



Ardun

Athorel Sea

Akylach

Market Town

Dum Lach
(Long Lake)

Ardun City

Khadim

Kyidan's
Town

Gorindel

Fabr Tonn
(Great Gate)

Bethalas

Ilythia

King's Forge

Bethal City

Grandbridge

Tarus

Havanni Duarta

Anund

Riverwatch

Dol
Khaach

Alpir

Pike's Hills

Tibem
Ferry

Pointsway

Tjarc

Tor Enrechil

Annemindin

**THE TRIALS OF ARDEN
SHADOW OF THE
DARKWOOD**

By

ANDREW ALEXANDER MILLER



Hamilton

ASCENSION INK PUBLISHING COMPANY

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Foreword

This is an ancient tale, now known by very few, and even more rarely told. Like most of the great stories and legends of old, it tells of a hero – of his trials and tribulations. He did not come from humble beginnings, nor did he have need to ascend to heights of power and glory before being set to his task, for he was born to it. Indeed, he himself was descended from a great hero.

Long before our tale begins, a man was born into the most influential family in the great city of Therabor. His name was Kai Dimascas. When his father Lothar, who headed the council that ruled over the Kayan people, died, a successor was to be named. It was presumed by all that Kai would be the next to lead their people, but when the Blue Council held its conclave, Kai was passed over. Frustrated and angered, he cursed the conclave and departed the city. For the next twenty years, he traveled the world, aiding the free folk. His name grew in renown as his shadow grew long. In time, he chose to settle, founding a new city of his own in a land called Forborine. He called the city Arunel, and there his power quickly grew.

It was in Arunel that the Cabal was born – the cult of the Kai. Kai mixed his knowledge of the *Radym* – the energy that held the fabric of the universe – with blood magic, melding ancient ceremonies and words of power with human sacrifice in the worship of the dark lord Javan, and Kai grew even stronger still. He gathered to him all the races of the world, subjugating each to his desire, creating a new hierarchy of what he believed was a perfect society.

In time the Council of Therabor, fearing Kai's unfettered power, and offended by his perversion of their order, decided that it was time to act. Ten thousand Kayan *alemba*, set out from Therabor, prepared to do battle, even wielding the *Radym* if necessary. Such a host had not set out to battle in an age, but the world was growing dark and the time, they said, had come when good men would need to stand.

And so, they marched, gathering forces from other Kayan cities as they went, their numbers swelling as more who were prepared to purge this new evil from the world joined them. Soon they came within sight of the city on its distant banks. Led by Timar Baniresh, they tried to call upon the power of the *Radym*, but try as they might, they found the energy had been subdued somehow and kept from them. A great host rode out from the city then, crossing the great stone causeway, and surrounded them. They were commanded to submit, and when Timar refused, they were cut down.

Tens of thousands were killed in the Battle of the Shallows, and nearly as many more were taken prisoner, enslaved by Kai. Now, with no one to curb his ever-growing power and no fear of reprisal, Kai's empire soon stretched from the snowy wastes to the north to the deep jungles of the south, and from the great western ocean to the plains beyond the eastern mountains. Kai ruled with absolute power, until a man named Akyrius, and a band of rebels who called themselves the Phoenix rose in Annendin, a long valley between two mountain ranges. From their valley stronghold, they began attacking Kai's forces, raiding outposts and supply lines and little by little they began to weaken the perception of Kai's invincibility. In time, Kai's dominion fell, and he was cast down by Akyrius himself.

A time of relative peace ensued, as Akyrius founded a new kingdom – a union of many lands joined together each by its own choice under the rule of a new common law – a law that treated all as equals. It was called the Ardent Kingdom, and for over a thousand years, the Ardent was headed by the descendants of Akyrius and provided peace and stability, holding the darkness at bay and serving as a beacon of hope and justice to the world.

But Darkness, it seems, has a way of hiding, waiting with great patience as it plots and plans, until the time is right for it to slink forth once again. It is at those times that the light of the world rests on those few who are willing to stand. This is the hero of whom I speak, and these are the tales of his trials – the Trials of Arden.

