



The
Exiled
Heir

AUTUMN'S FALL SAGA: BOOK ONE

JONATHAN FRENCH

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The Errantry of Bantam Flyn

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DEDICATION

To Liza, my wife. To Ann, my mother.
The midwives of this book.

PROLOGUE

The darkness was larger than his cell. He could feel it waiting beyond the four walls for fathoms in every direction. Above, below, all around, it loomed and it hungered. Squatting within its onerous center, the prisoner slept away his confinement. Eyes open or closed made no matter in that perfect blackness. He slept, passing the time on the knife-edge of death.

Time!

No longer was it measured in suns and moons and the passage of stars. It was marked with the sound of an unseen hatch in an unseen door, sliding back, the cold iron scraping. Next, the barest disturbance in the stale air as bread hit the stone floor. Quickly, the scraping would come again, the hatch closing, fastened with latches and spells. These noises were his only measure. Three hundred and two thousand, two hundred and twenty hunks of dry bread.

His prison was underground, deep in the Earth. Beyond the cell, beyond the endless darkness, he could hear the threatening song of Water, its heavy, hollow echoes waiting to crush him. Oh, but his cousins had fashioned him a dreadful hole in their sacred burial grounds! How they feared him, to place him alive in this place, far below the kingdom he once helped conquer, far above the kingdom that was once home.

Yet, he was no stranger to the embrace of the world. Long ago, he was born beneath its surface, but not in some cold gullet like the one which now caged him. No, he had matured within the world's fiery heart, nursed from its molten blood, bathed and basked in its heat until it was bound within his flesh. Long had he dwelt within the kingdom of Ghob, the seat of his people won from dragon-kind. It was a realm of sweat and steam, a realm of Fire!

When the command came, he had arisen with his brothers, back to the green, back to the blue, where even the noon-day sun was a pitiable candle to the flames of home. There, upon the surface, they had placed a crown upon a mortal's brow and known centuries of rule.

Those had been days of light and lust and war, and the only darkness was night.

Night!

He wanted to laugh, but dared not, lest the darkness claim his tongue. This true darkness where they kept him, deeper than black, where the eyes see nothing and cease to matter, cease to exist. There was no sight. What was night compared to that? A bad mimic, a poor mockery, a whore playing at being a lady.

Since his captivity began, the darkness gnawed at him, piece by piece. It took his eyes first, popped them into its blacker than black maw like sweetmeats. They were gone the instant they tossed him into the cell. It took his ears next, but not quickly. The blackness leaked in slowly, filling the cavities, dissolving his eardrums with cautious cruelty. He did not realize he was deaf until it was too late. He could dispel it if he spoke. Shouted. Laughed. Cursed. Screamed. Screamed. Screamed. He never did, always waiting for the scraping of the hatch to remind him he still lived.

When he was first a prisoner, they did not keep him so deep underground, so deep in the dark. The gnomes, his cousins and captors, were forever ruled by the elves. Their soft ways insisted

upon courtesy, even for an enemy. Mocking their mercy, he escaped. Once. Twice. Thrice. More. He escaped and they caught him. Once. Twice. Thrice. More and more. They caught him. And, at last, they put him in the dark.

Down in the deep, down in the dark, beyond where his sweet cousins laid their dead, that was where they chose to inter him. The gnomes banished him to the suffocating Earth, the undine sealing his cell with Water. The sylphs were kept away, for fear he would use the Wind to rekindle his powers. They kept him smothered, miles of ancient rock and dirt pushed in around him, dampening his power. His gaolers were venerable, blind gnomes, each a potent Earth Shaper and warded against him. Their sight had been stolen by the slow crawl of centuries or their eyeballs savaged in war by smoke and iron. They came blind to the darkness and would never see again.

But he did.

Unbeknownst to his captors, he could still call forth the flame to fight the darkness. But Fire burned, consumed, demanded sacrifice of its own and hungered for fuel. It was all he could do to summon a spark, barely an ember, a pitiful gnat of flame. He fed its craving heat and starved himself. Three hundred and two thousand, two hundred and twenty hunks of dry bread. He gave them all to the Fire.

They burned, and the burning sated him more than a hundred feasts. He transformed every meagre meal into a single star in an endless sky. Ash in the eye of the blackness. An ulcer in the gut of his prison.

