

RETURN OF THE WHITE DEER

Robert Sells

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Return of the White Deer by Robert Sells

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Dedication

For my wife, Dale, without whose gentle prodding this story would never have made the trip from mind to paper.

PROLOGUE

THE DRUIDS BELIEVED CROSS FELL MOUNTAIN was a god who guarded mysterious Markwood forest. The lone climber who scaled the flat cliff was determined to face that god and kill another.

Cearl, King of Mercia, wedged his boot into the slight crack reluctantly offered by the steep cliff and raised himself a bit higher. His foot slipped, but strong, sure hands maintained a grip on the ledge. Fierce eyes bore into the unforgiving mountain. In one fluid motion, Cearl swung himself up to the ledge and lay on the flat, cold rock, taking in great gulps of air. While regaining both his strength and breath, he scanned right, left, and back to the right. Between two large bushes he glimpsed movement of something white... and then nothing. *Could just be the fog*, he thought. *Or, could it finally be the end of my hunt?*

The king crept from the ledge, eased through some bushes, and rested behind a lone pine tree. An accomplished hunter, his careful movements did not betray his presence on the wild plateau. With small, imperceptible movements, the tall man unstrapped the leather quiver from his back and examined the contents. There were four long, perfectly straight arrows, each sporting golden feathers, each tipped with a large, jagged head. Three of the arrows had been successfully used before, each hosting small, but exquisite engravings: a wild boar, a bear, and a lion. Brushing the blond hair from his face, his long fingers reached out to the fourth arrow, bearing the unimpressive form of a deer sloppily painted all white.

Cearl was considered one of the best archers in the kingdom and, by all accounts, the best swordsman. Many slain animals were silent testaments to his skill with the bow, the heads of which adorned the Great Hall. The graves of many men, both good and bad, were evidence of his ability with the sword. To him these encounters were nothing more than sport. Today's effort, however,

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was of a more serious nature. Gods were difficult to find and nearly impossible to kill.

After the Romans departed England, the land fragmented into dozens of small kingdoms. The success of these small kingdoms depended upon the strength of their leaders. In Mercia, for nearly two hundred years, a strange, white deer chose able and caring leaders. Cearl's father, King Jared, had not been chosen by the deer and after his coronation, the white deer disappeared. A year later a famine wasted the country. Then there came a terrible plague. Many whispered it was not coincidental that dark times had befallen the country.

Upon the death of his father, Cearl presumed the mantle of king. He too lacked the blessing of the white deer. Those who challenged his legitimacy succumbed to his sword. Neither ignorant nor foolish, the young king knew many silently believed the white deer should choose the king. Instead of spending the rest of his reign killing and imprisoning the followers of the white deer, he had resolved to hunt down the animal and destroy the legend.

Movement again. With grim satisfaction, he realized this was no fog. Cearl followed the ghostly motion in the waning light.

From behind a holly bush, the white deer emerged. Astonished by her beauty, he gaped. She stood calmly, regally even, on the edge of the cliff and looked over the seemingly endless expanse of Markwood forest below. Cearl shook his head free from the entralling image. He slowly pulled the string back and aimed at the heart of the animal. At that moment, the deer turned to look at him.

Not more than twenty paces away, her startlingly blue eyes pierced into his soul. Cearl felt fear for the first time. The king shivered, shook his head, and focused on his target. He took a deep breath, relaxed, and released the missile. It sailed harmlessly over her neck.

She continued to stare at him, unperturbed by the arrow that just barely missed her. The king was stunned. He had never missed

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before. So confident was he in his abilities only one arrow was dedicated for each prize. Yet the deer still stood directly before him, alive, aware, and perfectly at ease.

Looking down, he fumbled for another arrow, frantically strung it, and turned back in the deer's direction, but there was only empty ground. He looked right and left. Nothing. The deer was gone. Cearl ran to where his arrow had passed into the bush, but he could not find the errant shaft.

He stayed there on the mountain, huddled under the solitary pine that did not shelter him from the cold, bitter wind or the driving rain. The next morning he searched in vain for the spent arrow. Miserable, tired, and hungry, the king returned to his castle.

For an entire year, he returned each month to challenge death on the cliff. He searched the plateau for some sign of the white deer or his arrow, but both had vanished. On that cursed mountain he did find two other things: frustration and its child, anger. Not flickering anger, the appearance of which is brief and short, but deep, abiding anger that burrows deep and corrupts the mind.