Prologue

*When the Rose doth breathe again, / Most beloved of His eye, /
Borne of Forjon [Highest] blood shall Ayinjosa [light's hope?]
be. / On turning's eve of the holy Fathers, / The Childe cometh,
and thunder shakes the land. / As Alidakra [true darkness?]
grows, / Like the treasured star / Shall Ayinjosa shine, / And
shrouded he must be, / Until the Voravena [First One?] comes.*

- excerpt from the *Tome of Ages*, Translated by Kordom
Baniresh at the behest of the High-King Fengal in the year
1244 in the *Corlana-Akyr*, the age of the Ardent Kingdom.

A chill breeze swept through the streets outside of Baniresh, the royal house and citadel of Ardun City, where countless people had gathered in the large square known as the King's Market, despite the cold of the evening. It was the largest open space in the city and its proximity to the Great House gave a view of the Murgan Tower, a squat stone structure built two-thousand years earlier. It stood above the gates of Baniresh, and men of the Phoenix Legion could be seen moving about behind its crenelated battlements, maintaining the low fires that illuminated the royal banner that flew atop the tower. Behind the Murgan Tower, the upper floors of Baniresh House could be seen, and beside the palace – looking like a sliver shaved from the moon itself – the Gellad Tower glowed brightly.

People had come from far and wide, braving the early winter to travel to Ardun to celebrate the *Lachithordieth*, the five-day festival that marked year's end. The city's usual population of over seven-hundred thousand had now swelled to nearly a million, packing the many inns and taverns. Residents even opened their homes during the *Lachithordieth*, inviting in relatives, or charging rent to strangers who made the pilgrimage to Ardun city.

It had been mid-morning when word had spread throughout the city that Aneri was in labour with the child who would oneday rule over Ardun and likely the Ardent Kingdom. Now the visitors along with countless residents had joined in pitching tents in King's Market to prepare for the coming birth. The food vendors made no complaint and worked long past sundown when they would usually have stopped their selling, and artisans and craftsmen crowded the market where they completed sculptures, paintings, tapestries, and countless other wares that would commemorate the event. To be born on the fifth of *Lachithordieth* which had begun on the winter solstice, was viewed as good omen. This child would bring a new dawn of prosperity to the people of Ardun.

The air was crisp, and stars painted the clear night sky looking like pinholes of sunlight streaming through a black canvas as the great horn of Benthor rocked the Gellad Tower, its brassy call resonating from beneath the domed hoarding of the tower, two-hundred feet above its base. The sonorous note disturbed the freshly fallen snow that had collected on the rooftops and the battlements of the wall that surrounded Baniresh. As the second blast sounded it sent a dusting of the snow drifting downwards in a fine mist that chilled the people below, and as the seven drums began their deep and thunderous pounding, the people of the great city of Ardun erupted in a shout of celebration; the child was born.

The revelry had only just begun when a second great cry of jubilation rose from the city as the blue standard of Annendin, embroidered with its white unicorn, was raised above the Murgen tower. The standard signified that the crown-Prince was at home in Baniresh. The child was a boy; Ardun had received her future King.

Chapter One

THE FLIGHT FROM TYARE



“Run faster!” Arden called over his shoulder as he bounded lightly across the long high grasses of the Elerin Fields towards the vast expanse of deeper green that was Verin Wood, or the Darkwood as it was often called.

“We’ve already escaped them Arden!” Taril shouted as he puffed and struggled along behind the younger boy. “We needn’t hurry now! It will take them hours to find we’re missing, and even longer to find where we’ve gone once they do.”

Arden laughed cheerfully as he slowed, his curly brown hair bouncing as he ran. Finally, he stopped and waited for his friend to catch up. “Five years at Baniresh and you *still* do not know Thorium!” Arden said with a grin as he wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his forearm.

Arden was twelve years old, and the crown Prince of the Kingdom of Ardun, which governed over an association of other states which called themselves the Ardent Kingdom – the last remaining portion of the vast union of kingdoms once ruled by Akyrius the Great. Arden’s father, the High King Fengal, had reigned for over two-hundred years, and Arden had been crowned as his chosen successor five years earlier during a great festival, and it was there that Arden had met Taril.