During those fleeting moments, he lived. He awoke. His eyes were restored and his ears returned to the sizzle of burning bread. It was torturously fleeting. Quick. Painful. Ecstasy. Enough time to feel, to be whole, to breathe, to mark the wall, to count the days. Three hundred and two thousand, two hundred and twenty days. Each time, when the flame died and the darkness returned, he slept again to avoid following the Fire into nothingness.

When his hair grew long enough, he would cut it, gnawing through the filthy strands with his teeth. He mixed it with the contents of his slop bucket and summoned a true Fire. The blaze illuminated his cell, fed by his leavings, the waste from a wasted body. He danced and cavorted, cursed the darkness and counted the marks on the wall. Tallying the cost. Totaling his captivity. Three hundred and two thousand, two hundred and twenty days.

Yet today, the meal had not come. No bread. No Fire. No count. No life. He was blind. He was deaf. He was asleep. He was dead. And he would not live again. Panic seized him. This stomach of Earth would claim him at last. The Water would rush through the stones, the bile of the world, eager to digest him. He would be shit out into oblivion.

The walls of his cell imploded, punching his ears with concussive force, showering him with grit. Any moment, he would begin to drown.

Then, he smelled it. Burning dirt. The Earth was on Fire. Burning. Smoking. The charred air filled his nostrils, arousing him. Straightening, he stood.

Where once stood a rarely seen wall scarred with tally marks, there was now a great, gaping hole. Figures stood in the fissure. Squat of body, wiry of limb, flat of head, pointed of ear. Not his cousins. His brothers! Saviors silhouetted in the magnificent glow of violent firelight.

Light!

Constant, steady and painfully bright.

He was free and a new day could begin! Another chance for conquest and vengeance. Another chance to burn, to burn it all and never stop until the scions of his King sat the throne.

As his brother goblins stepped into the shattered cell, he smiled and his atrophied voice was a croak.

“One.”

ONE

Padric let his knuckles bleed and cursed his small hands. He dipped his injured hand back into the frigid creek and tried to watch his blood mix with the water, but the current was too fast. Even this small creek cared nothing for his tiny contribution. Padric spat in spite and gave a snort of self-mockery when the flowing water also overcame his foamy expulsion. His hand started to go numb, but he did not remove it, hoping the water would cool his anger as well as his pain. He knew it would do neither.

The betrayal of his hands was an old hurt. Familiar and constant, even predictable. Today, it was a welcome distraction from the rage that had been building for some days, threatening to boil over and tempting in its promise of relief. So far, Padric had resisted. He feared what would happen if he lanced the poison within and exposed it to the village. Mostly, he feared himself. There was murder in his heart. He did not want to kill Eirwen, but even his small hands could complete that grisly work with confidence if fueled by the torment in his head.

Eirwen's callous disregard did not deserve such a punishment and Padric could think of what others would say if they knew his feelings, but the dark thoughts in his head were ungoverned by the opinions of others. In truth, Padric could think of no crime of either the law or the heart that would merit the killing of a woman. He remembered the widow who had given her daughters over to the gruagach last year. Even she was spared by the village council. Sent to the Knucklebones, of course, but still alive. Padric was not vicious or violent by nature, but the fire of passion burned the brighter when lust turned suddenly to hate. At least, that is what he told himself.

He took his hand from the water, closing the cold, swollen fingers into a fist. He watched as the blood welled up once more on his ragged knuckles, then shook his hand, ridding it of droplets both clear and crimson. He thought of returning to the border ditch, but tarried by the creek instead. The prospect of going back to the company of his father and the other men was not a welcome one. No matter that he was a man grown, Padric always felt the fool child around his father. There was no task Padric could perform for the benefit of the clan that his father could not do with greater ease and greater haste.

He had been sent to gather more spades and was happy to get away, for the tedious labor did nothing to distract his mind from Eirwen. His thin fingers and narrow palms had lost their grip on the hafts of the tools as he was backing out of the small stack stone shed. Foolishly, he had tried to carry four in each hand; to avoid the embarrassment of a second trip. His father could have handled five, maybe even six in each of his meaty clutches. Three was pushing it for Padric. His overzealous efforts were rewarded with nothing but an awkward juggle for control of the heavy tools which Padric quickly lost, but not before he had managed to rake the back of his left hand against the rough stone of the shed wall. He made two trips after all.

