskey, *Captain*, and contaminated my flask with your filthy mouth." He spun Erikson around. "Sit or I'll cut your scrawny throat like a chicken's." His voice

never rose, but his dark eyes pierced Erikson to the bone.

The captain looked cross-eyed at the long knife in the stranger's hand. He swallowed then eased himself back into the chair.

The stranger flipped the knife around in his hand and slipped it back into his boot, then pulled a small bag of gold from his coat. He judged its weight in his hand then tossed it briskly into Erikson's chest.

"They call me Razor." He reached over, retrieved his pipe from the arm of his chair, and took a long drag from its stem. Dark smoke poured from his two breathing holes, rose up past his eyes, and hovered over his head like storming clouds. He gripped the bowl of the pipe and jabbed its mouthpiece at the man. "You're going to be a very rich man, *Captain*." His teeth clamped the mouthpiece. "In the morning, we leave for the mountain."

"M-m-mountain? Oh, bloody 'ell ... *mmmm* ..."

## Chapter 3

### Drafted

The morning broke in a bluster. Winds from the north sent rain crashing down on the saturated earth for the third day in a row. It wasn't unusual for May but Erikson wished it would stop, all the same. He hadn't any place to go, so he snuggled into his pillow and drifted into a half sleep. He could spend the morning in bed.

A fire crackled beyond the curtain doorway, and the smell of bacon filtered into his room with the warmth. Erikson took a deep breath and smiled as he exhaled.

Ah ... breakfast ... *Breakfast?* His eyes popped open. *Bed?* He sat up with a jerk. "What in bloody 'ell!"

The old man's brows narrowed as he examined himself. The five scars over his heart itched. He rubbed the area with his hand and wondered for the umpteenth time how they'd gotten there. After a year, he simply could not recall.

Still rubbing the wounded area, he looked around and didn't know—again—where he was. Usually he woke outside on the ground, but he must have gotten lucky last night and landed a real bed under a real roof with real food cooking.

He found his muddy clothes thrown in the corner by the window and something shiny at the foot of his bed. He grabbed the object and turned it in his hand.

“Whiskey flask? Hmm ... whiskey flask. I ought ta remem—*whiskey flask*.”

He jumped out of bed, staring at the bottle in his hands. At the sound of footsteps beyond the curtain, his anxiety escalated. “Razor ... Misty? Not be goin’ ta no bloody mountain again. Gots ta get outta here.”

He crept around the bed to his clothes and pulled them on quietly, keeping an eye on the doorway. He stuffed his hat over his tousled hair and took a sniff of the breakfast frying on the other side of the curtain before carefully lifting the window. His stomach growled sadly in farewell.

The wind blew a damp chill across his skin. He lifted a foot through, making as little noise as possible. He eyed the curtain nervously, grabbed the window sill, and pulled his other leg through. One last sniff and he dropped to the muddy ground.

Free at last, he felt relieved in spite of his missed breakfast. He pulled his collar up against the rain, turned and bumped right into the face of a horse. Lightning flashed in the sky, and sent the horse rearing.

“Whoa, girl!” came a raspy command. The rider steadied his horse as it pranced about in the showering rain and mud. Draped across the saddle on individual leather straps hung a number of bison horns covered in strange carvings. Their tips had been cut off and banded with a ring of silver. They knocked against each other with a hollow sound.

Above the spooked horse, the captain caught Razor’s angry glare. He wore a long, dark jacket and a wide-brimmed hat that repelled the pouring rain. On one side of his saddle a musket hung in its scabbard, on the other side a bullwhip. He held two sets of reins: one to his

horse and the other to a calm, sickly-looking mule with long ears that drooped in the weather.

“I see you’ve rested and are anxious to be on our journey, *Captain*,” he said sarcastically. “I’m sure you’ve had your fill of breakfast, too. Here.” He tossed the reins to Erikson. “Suffer the beast your presence, old man, we leave immediately.”

A chill of a different kind shot through Erikson and he took the reins to the pitiful beast. Was it the determined face of the man before him that caused the shiver? Or was it the cold, or the torturous memory of the mountain he was being forced to revisit. Any of the three was enough to do it.

He gathered his courage, stood tall, and tossed the reins back to Razor.

“Mate, I be regrettin’ that I be informin’ ya that I shan’t be going on this here expedition of yer’s no matter how much gold ya be puttin’ in me pockets. I’m sure ya be gettin’ along jus’ fine without me help.” He tipped his hat and water streamed off the tattered brim. “Good day to ya.” He walked away nervously.

Razor reined his horse into the path of the captain, threw a leg over the front of the saddle, and dropped to the ground. Three determined strides later, he backhanded the captain, smacking him hard with a gloved hand. Erikson fell to the mud and was met with a knee to his chest that knocked the wind from him. Razor pulled the knife from his boot and grabbed the captain by his thin, gray hair. He pushed his noseless face close, his breath reeking of stale tobacco, and then slowly, deliberately, cut a thin line on Erikson’s neck, drawing a sliver of blood.