Taril’s light-brown hair blew back from his face as he reached Arden. He was thirteen and slender, and his bright eyes and impish smile marked him as a boy prone to mischief. While he usually took the lead in most of the boys’ exploits, this adventure had been Arden’s idea. Taril had been leery of leaving the city, indeed of even leaving the walls of the citadel. Children had been going missing from Tyare

of late. To be out beyond the wall without guard seemed foolhardy, but Arden had followed him on many an unwise idea, so Taril had reluctantly agreed feeling that perhaps it was just his turn to follow.

The fact that children had been going missing in Tyare was not new. It had been going on for years, but recently the frequency had increased. Disappearances had become so numerous, that the king of Tyare, Taril's father, had been forced to accept the idea that the children were not merely runaways. He had sent word to King Fengal asking the great king to come to Tyare and give council, and true to his people the High King had come. He had, with some reluctance, allowed Arden to accompany him, with the boy's promise to remain in the citadel and not to go wandering about the city. Arden had meant the promise when he made it, but over the past few days the citadel had begun to feel less like a palace and more like a prison.

II

As a young boy, Arden had heard stories of the great Kayan city that had once stood within Verin Wood before the forest had become so large and so ominous. The city of green, Talindor, had been a great city where the Kayan people and the Elarin lived side by side, but it had fallen to ruin centuries earlier in the days after the departure of Akyrius. Stories of Talindor like all the great histories had always fascinated Arden, and the idea of seeing the city had come to him as he paced about the gardens for what felt like the hundredth time. He had asked around the palace of Tyare and had found an old scholar willing to speak of the city, lost in the Darkwood.

Talindor was said to have been in the centre of the forest that had now grown wild all about it, but few – if any – knew what remained of the city itself. The forest was said to be haunted, and no one ventured far beyond the borders of the wood. Mists often hung over it at night and were said to grow so thick beyond the edge of the forest that people were quickly lost, and the few adventurous people who had reportedly

entered the woods in search of the city during the man's lifetime had never returned. Maybe they had become disoriented in the dense trees and been injured somehow, or maybe finding nothing they had gone on to more adventure, or maybe the stories were true, and the forest had claimed them in the night.

The thought of the woods being haunted had frightened Arden at first, but as the days wore on, the urge to at least attempt to see some remnant of the city grew. If the forest was haunted at night, then perhaps he could go during the day. Just to see. He had asked Thorium, who had spoken to his father Fengal, and Fengal had refused. When Arden worked up the courage to ask the man himself, the King had arched an eyebrow at him, leaned forward, and said that it was "positively out of the question."

After exhausting both avenues he saw only one other option, and so the night before he had resolved to sneak out of the city the following morning using the tunnels that led from the citadel to the fields beyond Tyare's great white walls; he would then enter the Darkwood, find the lost city before noon, spend a couple of hours exploring, and return to the citadel by the same means in time for dinner. Of course, he didn't know how to use the tunnels, but Taril did.

"It will be such an adventure!" He had said to the older boy who had looked at him amusedly.

"If you think I'm going to disobey –"

"You disobey the rules *all the time!*" Arden exclaimed.

"Perhaps I bend a rule or two here and there," Taril said a little too innocently. "But never your father when he says something to me."

"Only because my father never talks to you, and besides he didn't forbid *you* to leave the city, he forbade *me*."

Taril was shaking his head. "I'm sorry, I think it's a bad idea."

“I command it!” Arden exclaimed.

“You *command* it?” Taril repeated grinning. “Oh, your *highness*, what dost thou command of me?”

Arden smiled in-spite of himself. “I command you to take me beyond the walls.”

Taril giggled. “Why do you want to go looking for some old ruins anyway? All we would find – if we found anything at all – would be some old moss-covered rocks. Anything made of wood or metal likely rotted away centuries ago.”

“It’s a Kayan city!” Arden said excitedly, turning to pace across the room as he spoke. “They were made using the great magic, and the stone is hard and strong. It could all still be standing. Just think of it! There could be ancient relics! Even things that still work, like my lantern that the Kayans of Therabor gave me.”