After giving over the second bundle of tools with as much pride as he could muster, he mumbled some excuse and headed for the creek. He felt the eyes of the men on his back as he stalked away. He could almost hear the shake of his father's head.

He was such a failure. And it did not matter if his father or the other men thought it. Padric thought it of himself. His only real accomplishment was winning the affections of Eirwen, but even

that prize had vanished in the time he had been away.

Two months!

The thought of how quickly her feelings fled set his teeth to grind and sent his mind skulking into its darkest corners where schemes of blood and vengeance squatted in wait. He could escape in the mundane tasks of his daily life for only so long before some unexpected thought of her sent him seeking out those black fantasies in order to calm his anger and comfort his pain. But the more he thought on them, the more difficult it became not to act upon them, to bring them forth from his wounded heart and cast them in her face.

The sound of the creek dwindled behind him, and it was some moments before Padric realized he had set off toward the village. His jaw was sore from clenching. He tried to relax it before he ground his teeth to dust. He was vaguely aware of the maul riding in his injured fist and made his way along through familiar habit. His vision was clouded with the image of Eirwen's tear streaked and pleading face, the body of her new and unknown lover wrecked upon the ground. He had never seen the man, but he knew Eirwen and her tastes. He would be fair of head, broad of shoulder and deep of chest, with a soft, simple face and not an ounce of cleverness behind his eyes. He would be the opposite of everything Padric was.

A growl of frustration echoed behind Padric's clenched teeth and his pace quickened. He did not know for certain where she was, but his anger told him he could sniff her out wherever she dallied. And if he found them together, so much the easier. There would be no choice then.

He reached the upper outskirts of the village, where his father's house lay. Instinctively, he gave it a wide berth, knowing that giving his mother even the briefest glance of him would alert her to his intention. Mothers knew that kind of thing. He would try Eirwen's rooms first, hoping to find her there, otherwise he would have to go up to the fort and search the ciderhouse. The thought of that familiar task only increased the burning behind his eyeballs.

By the bones, that girl could drink! And dance. Those were her true loves. Public displays of frivolity that only increased her appeal with the men of the village and the fort. That and the fact that she was slim, with a round bosom and backside, with long, red tresses, creamy skin and a flashing smile. But Padric knew the truth was in her eyes. Frigid and distant and overly large, so like a fish, and when they knew fear, they turned to puddles of panic. The shapely woman fled and the lost child was left behind. He had seen it many times. Despite all appearances she was not a lusty wench. Padric often thought she had inherited the madness of her mother, for fear was her driving factor in all things. She gave her body readily enough and that could be forgiven had she found true joy in it, but she did not. It was simply that she feared to be alone. Two months and she had replaced him!

The old widow that lodged Eirwen had not seen her that day. She looked up at Padric with an expression both lost and full of pity. Padric was not sure she recognized him and he began to wonder, not for the first time, how many men had come calling at this woman's door, seeking her itinerant lodger. Eirwen did not sleep here often, that he did know. He could not count the nights they had spent together, hidden away in some turf shed or root crib. She would always drop off to sleep directly after and leave him lying awake, pondering the lack of true affection between them. He did not love her, then or now. That knowledge, however, did not ease the sting of her betrayal.

The widow slowly closed the door. Padric stood a moment and glared at the house. He wondered if Eirwen was doing the cooking or the washing for the widow as she was supposed to. Shame settled over him with the thought that he had been one of the numerous distractions that kept Eirwen from tending to her duties and caring for this poor woman who had taken her in. Not again, he promised himself. He had wasted enough time with her and no matter what course this day would take, he would see himself free of that worthless wench.

He felt sick to his stomach as he made his way up the hill. The familiar sight of the fort at

the summit curdled his anger into a swimming nausea. He hated this place with its ciderhouse and barracks. The drunken warriors with their big talk and idle ways made Padric glad he was a farmer's son. The labors of the land were thankless, boring, and hard on the bones, but at least the result kept the children's bellies full. These louts did nothing but create more hungry mouths. Their killing made orphans, their carousing made bastards. Padric was glad his seax was still under his bed. He was like to use the large knife given his mood and he could ill afford a fight with one of these sword-wearing swine. He was not a fighter by any means. Had he the bulk, which he did not, he would still be a farmer's son. Farmer's sons were not fighters, they were strugglers.

