

## Foreword

*Gentle Reader,*

*Someday soon, your world will end.*

*Ending is not as final as it sounds. Our world has ended before. At least this time, the end will be a quick one.*

*When it comes, be patient, for your time here is not yet done. Those of your cycle linger and watch new cycles unfold. Some of you will walk this spinning blue rock again. A few will shape its destiny.*

*Rootstock Saga chronicles the events that will forge us, and we join the tale in the year 4399, Wodari Calendar, Earth Cycle Five.*

*This is your story.*

*Regards,*

*Nigel*

## Chapter 1

# Fehan

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Nigel Willoughby  
Eyton's Fork, Aleron  
Tremoon, 4399

Nigel narrowed his eyes to a thin slit. As an old drunk slouched in a chair, he drew as little notice as the broom propped in the corner. He leaned back his head, and the wall pushed his tweed cap down his brow.

Bounty hunters crowded around a table near the fireplace, rough men as hard as flint but not as sharp. Wedged between them, the spindly youth with a hefty price on his head sullenly poked at a bowl of stew.

Nigel scanned the tavern again and sent a glance up the stairs. The patterns wouldn't so much as quiver if he got up and walked out, but he owed a debt to a good man. A dead man. Paying that debt could wait until the bounty men had downed a few more mugs.

As he settled back to bide his time, the tavern door sprang open. Crisp winter sunlight sliced through the tavern's smoky haze. A distraction came striding in, carrying the brash and breezy sound of young men not yet blunted by life. Three young bucks scraped back empty chairs at Nigel's table, paying the old drunk no heed.

Rhynn nobles, Nigel gauged from their tall boots and weaponry. Hawks of Aleron, declared the breclans beneath cloaks they shed in the tavern's warmth. Nigel noted the clan sigils in passing interest. Callan, Gruder, and Buchanan. The last to sit was the first to speak.

"A round, Livvy," the young Callan called out, his smile fading with a glance the bounty men's way. "It's Fehan, all right."

The tavern and the village surrounding it were little more than a traveler's stop on Falkender Road, but the land beneath it belonged to the Callans, and that put it under their protection.

"Fehan Elliott has a bounty on his head? That can't be right," said the dark-haired Gruder.

"What's Fee gotten himself into now?" said the Buchanan, of average size for a plow horse, but conspicuously large for a man. He shouldered between his companions with the apologetic

restraint of one accustomed to fitting his bulk into an undersized world and wishing it wouldn't cower like that.

"He must be in a right bad mess to get a waiver from your father," said the Gruder.

It was an understandable assumption, but no lord in Aleron had waived jurisdiction in the matter. Few could even be aware of the travesty yet.

"Da didn't give any waivers. He wouldn't," said the Callan. He had a robustness that stopped short of brawn and a boyish face. Only the eyes merited a second glance. Pale grey and watchful, the eyes belonged on someone older and wiser.

"Too many of them to be here justly," he said. "This has to be a nab and run."

When the proprietor sidled up with their cups, the Callan drew her closer and nuzzled her ear.

"A friend of ours is here, Livvy," he whispered. "We don't like the company he's keeping."

"Can't say as I blame ye." Livvy sent a furtive glance across the room.

"Have a lad ready our horses. One of theirs, too."

"Watch yerself, Lord Seth. They're a rough lot." Livvy wagged her finger. "Don't go bustin' up the place, ye hear?"

*How quaint.* Hapless Fehan had rescuers in abundance this day.

Nigel had to admit, Aleron bred them bold. Each of them had probably fisted a wooden sword on the day he was weaned. Even so, they were no match for hardened bountymen. Their eagerness to die could prove a useful diversion.

"What do you think?" asked the Gruder. "Pin the card?"

Lord Seth shook his head. "Mug shot."

"Oh, I like that one," said the big Buchanan. Quick for his size, he bolted to his feet, toppling his chair to the floor. He towered over the Gruder with a scowl that could make a gwynwulf tuck tail and run.

"Those are fighting words, Aengus. You got me riled now."

"I meant naught by it, Gaven. You're as good a shot as any." Black eyes flashed with mischief. "Any but my sister."

Nigel cracked one eye wider, intrigued as their names stirred a recollection. Fehan's unremarkable eyes had gone as round as saucers behind the oversized spectacles perched on his narrow nose, making him look like an underfed owl. The bounty men shouted for more ale at the prospect of an entertaining brawl.

Gaven lunged, and Aengus dodged. Seth got to his feet with unhurried purpose.

"No busting up Livvy's place, boys," he said. "A wager instead."

"Wager," Aengus wheezed in Gaven's chokehold. "Seth says a wager."

Gaven grunted and let go. Aengus tumbled to the floor.

"All right, then." Aengus dusted himself off and poked Gaven in the chest. "I wager I can set an apple on your shoulder and core it at ten paces. Without knocking it off."

Gaven swatted him away. "I wager I can set a full mug atop your head, nick the handle clean off, and not spill a drop."

"The winner takes what coin you have on you." Seth sealed the preposterous wagers. He held out his hand. A waggle of fingers called in the ante. Clinking coins had bounty men setting down their mugs.

Under the table, Nigel's fingers curled around his crossbow. He could take Fehan now and clear the debt his conscience wanted paid, but the encounter was becoming mildly interesting.

Aengus backed against a whitewashed plank wall. Gaven balanced the mug atop his raven-black hair, turned the handle out to the side, stepped back, and adjusted it again.

"Flinch, and you'll get doused."

"Aim well, or I'll get dead."

Aengus swallowed. Gaven steadied a silver pistol, and every eye in the tavern riveted on the spectacle. Sweat glistened on Gaven's brow as he drew back the hammer.