Taril rolled his eyes. “I have no need of a lantern.”

“I didn’t say there would *be* a lantern,” Arden said. He grabbed Taril by the hand and pulled the other boy to his feet. “I said there could be treasures left behind.”

“I am a prince,” Taril said putting on a regal affect, lifting his nose high and tossing his hair. “I have no need of treasure. The vaults of Tyare are filled with gold and gemstones.”

“*Tarillll*,” Arden said, drawing his friend’s name out. “I need you to show me the way. Please?”

Arden said the last effecting a pleading tone and look of such innocence that Taril laughed, but then he grew more serious.

“Arden, the Darkwood is haunted. It’s dangerous. I don’t want to go wandering around in there and get lost in the dark. People go in there, and never come out. Grown-ups! Soldiers and hero types I mean – not, you know, coxcombs.”

“We’ll go in the day – tomorrow. We’ll leave in the morning and have a look around and be home well before sundown, I promise.”

Taril was frowning in consideration.

“Please,” Arden repeated in the same tone as before.

“We’ll never manage to get away you know. That pet wolf of yours isn’t exactly inconspicuous,” Taril said gesturing towards the large mound of snoring fur on the other side of the room.

“I’ll leave him here,” Arden said. “Thorium will be with my father in council, and when he sees Shadow is still here, he will think we’re somewhere around the palace. It’ll give us some extra time.”

And with a little more coaxing, Taril had finally agreed.

III

The following morning the boys had made their way down to the kitchen as they did every morning. Once they had eaten a fill of eggs, steak, and oatmeal, they had helped themselves to some of the dried meat and two jars of preserved fruit, as well as a loaf of bread which they stored in a rucksack for their adventure. Then Taril had led the way down into the cellars, telling the guards he was going to show Arden the dungeons.

“Will you be wanting an escort your grace?” the guard asked.

“No,” Taril said quickly giving the man his most winning grin. “No escort necessary, we won’t be going near any of the cells that are occupied. We’re just going to be in the east block that’s empty.”

“Begging your pardon, but the dungeon’s no place to play your grace,” the other door-guard said.

“We’ll be careful,” Taril said.

“What’s in the bag if I might ask, your grace?” the first guard asked apologetically.

“I just want to see them,” Arden said.

The guard almost seemed to jump as the Prince spoke.

“In Baniresh the dungeons are not below the palace, so I have never seen a dungeon,” the boy continued. “After we’ve seen them, we’re going to the gardens for the day and have some food to snack on, and wasters for some swordplay.” Arden said and smiled reassuringly.

The guard looked at him a moment before he spoke – almost hesitantly. “Very well your highness, but please be careful.”

“We will,” the boys chimed together, causing both men to grin, and with that the boys were each given a torch, and passed down into the lower level.

Taril led the way down a dim passage partly carved from stone, and partly built with large stone blocks. He held his torch aloft, while Arden’s remained unlit. “My torch for the journey out, and we keep yours fresh for the journey back,” he had said, and Arden had nodded readily.

Taril led the way to a wooden shelf that stood in the corner of a bend in the passage, and he grasped onto an unlit torch next to it, and pulled down. There was an audible click, and the shelf swung outwards revealing an even darker passage beyond.

“This is one of the entrances to the tunnels,” Taril said in a whisper. “Last chance to turn back.”

Arden grinned and shook his head.

Taril sighed but smiled, and the boys passed into the darkness beyond, pulling the shelf closed behind them.

IV

The passage was dank and smelled of mildew, and something else. A rotten smell. The way angled downwards and here and there the walls of the passage opened to either side as other passages came to meet it. They walked in silence for several minutes, the only sound, the patter of their own footsteps, until they reached a point where the floor flattened.

“We’re under the river here,” Taril said in a whisper.

“Why are you whispering?” Arden asked, whispering himself.

“Why are *you* whispering?” Taril hissed. “I hate it down here.”