Cearl invited hordes of hunters to search for the deer. Some were true hunters, but most were former soldiers or criminals willing to do the bidding of whoever paid them the most gold coins. They found no white deer, so their arrows wreaked vengeance on other animals. Mercia became a land made harsh by a bitter king and barren by heartless hunters and greedy mercenaries.

Despite the king's brutal efforts to eliminate influence of the white deer, many prayed for her return. Some even whispered that she had returned...

CHAPTER ONE

THE ROAD THROUGH THE CANOPY OF OAK trees presented two riders, a boy and a girl. Liana scowled at her younger companion. His name was Penda, but everyone called him Pen except Liana when she was angry and she was angry now. He hadn't answered her question.

Astride a finely muscled brown horse, she stopped and asked once again. "Penda, why do you hide it from your father?"

Pondering whether to visit Jack in the village or find out if Thatcher was free for another 'lesson', Pen's mind could not digest what his ears fed him. Thinking, in general, was difficult for the boy, but thinking about two things at once? Well, that was annoying, nearly impossible. Better to focus on good thoughts, like fishing and sword fighting rather than difficult questions hanging in the air.

Pleasant images abruptly disappeared when Liana pushed him, trying to dislodge either rider or answer.

Pen glared at her. "Why did you do that?"

"Penda! You must listen better. What's wrong with telling your father?"

"You don't have to yell, Liana. I can hear you perfectly."

Liana looked away, rolling her eyes. Pen knew he had better answer and quickly. Too many times before, sharp words from her had wrecked his neatly ordered world.

His mouth formed a rare frown while he struggled with the explanation. "Father wouldn't understand, Liana. I must learn how to fight and he has never handled a weapon. He's just a farmer."

At fourteen, Pen could see eye to eye with most men. Sitting tall in the saddle he even looked down at his older riding companion.

"He wants me to be a farmer too, but I'll have none of it."

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“What would you be? A huntsman?” She giggled. Pen was one of the very few who heard her laugh or witnessed her infectious grin. Liana said little, observed much, and rarely showed emotion of any sort.

“I can’t see you as a huntsman, Pen.”

“No, you’re right, not a huntsman. But maybe a soldier? I don’t know. However I end up, I have to be able defend myself. I need to know how to wield a sword.” His voice dropped to a whisper: “I must be ready.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know!” he snapped, startling her. “I just know I have to be ready... for something.”

Liana glared at him, irritated more by her surprise than offended by him yelling. She shot back at him, “So, you sneak away to Thatch to have that old soldier teach you how to use a sword. And, what is worse, you tell your father you’re with me. All I can do is nod and smile, nod and smile. I become part of the lie, Pen. Wrong! Wrong, in so many ways! You’re wrong not to tell him and I’m wrong being silent.”

Eyebrows raised, she looked over to the boy. “I’ve decided to tell your father.”

His earlier eruption of anger vanished with her threat. “Please don’t, Liana. He’ll be furious.”

She shook her head resolutely while her steel-gray eyes drilled into him.

“By telling him you were with me, you not only lie, you put me in the middle. I don’t want to be part of this lie any longer.”

The boy slumped in his saddle and turned away. Liana glanced at him and her heart fell.

“Alright, Pen. I won’t tell him. But you had better tell him soon.”

Liana was his best friend, even though she was a girl. But, she certainly wasn’t like other girls. She was skilled in matters

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boys considered important, like archery. A few months before, one of his friends brought an old bow from his father's hunting rack. The two boys shot arrows at a not-too-distant tree for the entire afternoon, getting progressively closer to a nearly circular knot hole. Liana came by and watched them show off for a few minutes. Then she snatched the bow from Pen, quickly aimed the arrow, and, a second later, the arrow burrowed deep into the dark circle. *No, she was definitely not like other girls.*

Pen stared at her profile. She had always been by his side, a fixture so common she required no study. Recently, however, she began to look different to him. Even now, annoyed as she was, Liana looked pretty. That was it, he realized. *Liana was attractive. More than that. Much more. She was remarkably beautiful. How could I have been so blind?*

The subject of his stare, bored with the ride, sighed and turned to Pen. Afraid she might read his thoughts; he pretended to look up at some branches in a nearby tree.