“I swear if I have to persuade you one more time,

*Captain*, I'll cut you deep where you lie and in a place where death comes slowly. The pain, I assure you, will not be pleasant. You either leave with me now or die slowly sometime tomorrow. Make your mind up fast, *mate*, because you're wasting *me* time," he spit Erikson's jargon back at him sarcastically.

Water from the brim of Razor's hat channeled down Erikson's neck and washed away the blood. He tried to speak through gasping breaths. "*I ... I ... go ... you ...*"

"Good." Razor lifted Erikson to his feet by the scruff of his neck and shoved the reins back into his hands. "Mount your steed, *Captain*, we leave now."

Erikson stood with his hands on his knees and sucked in mouthfuls of air. Already back on his horse, Razor waited impatiently while he placed a foot in the stirrup and struggled into the wet saddle. A sickening feeling grew in the pit of his stomach—the kind you get when you know you're in serious trouble.

The old man looked puppy-like into the dagger eyes of Razor—eyes that upstaged even the dark black holes violating the center of his face. He thought he'd met every foul creature that ever walked on two legs, but this man was the most menacing, foulest being he had ever witnessed or tangled with. He was definitely out of his league.

*How could it be?* he wondered. *Hadn't I been the one always makin' the threats? Weren't I the one who be pushin' swabbies around an' snappin' orders? But that be long ago on me own ship in some distant land before the bloody mountain unleashed its filthy stone on me.*

"This way." Razor jerked his horse around and, horns rattling, led them through the northern streets of town.

Children gathered under the protection of their

porches and laughed at the captain riding by on a scruffy half-breed. Their insults stung, and he shrank into his saddle feeling humiliated. He thought of Toby on the mule he'd always made him ride and the insults he'd lavished on the halfwit. He missed Toby. The memories made him curse the mule as it swayed awkwardly from side to side.

“Suffer the beast yer presence,” Erikson mocked Razor to the mule. “Ya bloody pitiful beast. I haven't been on ya fer more than five minutes an' already me butt an' pride suffers your presence.”

The mule lowered his head as if he had been beaten with abusive words before.

“When ol' leather face handed me yer cursed reins an' said, ‘Suffer the beast,’ I believes he meant ta say, ‘Suffer this beast.’ Aye, ya are a beast of sufferin' not only to me butt, but to me eyes an' nose as well. Suffer ye are, so Suffer yer name be if'n I have anything to do with it, ya flea-bitten bag of bones. Aye, Suffer? How's about a little sufferin' in yer ribs as a payment to me backside?”

Erikson drove his heels into the mule's side. Suffer let out a grunt then trotted off behind Razor in a way that nearly rattled Erikson's hips right out of his skinny joints.

A short distance outside of town, a gang of ten rough-looking riders with five packhorses huddled under an over-hanging cliff flanked by oak brush. Each horse carried a different load: a couple with bags, one with cooking gear, one with excavating tools, and one carried long wooden crates.

The riders talked among themselves as they watched the two men approach. They laughed, pointed their fingers like pistols and shot make-believe bullets at them.

Fear of a different kind ran up Erikson's spine. He

looked at Razor and wondered what he thought of them, what he was going to do.

“Them bandits be lookin’ fer easy prey, I warrant,” he whispered to his mule. “Even Razor be pushin’ his luck if’n they take up arms against ‘im.”

More laughter erupted when they approached.

“Hey, Razor, where’d ya get the wet rat?” one rider jested.

“Yeah, how’d ya train it to ride a mule?” another mocked.

“What is it anyway? Some kinda mascot ya hired ta cheers ya on?” said a third.

Razor strategically placed Erikson between himself and the gang of riders. He made no reply or indication of what he was about to do. Erikson fidgeted, looking for a place to escape, but Razor marched them right up to the laughing roughnecks.

Without stopping, and as quick as the lightning that flashed around them, Razor snapped his bullwhip past Erikson’s face with a crack. It found its target around the neck of one of the men. With a quick yank, the man flew off his horse and landed hard on the muddy ground. One of the riders pulled a pistol from his belt but before he could take aim, a knife spun through the air and sank deep into his chest. The muddy ground received another body.

Erikson knew all about the muddy ground and what it was like lying in it. It didn’t matter if the person was dead or alive; it pleased him to see someone else experience it for a change. The captain took his turn at a chuckle. The other men, however, didn’t see the humor.

Razor continued to pull hard on the whip until he wrenched the man back to his feet next to the mule. He

gasped for air and clawed at the whip wrapped around his throat. Razor leaned over to the man and spoke loud enough for all to hear. “I’d like you to meet our new guide and treasure-seeker. He’s no mascot, and although he may be something to laugh at, you better hope it doesn’t happen again. Do I make myself clear?”

The precision and speed with which Razor executed the situation struck a fearful respect into the hearts of the men. With the whip held taut around the strangling man, Razor sat straight up in his saddle and spoke. “This is Erikson. Some say he’s a captain. He’s been to the mountain twice before and knows what we’re after. He spooks easy and shows promising signs of being a coward. Nevertheless, you watch yourself around him, or I’ll hang the next one who doesn’t.”