Arden nodded his understanding. The tunnels were creepy. They were silent but for a strange sound that reminded him of the ocean. The air was stale, and that odor of rotting... *something*, hung thick like a fog. Arden thought he could almost taste it. They were alone with countless of tonnes of rock above them and no one knew where they were. Somehow though, the thought that they *were* alone and that no one would yet know they were gone excited him. They were really doing it, and soon they’d be above ground again and headed for the Darkwood.

“Does anyone ever come down here?”

“Only to keep the tunnels clear and maintained,” Taril said softly. “Builders come down once or twice a year to inspect them. Others work, clearing any fallen rocks and shoring up places where the walls have begun to weaken. I hate being down here because sometimes there are small cave-ins and you can end up trapped. My brother and I explored some when we were younger, but father told us the story of other boys who had explored and been caught down here. They died before anyone found them. I think it was just a story, but still...”

Arden swallowed hard.

They continued onward, and passed more openings and Arden began to think they looked like dark yawning mouths. They were disconcerting; the torchlight only travelled a short distance before fading into blackness, and each time they passed one, Arden half expected to see something emerge from the blackness, or glowing eyes looking back. He was sorry he had left Shadow behind. It would have been comforting to have had the wolf along, but it was too late now. Arden gritted his teeth as he found himself feeling for the haft of his sword through the fabric of the bag slung over his shoulder.

He was passing one of the branching tunnels when the hair on the back of his neck stood on end and he stopped abruptly.

“Taril,” he called softly, and the other boy turned to look at him. Arden nodded towards the opening and Taril moved to stand next to him. “What’s down that way?” he asked the older boy.

“Don’t rightly know,” Taril said, licking his lips. “You want to go exploring down here now?” He was smiling but it was a nervous smile.

“No,” Arden said quickly. “I just wondered. It feels... funny, you know? Like there’s something down there.” He peered into the darkness trying to see.

They stood in silence trying to look beyond the black. Taril held his torch higher as he strained to see. “Let’s keep moving,” he said at last, and Arden nodded.

They resumed their steady pace then, but Arden’s feelings of unease continued to grow. Taril had also seemed nervous when they had stopped, but Taril didn’t like the tunnels in the first place. Arden was feeling something more. He felt like something else was down here, as if something else were moving with them – sometimes just behind, and at other times off down the branching tunnels. He kept glancing back over his shoulder, afraid that he might see some creature coming out of the gloom to get him, ghoulish dead-grey fingers

reaching out grasping for him, but each time there was nothing but his own shadow, reaching back towards the black.

The passage had been sloping steadily upwards and curving to the left and he was trying to keep his breathing steady, when the suddenly the way turned sharply to the right, and the torch revealed a wooden ladder leading up to a trap door.

“There are other exits that come out at different points, but this is the only path I know, so I thought this would be best. Straight with no turns – impossible to get lost. It’s the easiest for me to find from the surface too. We’ll come up about a mile from the city wall, between Tyare and the forest. It’s a rocky patch of boulders so the sentries on the walls won’t see us, but we’ll have to run low for a bit until we’re out of range of the watch,” Taril said.

He handed Arden the torch, climbed the ladder, and pulled a latch on the door, pushing up. He strained against the weight of the door with an audible grunt. Then a slit of blinding white appeared around the lip of the door and slowly grew as Taril won the battle and the door gave way, swinging upwards. He pulled himself up and out of the square of light and Arden squinted as he looked up through the opening at a blue sky decorated by white puffy clouds.

Taril’s face appeared back in the hole and the boy grinned. “Glad that’s over-with! Leave the torches there and pass up the bag.”

Arden smiled, and after glancing back down the tunnel, he extinguished the lit torch on the floor, and let the other one fall next to it, before turning his eyes back upwards and lifting the bag towards Taril. Taril reached down and caught the loop of the sack and pulled it up through the hole.

THWAP!

Arden jumped as he heard the sound, and he spun to face the darkness. He stooped and grabbed the smouldering torch as gooseflesh stood out on his skin. He was instantly sweating, and the sweat made

the torch handle feel slick in his hand as he held it out towards the black. Rather than the feeling of panic subsiding, it grew steadily, and he backed up until he felt his backside touch one of the rungs of the ladder.