“I’m surprised you got Mirus today. I thought your dad was going to plow the west field with him this morning.”

“He and Songor ended up fixing the barn today. Tomorrow they might plow.”

“Well, rider of the plow horse,” she taunted, “let’s see if you can beat me to the creek.” She looked at him with a grin and was about to spur her horse forward.

“Come on, Liana. That’s not fair. You have Brill and she’s your fastest horse.”

The girl smiled, “Ahh, but you have a far larger horse, don’t you?”

He sighed. Liana could be so exasperating. Mirus was a large horse, in fact, the largest in the village, but he was also one of the oldest... and not notably fast.

She leaned over in the saddle, nose-to-nose with him. “Now talk to my backside, boy!” With that she whipped the reins. Brill

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and Liana burst away in a gallop, dust from the abrupt start caused Mirus to turn away and Pen to shield his eyes.

The boy urged the large animal forward, getting him to a lackluster canter. He gently prodded him into a begrudging gallop. Still, the distance between Mirus and Brill grew wider.

Pen refused to heel the horse or whip his flanks. Someone, long ago, had left scars all over the poor creature's body. Instead he did his best to encourage the old stallion with words as he leaned over his neck and spoke into his ear.

"Onward, great steed. Faster, Mirus!" And the horse continued his indifferent gallop. Liana looked over her shoulder and laughed while Brill carried her farther ahead.

Pen recalled the ancient Roman call to battle, 'adgredi'. Thatcher shouted it out when he wanted two boys to rush together and fight. In desperation, Pen pointed forward and yelled, "Adgredi!"

The horse came to an abrupt stop, Pen was nearly thrown over the great head of the animal. Mirus snorted, reared, almost dislodged him again and, in the blink of an eye, broke into a furious gallop. The boy gripped tightly with his knees and prayed to Odin he wouldn't fall. He had never known such speed. Tousled hair flew back exposing an uninhibited grin. When Liana looked back again, her smile dropped away, replaced by an astonished stare. Pen and Mirus were only a few horse lengths behind and closing fast. Shocked, she heeled Brill faster.

At last they were neck and neck. Pen hazarded a sideways glance at the girl. She stared at him in amazement, her reins snapping. Mirus and Pen just coasted past. When boy and horse splashed into the wide creek, Pen pulled gently on the reins. When the horse finally stopped, knee-deep in water, the boy hugged him around the neck. Another splash sprayed behind them. Liana looked at Mirus for a few moments, watching him bob his head up and down, great blasts of mist exploding from his nostrils. Eyes wide, she turned toward Pen.

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“What happened? How?”

Pen smiled broadly. “Mirus decided he didn’t like looking at your backside.”

Playfully bantering on the relaxed walk to Pen’s farm, they failed to notice Pen’s father waiting for them at the barn, arms folded. When they turned to lead the horses in, they were met with his dark scowl and their smiles wilted.

CHAPTER TWO

WITH A FLIP OF HIS HAND, LARMACK SILENTLY ordered his son down. He stepped up to the boy and looked down with one eyebrow raised.

“Is there something you want to tell me, Penda?”

One of the tallest men in the village, Larmack was also among the strongest with well-developed muscles from years of hard farm work. The portion of his face not covered by a thick, peppery beard was deeply lined, suggesting a past familiar with pain and suffering.

Pen tried to distract his father with what he hoped would be important news. “Mirus beat Brill, Father. I have never...”

The man leaned forward and yelled at him.

“My concern isn’t about the horse race. My concern is why you didn’t tell me about the sword fighting.”

Pen’s stomach lurched.

“You think you can keep secrets in this small village?”

Larmack’s head snapped around toward the girl.

“Liana, how can I ever trust **you** again?”

“Larmack, I...he...”

“Liana, you should have told me.”

Liana furled her brow and then looked away. Larmack had never scolded her. She wanted to scream she had told Pen to tell him. But, she couldn’t. Her heart choked her throat and burning tears formed in her eyes.

Pen saw her distress. He bit his lip and turned to face his father.

“I’m at fault. Me, not Liana. She told me to tell you, but I didn’t listen. She was even going to tell you herself, but I begged her not to.”

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His father's eyes knifed into him. Frightened, Pen took a step back.

“She gave you this advice and still you didn't tell me?”