He did not even glance at the sentries by the gate. Padric discovered long ago that simply appearing direct in action was enough to remain unchallenged by these fools. They perceived he had business in the fort, some menial labor to perform and were not interested enough to bother with him. Or they could have just been afraid of him. He deepened his frown and pushed on, leading with his shoulders as he passed through the gate.

It was a risk coming here. Always was for Padric. The warriors might try to goad him into a fight. They had before, sometimes with success. The drunken ones were the most likely to try or the ones that liked to mask their fear with bullying. Just another reason to hate this place, hate the fearful and simple-minded people who branded him.

Raven-touched. Death Cap.

Ill luck was in his blood or so the midwives said. Those ugly crones should be sent away too, like the child-selling widow and Eirwen's mother. He should have stayed away. Fafnir had asked him to journey farther and it had been tempting, but Padric felt obligated to return. His father needed him.

Padric's face twisted.

It was a lie he told himself then, as now. He was a burden to his father, a mouth to feed that was rarely useful except to draw the ire of the other farmers when a sheep died or the milk turned sour. For true, his uselessness was the reason he had been given leave to travel with Fafnir and he left with a high heart. This place could contain his revulsion no longer. The distrust of the village had poisoned him, he was full up with it and it leaked out of him. He had idled here over tedious years, the sour frustrations of his own shortcomings seeping out of him, soaking into every house and every person that surrounded him until he had poisoned them in kind. Leaving it all behind was like coming out of a long illness, a sudden breaking fever and then nothing but easy breaths, clear and deep. It was not a long journey, but how he had enjoyed it. He had been free of this place. Free of Eirwen, free of the endless work, free of a people who judged and feared one of their own simply because his hair was the color of coal. Padric hated them for believing such a thing. He hated them for making him believe it.

Eirwen always admitted to believing the things that were said about him. Rather than shunning him, she seemed to take pleasure in his reputation. It excited her and made folk talk of her also, which she relished. She had no family to speak out against their coupling, so their romance kindled. To her, he was a dangerous novelty and she was a child playing with fire. When she was in good spirits she delighted in reminding him what the villagers called him, as if he would take equal pleasure in hearing the unwanted titles. When angered she would spit them in his face and proclaim how cruel he truly was, how she feared for herself when he was near. He was rarely the cause of her sorrows, in truth, but it was easier for her to place the blame upon his dark brow.

The fort stank as it always did. Wet, freshly cut timbers, rotten apples, sweat, urine and Eirwen. All of these smells hit his nostrils, moist and unpleasant. He slogged through the thick, dark muck of the yard, not bothering to avoid the puddles. He was filthy enough from the labor at the ditch and was likely to be far more soiled before he was done here. It was possible he would be completely covered in mud before the day was out, buried in a rank grave.

He paused. Padric was not afraid to die. It would certainly put an end to his shame, his anger, his hurt. He was more afraid to simply do nothing, to walk away and continue to carry the crushing weight of his failures. He could brain Eirwen's new lover, his maul scattering pieces of the fool's skull into sticky, broken pottery. It was a sweet thought, but the balm of his enacted vengeance would be fleeting. Afterwards he would have to make a choice. Flee and be hunted, bringing worry and shame to his family or stay to face the knives of those seeking a blood debt and the fines that would ruin his kin. Warriors rarely had family, but they always had friends. Either path brought sorrow and hardship to those he cared for; the people who cared nothing for the color of his hair and who endured the same gossip it created.

Fae-friend. Piskie kissed.

Padric did not care for himself, but he did care for his family. He would not let his selfish fury destroy them as well. But more than that, he would not make the villagers right. He would not be remembered as a killer, a madman, and the doom marked son that brought ill luck to his kin just as everyone said he would from the day he was born. Dead or alive, Padric could not bear their hearthside prophecies to come true by his own hand.