“What is it?” He heard Taril’s voice from above. The boy sounded both amused and quizzical, and Arden found it irritating.

“I heard something,” Arden said quietly.

“What?”

“I said I heard something,” Arden repeated more loudly. He squinted into the darkness trying to see something, anything that could have made the sound. His eyes had adjusted, and since he was standing in a column of brilliant sunlight, he found he couldn’t see far into the darkness at all.

“Falling rock maybe?” Taril asked, hunkering down to peer into the opening.

But it hadn’t sound like a rock. It hadn’t sounded like a rock at all. It had sounded wet – wet somehow – like something slapping water, or almost like...

“It sounded like a fish,” Arden said.

“A fish?!” Taril repeated laughing. “Quit being a nelly and come on up. Daylight’s wasting and this adventure was your idea, not mine. If you don’t come up right now, I’m marching up to the main gates and when I’m asked, I’ll tell your father you kidnapped me and got eaten by a fish.”

Taril was laughing, but Arden didn’t join him. He thought he could almost see something. Something seemed to be moving, but he couldn’t tell for certain, and he wasn’t going to go back into the dark to find out. There was something else too though. He felt like he was being watched, like something malicious was eyeing him, studying him.

Worse, it felt like that *something* was amused. His mind's eye saw a great cat perched outside of a mouse hole, waiting for a meal. The cat would kill the mouse and eat it certainly, but before it did, the cat would also *play* with the mouse. The cat would chase the mouse, and maybe even let the mouse believe it could escape. It would let the mouse hope, as if such hope would improve the flavour of the kill.

Arden shook his head clearing the thought, and reached one hand back, gripping one of the rungs of the ladder behind him. He put a foot up on the lowest one and hoisted himself up the first step, then did the same pulling himself up another and another. He paused a moment longer. He needed to turn and climb, but somehow knew, was absolutely *certain*, that the instant he turned his back to the darkness, whatever had made that sound would rush forward and seize him, dragging him back into the darkness.

He was breathing in short little gasps, and his arms and legs were becoming unsteady. He had to get out of here now, before it was too late. There was a kind of tension building in the darkness. He took a deep breath and counted to three in his head. He threw the torch into the darkness, turned fully towards the ladder and propelled himself up the rest of the way through the opening.

V

The air above was warm, and his clothes stuck to his body, but there was a cool breeze that felt good on his forehead, and he took a deep breath of the fresh air before he turned to look back into the hole. He saw nothing and looked at Taril and saw the boy was grinning at him.

“You going to be okay?” Taril asked in a sardonic yet somehow not unkind tone.

“Yes,” Arden said simply. “Close that thing and let’s go.”

Taril moved to the other side of the door which stood upright, and Arden took one last glimpse into the hole. As Taril pushed it shut, for the shadow of an instant, Arden felt that same malevolent stare on him again – a kind of awareness of him – of what he was thinking, and what he was feeling. He shivered as the door fell shut with a loud clap.

As soon as it was closed, Arden felt the air lighten, and he realized why it had taken Taril so much effort to open it. The top of the door was covered with stone. It had been carved to hide the contour of the door, and the only thing that really made the door visible was the metal ring which served as a handle that sat atop it.

With the opening closed, and the dark malice trapped beyond it, Arden felt much better, and he let out a deep sigh. Taril turned to look at him and his face softened. “Are you okay?”

Arden smiled. “I am,” he said. “Must have been a rock, I just panicked. Stupid.”

Taril reached out and gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Come on. My turn to carry the bag I suppose. Let’s go find this lost city. First piece of treasure we find is mine.”

Arden nodded, and followed as the boy set out through the high grass, stooped low. He was embarrassed to have lost his nerve in such a dramatic fashion, but it hadn’t sounded like a rock. Not like a rock at all. His mind wandered back to a day not long before when he and Thorium had gone down through the gate to King’s Market and there had been a fishmonger there. Arden had been looking at a fish that seemed to have impossibly large eyes when the fishmonger opened a box and lifted out what he had called a *lula*, but Thorium had called a *kalmar*.