Razor released the tension on the whip and allowed the gasping man to uncoil the leather from his neck. Their eyes met. “Fetch me my knife—*now*.”

The others, paying no attention to the half-strangled man or the lifeless body in the mud, looked the captain over as if some commodity to be purchased.

In spite of the rough handling and talk by Razor, Erikson felt important and honored when Razor stood up for him.

“Ah, hi ya, mates! Didn’t know ya was all invited. Not that it matters much to me, if’n ya catch me drift. Ya can call me Cap.” He looked quickly at Razor for approval, but could read none in his expressionless face.

Razor calmly coiled his bullwhip and attached it to his saddle while all nine riders stood before him waiting attentively in the dripping rain. The man who had been choked with the whip, obediently handed Razor’s knife back to him, handle first. Razor took it and slid the

bloody blade back into his boot. From the front of his saddle, he took a leather strap holding an engraved horn, then looked the men over.

“Constantine!” he called to the man he’d choked with the whip. He threw the horn to him with a nod of his head.

Constantine caught it in midair and nodded back.

“Vasco!” Another horn swung through the air to meet its new owner. “Alexander!” Again he tossed a horn. “Adolph ... Roman ... Genghis ... Marco ... Hernando ... Napoleon ...”

With each name, Razor tossed a silver-tipped horn until one remained. He turned to Erikson and looked him over. His eyes narrowed, considering the old man, then he held the tenth horn to him. “Take it.”

Erikson hesitantly took the horn.

Razor stood tall in his saddle, towering above the rest, and made a final scrutiny of the men. “You are my horns in battle. My warning in trouble, my eyes, my ears, my hands, and if asked, my counsel.”

The men, each holding his horn, felt a sense of pride and duty to the man with the whip. Each face held a certain sinister arrogance that made Erikson’s skin prickle more than the damp weather.

“There is none mightier than me! You think ice is cold? You think fire’s hot? Watch me melt glaciers, freeze lava, and destroy all who stand in my way or say I can’t.”

From his boot, he yanked his long knife and held it high in the air. Rain washed blood down the blade and over his hand. He raised his voice, growling like thunder across the rain-pelted earth. “There is none mightier than me!”

The men thrust their horns into the air and shouted their decree:

“There is none mightier than you!”

“There is none mightier than me,” Razor roared back.

“There is none mightier than you,” the men shouted louder. “There is none mightier than you, Razor! There is none mightier than you.”

Over and over they screamed their declaration and jabbed their horns madly to the sky.

Razor breathed in the praise as a starved beast feasts on an overdue meal. The dark cavity, where his nose should have been, flicked red with fire.

Erikson watched nervously as Razor shoved his knife back into his boot and with both hands grabbed the front of his shirt and tore it open, revealing a chest of tight defined muscles. Directly over his heart, five red scars flickered with the same fire as his nose.

“Men of the horn,” Razor shouted, “show me your heart!”

Each of the nine men stood in his saddle and opened his shirt. On each chest, the same five scars burned red.

Erikson felt heat on his chest and put a hand to his heart—it burned. He fumbled with his shirt, almost tearing his buttons off, and found that his scars burned red like everyone else’s.

“Brotherhood of the horn!” Razor bellowed. “You—are—mine!”

The nine riders shouted their acceptance.

“My horns,” Razor roared above their noise, “sound your weapons!”

Each rider put his horn to lips and, one by one, they blew.

Erikson expected a loud, jumbled blast but, instead,

heard a melodious harmony. The sound, though beautiful, shot a peculiar fear through him.

For the first time, he looked at the horn given him. His thumb rubbed nervously over a carving. The image showed a hand with sharp fingernails gripping a heart.

He felt an urge to put the silver-tipped horn to his lips and blow. It harmonized with the others, and he swore he saw glittering sparks spray out. With each blast of the horn, the pain in his chest subsided and faded away.

Razor basked for a time in the sound, which gave him a new strength. He was in command, and they knew it. He kicked the sides of his horse with a shout: "To the mountain." He lifted his horn high, galloped past the men, and out into the northern wilderness.

"To the mountain," the nine yelled and galloped madly behind into the wind-blown brush of the plains. The horns, slung around their necks and arms, slapped against their sides as their horses pounded the wet earth.

The men raced up the trail after Razor. Erikson's stomach growled, and he wished he'd slipped into the dining room for breakfast instead of creeping out the window. He looked around and saw he was alone. He could escape if he wanted to, but the fear of crossing Razor made him think twice.

The pounding hoofs galloped farther away. Erikson couldn't believe he was reconsidering fleeing. He knew of several hiding spots; it could very well work.

He was about to try his luck and rein his mule about when his heart started burning again, and he heard the faint shimmering sound of chimes. A shiver rippled up his spine. He jabbed his heels hard into the sides of his miserable companion and trotted after the others, horn knocking at his side with the rhythm of his skinny butt

bumping up and down in the saddle.

“Wait fer me!”