Padric emerged from his brooding and found his eyes staring straight at a discarded coin lying in the mud. He stooped and pinched it from the mire, careful to keep his skinned knuckles from touching the muck. It was one of the tin pieces used to pay the garrison of the fort. All but worthless to them, but a welcome find for Padric. He had seen only a few coins in his life and held fewer still. He gave it a halfhearted rub on his jerkin to clean it and held it up to his nostrils, breathing deeply. Padric knew the scent of tin from the village foundry and from his father's tools. It was strange that this small piece of the same metal would smell so differently. It was repulsive and comforting, alluring and venomous. Just like her.

He made for the ciderhouse.

The pungent heat of the turf fire packed around his head as he pushed through the door, making his nose run. All the clinging smells of the fort gathered closely together in the gloom of the wretched place. Padric coughed once and swallowed hard. A drunken minstrel performed for a few apathetic wastrels, his voice high and scraping. No one paid Padric any mind. He was just a dirt covered farm boy and they were well into their cups. The ciderwife was tapping a keg in the corner, her strokes clumsy, her hair free and lank. Padric approached, the maul now propped on his shoulder, his head slightly bent in the low room. The woman did not look up.

"The girl Eirwen. Do you know her?" he asked the top of her greasy head.

The ciderwife stopped, tossing the bung mallet contemptuously on top of the barrel. She looked up with swimming eyes, took a sneering breath to answer and stopped short.

Fear. It was always first.

Her moist face hardened into a sickening scowl and she retrieved her mallet, resumed her labor, did not answer.

Hate. It always followed.

Padric flicked the coin onto the barrel just as the mallet was coming down. The ciderwife jerked and the mallet head smashed into the wood, caving in the top of the barrel. The sweet, cloying scent of fresh cider cooled the air around them.

"That is for her. When she comes in tonight. As many cups as it is worth. See that she gets them."

She always delighted in calling him names, feigning her affection as if he was some sorcerer king of legend, to be feared and worshipped. Mocking him, in truth. He remembered her favorite. He smiled then. Smiled at their memory. Smiled at her foolishness. At his own.

"Tell her to drink deeply. Compliments of Padric the Black."

The bees were angry and that made Rosheen laugh. *Little buzzing bastards.* They chased her as far as their tiny minds allowed, then dutifully turned back to the hive as soon as they forgot why they had left. Rosheen took her prize to the lowest branch of an old edad and settled in to wait. *Still all orange and gold, friend.* She missed the green.

Her arms were sticky to the elbow, as was her breast, where she had been clutching the honeycomb, which now called to her. She broke off a fistful of the dripping comb and began munching while she waited, licking her fingers once the morsel was gone. The rest of the comb lay in her lap and the honey oozed its way over one knee, snaking its way down to her toes. Rosheen watched it drip down to the dense golden carpet below and listened for the soft tap of each droplet as it struck the fallen leaves. She thought about eating some more, but decided to save it for Padric. *He won't want any.* But she saved it anyway.

The honey trail on her leg had hardened by the time he came tromping into the grove, his every step dashing yellow leaves out in front of him. She giggled. *He thinks he's changed.* He looked up at the sound of her laughter and frowned.

"You have *not* changed," she said to his amusing face.

"Quiet, you," Padric said half-heartedly.

Rosheen considered that a moment. "Are we leaving now?" she asked.

Padric did not answer. He stood looking across the grove, his eyes focused on nothing. Brooding. *Like always.* Rosheen wondered if Padric was happiest when tormented. His moods had grown so dark of late, so different from the gleeful child he had been an eye blink ago. She had laughed when he took his first steps, for he was already taller than she. Now, she barely reached his knee. *And even at twenty he is still such a child.* Try as she might, she never saw him as anything else and probably never would. He knew it, too. He was clever. *For a mortal.* It bothered him that she saw him thus and he was forever out to prove otherwise. Mostly it just made her smile.

She scooted off the branch and let herself glide down onto his shoulder. She sat there for a minute staring at his temple, silently daring him to turn her way. *This always works.* The tension built up quickly as he continued to stubbornly keep his head averted. Rosheen had to bite her lip to keep from laughing when she saw his jaw muscles begin clenching. She fluttered her wings so that they brushed ever so slightly against the back of his ear. *He hates this.* A frustrated inhalation of the mouth was immediately followed by a defeated exhalation of the nostrils. He turned his head and looked at her, still frowning.