The creature had tentacles, and big eyes and had felt like drying tree-sap when Arden had touched it – squishy. It had been wet, and when the man had put it on the table it had made a sound like what Arden heard. *Thwap*. There was certainly little chance that a similar

sea-creature was roaming the tunnels beneath the city of Tyare though, so what had it been?

A rock, he reasoned.

But he had seen no loose rocks in the tunnel.

They maintain the tunnels; clear them of rocks.

He shrugged.

Soon the warm sunlight and the vast expanse of the clearest of blue skies began to warm away his feelings of unease and as the green tree-line drew nearer he began to grow excited. They crested a hilltop and once on the other side, Taril paused and put the sack down and stretched, standing straight. We're far enough away now we don't need to slink about."

Arden straightened himself and smiled. "Race you to the forest?"

"It's your turn to carry the ba-"

Arden laughed as he took off towards the distant line of deeper green. He ran for several minutes, and Taril fell behind.

"Arden!" Taril called.

"Run faster!" Arden called over his shoulder.

VI

The boys walked at a leisurely pace now, as the grasses swayed in the lazy wind of the morning. Arden guessed it had probably been about two hours since they had left the dungeons and entered the tunnels. They had spent a little less than half of that time underground, and the rest spent crossing the fields.

They were now about a mile from the forest, and Arden guessed that Thorium and his father would be now in council, tied up for the next couple of hours, perhaps even more. Consul Norin had come on the journey, and if there was one thing Norin loved more than the power of his position in the Synod, it was the sound of his own voice. His presence could easily stretch any meeting to a few hours.

Arden reckoned they should have three hours to explore the forest, so they would explore for an hour and a half, and by then if they hadn't found anything they would turn back. He smiled.

"You seem pleased with yourself," Taril said walking beside him. He was enjoying the adventure less. Taril was at home in the big city and had grown accustomed to living in the luxury of Baniresh. While a walk in the gardens every now and then was certainly nice, and even running on a well-kept lawn could be fun, traipsing through the high grass that tried to trip him up with each step, with a bag slung on his shoulder was not his idea of a fun time.

Arden on the other hand loved their camping trips and had insisted on going on several the previous summer. He liked catching fish, and even worse, cleaning them. Taril thought it was utterly revolting, but he had played along on those trips, because... well... Arden was *Arden*. The crown-Prince of Ardun was happy to go along with whatever everyone else wanted to do most of the time, but when he got it in his mind that he wanted to do something – one might as well try to hold back the tide with his hands.

Indeed, Arden was enjoying himself. The field was peaceful – far removed from the smells and sounds of the city. He had seen wild deer, and there were hawks that seemed to float as they rode the thermals here and there overhead, occasionally diving to catch an unwary field mouse. Wildflowers had started to bloom, giving the fields a picturesque look like in one of the landscape paintings that hung in Baniresh.

It was refreshing somehow, even exhilarating to be out here with no guards. All his life he had been constantly guarded. Thorium rarely left his side. Even when he was in the grounds of Baniresh playing with Taril and his brother Adalon, he was watched from a close distance by numerous guards. On his few camping excursions to the foothills north of the Bakhura, the boys had shared a tent in their own little clearing, but guards had been posted all around the clearing, and there had been a whole encampment of the Phoenix Legion a short distance away. His every move had been tracked – until today, and though it was a little frightening, it was exciting to be on his own.

This trip had been his first time leaving Ardun. He had hoped to have more freedom, but the trouble he found was that as well recognized as he was at home, here in Tyare he was more the stuff of legend. People treated him almost as though he were some sort of walking deity. Worse still, as word had spread that he and his father were coming to Tyare, people from the surrounding towns and villages had flocked to the city, so he was not permitted to leave the citadel without armed escort. This in turn drew more attention to him, which forced an early return to the palace.

So, it seemed to Arden that he was perfectly within his bounds to take this little trip – his first real adventure, stepping out into the world – not as a boy, but as a young man, setting his own course.

They were about fifty paces from the edge of the wood when Arden spoke again. “The leaves are already so big.”

Taril nodded. “Spring comes earlier in the lands south of the mountain pass. Bethalas is warmer than Ardun, and the leaves of these trees grow quickly. They would have been buds a month ago.”

Ahead, a single tree stood apart from the rest of the forest, like a lone emissary. It was about twenty paces from the forest’s edge and the boys walked toward it. “How tall do they grow?” Arden asked curiously brushing his fingers over the rough bark of the tree. It was about ten or twelve palms across he guessed. It was thick for a tree on a forest’s

edge where trees were often younger as the forest worked its way out. Looking at the tops of distant trees beyond the wood's border, he saw they grew much taller than this, and he surmised, much thicker as well.

"The tallest can grow to be fifty paces or more," Taril answered, noting the other boy's continual curiosity regarding things that seemed so mundane. "Are we really going to go in?" He asked. Now that they were here, he found he was even more reluctant to enter the Darkwood.

"You want to go back?" Arden asked a little disappointedly.

"Don't know really."

Arden looked up towards the lowest branches of the tree, several paces up, then back across the field tracing the visible line in the grass that marked their path. He sighed. "I won't force you if you don't want to," he said, "but we've gone to such trouble and come all this way. Why don't we walk for a time, and then if we've found nothing, we'll turn back and go home."

Taril looked toward the forest for a long moment then turned back to him, and Arden was startled to see there were tears standing in his friend's eyes. One fell free, dropping from the end of the boy's long eyelashes. He blinked.

"In Tyare we grow up hearing that this place is haunted. That it's dangerous for anyone to enter. It's not just children, grown men don't enter. We get most of our timber from the loggers to the north in the Pikes Hills. There were some lumberjacks who came to Verin, but the people in Tyare wouldn't buy their wood because timber from the trees is said to be bad luck. No one has a table, or a shelf, or a bed made of fluxin wood. Craftsmen won't use it, and it's said that the last one who did saw his entire shop burned to the ground in an accidental fire."

Taril paused a long moment, and Arden let the boy take his time. He wouldn't push. The silence began to grow uncomfortable, and Taril

shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his eyes downcast. “Look – I’ll come, but do you swear we’ll turn around in an hour?”

Arden took the bag from Taril whose turn it was again and pulled out a linen ball which he unwrapped to display his pocket clock. “Here, see? It is half past eleven bells.” He held the clock out for Taril to see. When it reaches half-past one bell, if we haven’t found anything we will start back. We should clear the forest by half-past three and be home well before sundown. We’ll cross the fields and use the gate.”

“We’ll be caught if we use the gate,” Taril said quickly.

“I’ll take responsibility for being out.”

“A lot of good that’ll do while I’m being hung from a gibbet.”

“As you said, we’ll just tell them that I kidnapped you,” Arden said with a grin.

Taril smiled. “Just don’t get eaten by a fish.”

Arden nodded still grinning but noticed Taril’s expression. “What is it?”

The other boy hesitated again, reluctant to speak. He looked at the younger boy with wide eyes. “You won’t leave me behind, will you?”

“What do you mean?”

“If the forest is haunted and we have to run, you’re faster than I am. You wouldn’t leave me behind, would you?”

Arden smiled as he buckled his sword in its sheath onto his belt, and did the same with his dagger. “No Taril,” he said.

“No, I mean it,” Taril said, and he reached out and grabbed the fabric of Arden’s doublet at the shoulder. “We go in together, and we

come out together. You won't leave me, and I promise I won't leave you."

Arden smiled, placing his hand over Taril's where it held him. "I promise not to leave you Taril," he said, giving the hand a reassuring squeeze. "You're my best friend. Really my only friend... well, except for Adalon, but it's different with him because he's like my brother." Arden paused. "Anyway, all that is to say that I won't leave you. We go in together and come out the same."

Taril's smile looked grateful as he nodded, releasing the other boy. He pulled his own dagger from the bag and lifted the loop of leather lace its sheath was tied to, over his head. Dressed for battle, Arden slung the bag over his own shoulder, and the boys turned towards the forest again.

"Well," he said. "First step is always the hardest."

Taril rolled his eyes and started towards the forest and the boys made their way under the dense canopy of the trees.