Rosheen held the honeycomb out in both hands. "Want some?"

"No," he said, followed by an off-put growl. "You are all sticky!" He gave a small leap to the side, forcing her to take flight. She let her laughter escape as he made his way over to the base of the edad and sat down.

"Stickier down there," she told him, still hovering. He looked up and gave her a confused twitch of the mouth. "It dripped," she finished and pointed above him at the branch she had been sitting on.

"Aaawwwwhh!" issued from Padric as he rolled back to standing. "Hhhrrr!" followed the discovery of the leaves sticking to his rear end. Rosheen tried to contain herself, but failed when Padric proceeded to try and dust the leaves off his backside, only to have them stick to his hands instead. Her laughter drowned his curses as he scrubbed his palms on the bark of the tree.

"I hate this place," he mumbled, stooping to fetch some damp leaves from the ground to clean his hands further.

"Then leave," she said. "And this time, do not return." She threw a little force behind the last word, knowing it would aggravate him further, but unwilling to let the point go by unmentioned.

“It is not that simple,” he said, tossing the leaves back to the earth.

Yes it is. “Why?” If I must play this game.

“I am needed here.” He attempted some conviction, but failed.

“That has never been true.”

He turned swiftly towards her, his eyes burning. “You know nothing of it!”

“I know what you have told me and what I have observed and that is all. That is enough.”

Padric’s eyes went dead, his shoulders slumped slightly and his skin went ashy grey. *Do not give up, damn you!* Rosheen knew that his anger was the only thing with enough momentum to send him from this place. *He needs to go.*

“People hate me because of you,” he said. There was no malice in his voice, just resignation. “Eirwen hates me because of you.”

She loves you. Hates me. And herself. “She is foolish. A feckless cow. And nothing but a child.”

“We’re all children to you, Rosheen.” He walked wearily a few paces away and slumped to the ground, his back against a rotting log. She flew over slowly and landed a few feet away from his outstretched legs. His head rested on the water swollen wood, his eyes staring up into the branches overhead, but not to the sky beyond. He looked beaten, petulant and ill. Lost in his own miserable little life. Worthless to the world. Worth even less to himself. *They waste so much on this foolishness.*

She went over and hopped up onto his knee, began walking up his leg, then his stomach until she reached his chest. Here she sat, munching her honeycomb, and looked him full in the face.

“What do you want from here?” she asked.

His eyes flicked down towards her. Rosheen rode the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed deeply.

She pressed on. “To jump the jug with that strumpet? To remain here, a farmer of little skill? Distrusted by your neighbors? Your father and mother...”

“Enough,” Padric snapped. “I know all of this.”

“Then catch up with that metal-peddling dwarf before it is too late. Get back on the road where you were at least content.”

“I was never content. I have no gift as a peddler.”

“And you are a capable smith? A fine warrior? Skilled minstrel?” She shook her head. “Stop looking for what you are best at and start living with what you are capable. Out there traveling, at the very least, you have not the time to whinge about. And you are never in one place long enough for your simple-minded people to cast their suspicions at your feet. Go to the places where being dubbed a Fae-friend is not a slight nor a cause to fear.”

“I made my choice to return,” Padric said. “To leave again would seem like weakness.”

“Returning was weakness. Fafnir asked you to stay and help him.” She watched his jaw clench again. “Who here asked you to return?”

A smirk cracked his frown. “Certainly not you, you flippant piskie.”

“I did not need to. I knew you would be back.” She leaned forward. “Now eat this. I am tired of holding it,” she said, stuffing the honeycomb past his lips.

Padric tested the edge of the seax with his thumb and frowned. It could use some attention from a whetstone, but there was no time. He wanted to be gone before the sun set. It was dangerous sleeping out in the wilds, but Padric feared finding himself still in the village come the dawn more than he did anything that may wait out in the dark. He had made up his mind to leave and somehow it was easier to depart with the dying light. Mornings were too stark, too real and tempting with false promises of fresh intentions. It was better to leave now. Let the night swallow this place as he

turned his back on it forever.

He had slept out before on herd watches and sometimes with Rosheen for no reason at all. It was not a comfortable way to spend a night, for certain, and the prospect filled Padric with a healthy dose of caution. He turned the big knife over in his hand, relieved that it would be with him. Padric had worked with tools all his life, but the seax was the first he had ever possessed that was not meant to turn soil, cut turf, or break stone. It was a stout fighting knife, wide bladed and well balanced. From blade tip to pommel, the weapon was longer than his forearm and hand combined. And it was steel. Not the crude, heavy, black iron that the warriors from the fort wielded, no, this metal was smoke colored and light, seeming to shine with an inner fire.

Padric had worn the blade for close to a month so that he might better protect Fafnir's goods and grown used to the weight of it on his belt. Secretly he had nursed the hope that he could one day barter it from Fafnir. Padric remembered his surprise when the dwarf had insisted he keep the knife after their journey had ended. After all, he had refused the peddler's offer to journey further and such generosity made Padric feel shameful. Fafnir simply told him he would need it if he was to journey home alone and went back to tightening the bags on Ingot's back. It had only made Padric feel worse about his choice.

He pushed the seax back in its sheath. He was going to reverse that choice and prove his worthiness of the gift. He pulled his heavy woolen coat over his head and belted it at the waist, the weight of the knife close and reassuring across the small of his back. He checked his pouch for the fourth time to ensure his flint, hook, and line were still there, then rolled a candle in his blanket and tied it into a bundle. He grabbed his mantle and hood from the peg on the wall, wrapped them about his body and secured them with a brooch. He stopped and squinted hard at the floor, willing it to tell him if he had forgotten anything.

"If you are looking for your axe, I put it in here."

Padric blinked out of his mental inventory to find his mother standing in the doorway holding a large, round object. There was a smile on her face that did not reach her eyes and a hesitance in the way she held the object out to him.

"I covered one of our apple baskets in goat hide and then with otter pelts. It should keep most of the wet out. These straps...so you can carry it across your back."

He took the pack from her and looked it over. Solid. Elegantly simple. Brilliant. Just like she was. He took his time inspecting it, afraid to look up again. She was the one thing he would miss from this suffocating place and he felt sick that he had to turn his back on her along with the rest. The last time he left was not difficult for him. Maybe he knew he would come back. Maybe he did not know what he was leaving. He did now.

He was her son and a walking curse. A shadow she bore from her own body. He was given names that tainted them all. The ridicule had turned him sour at an early age and often he turned his spite on those who fed him, clothed him, held him when the loneliness was too much to bear. He feared she blamed herself for his lot in life. Her own life would improve with him gone. In a short time, the hamlet would no longer be able to lay their sorrows at her door; the door behind which slept the black head of her ill-luck offspring. He would go for good this time and things would be better. And it would almost break her, again. It did not matter what others said of him. He was her son. And it would pain her to see him go, but she would bear that just as she bore the disdain of her community, for him.

"This is grand, mother. Thank you." His voice was thick, the words choked out. He glanced up briefly and had to immediately look down again when he saw her face.

Her voice quavered. "There is food in there. Some eggs and bread. A flask of milk. You eat, hear me."

"Yes, mum," was all he could get out and they embraced to save each other from their own

selfish tears. She seemed so little.

Over her shoulder, Padric saw his father. Waiting, awkward and strong. Padric felt embarrassed, but he did not let his mother go. He would wait for her to be ready. She deserved that. At last, her arms relaxed slightly, but she hooked her hand in his arm and stood by him, wiping her tears with her free hand while his father approached. Padric set his jaw and swallowed hard.

“Take this,” his father said, handing over a sizable coil of thick rope. “Many things can be solved if you have good rope.” And then he held out his hand. Padric clasped it and could not help but smile as his thin fingers and narrow palms were enveloped by the strong grip of his father’s large hand.

Sun is already down. Late leaving. Rosheen sat on the roof of the house and watched as Padric shouldered his pack and began walking away from his parents. *Three times. He will stop and wave three times.* She sniggered when he turned and raised his arm for the fourth time. Padric’s father had turned and headed off behind the house to tend the goats at the second wave. His mother stood for all of them. She continued to stand there watching once he disappeared into the woodlands.

“Take care of one another,” she said, without turning.

“We will,” Rosheen told her and flew off after him.