The boy nodded, cowered a bit, but did not look away.

Larmack turned to Liana, “I must speak to my son alone. Go home, Liana.”

She nodded and quickly rode off, wiping her nose and eyes.

Larmack watched her leave, giving him time to think. His son had put himself in considerable jeopardy by defending his friend. He turned to the boy.

“Why didn't you tell me, son?” He asked gently.

Breathing heavily and out his nose, the boy waited for his heart to settle down before he answered.

“I was afraid you would tell me not to do it.”

“Better to ask forgiveness than permission, eh?”

“Yes... no... I don't know. You always told me to avoid fights. I can't always do that.”

Pen took a deep breath and spoke again. “We are different. You like being a farmer. Not me. When I come of age, I'm leaving. I have to know how to protect myself and that is done with the sword. You couldn't teach me, so I had to learn from Thatch.”

Larmack was quiet for a few moments. He looked out across his fields, anger dying, sadness growing.

“Perhaps you are right, son. I could never teach you how to use a sword, but I do know one thing. When you use weapons you invite death into your life and that makes your life considerably less safe.”

Pen stared at the old man. Sometimes he made strange statements just like the last one. ‘Invite death’? How would he know? He never owned a weapon. Except maybe a shovel. Nevertheless, he knew his father would protect him even if he had

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to match shovel against sword. Pen forced the lump in his throat down. He would not cry. Men don't cry.

“I won’t lie to you again, father.”

Larmack’s head wearily turned back to his son. “Ahh, but how can I believe one who has already lied?”

Pen began to protest, but Larmack, a smile finally on his face, interrupted him.

“I believe you, son.”

Larmack waved Songor to join them. The servant had watched the exchange from just behind the barn door.

“Songor and I have to help Eldrick.”

Larmack leaned over and whispered into Pen’s ear, “I told him our work would not give him time to make us dinner and that we would eat at the inn this evening.”

Pen grinned. Songor was a terrible cook.

The servant, short and heavy, reached the pair and nimbly jumped up to the riding block of the large wagon. Larmack joined him and released the brake; the wagon inched forward. Settled on the buckboard, Larmack looked back at his son. “Well, you got the old horse to run, did you? Knowing you, it wasn’t by whip or spur, so how did you do it?”

Leading Mirus by the reins, Pen walked beside his father while the cart creaked along the bumpy ground.

“I kept talking to him, trying to find something that might get him moving. I guess I just said the right word.”

“The right word,” said Larmack with a wink to Songor. “Let me guess... adgredi.” The large black horse suddenly stirred and stared at the farmer.

Pen frowned in puzzlement and looked at his father.

“How did you know?”

His father laughed.

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“He’s been my horse far longer than yours, boy. I bought him from an army officer; he was in many battles, son. I’m supposing there were many adgredis.” The father smiled at the son, snapped the reins and the cart careened off. Songor leaned back over the buckboard and waved goodbye.

While the weary steed contentedly munched on the thick grass near the barn, Pen wiped him down. His hand crossed over the scars Mirus had carried all these years. Pen spoke into his ear. “When I fully master the sword, I will seek out your previous owner and thrash him for you, dear Mirus.” The large, black horse looked at Pen, whinnied, then snorted and nuzzled his head close to the boy.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LOKI INN, AT THE HEAD OF THE SMALL VILLAGE of Kirkland, enticed the infrequent wayfarer and the locals with rich aromas. Songor's nose, particularly sensitive to good food, detected whiffs of roast pork and he spurred his horse to gallop before the inn had come into view. The horse knew where to go and it abruptly stopped in front of the inn. The old servant jumped off, ran up the rickety steps, and stomped along the porch, its boards bending from his weight. Then he burst through the door of the inn with a smile and a shout. The hair he still had circled his pink skull like a white halo. At the Loki Inn, if he wasn't talking, he was eating, and if he wasn't eating, he was drinking; often he tried to accomplish all three at the same time.

Pen followed seconds later. He waved to a few friends and grinned when he saw Songor back-slap the men and hug all the women he could. Larmack came through the door, a quick smile here, a curt nod there. The old farmer favored the table in the corner of the upper level and, though the inn was crowded, the table was unoccupied.

The innkeeper brought three steaming bowls of pork stew, colored with purple carrots, green peas, and small yellow onions.

“Hello, Pen. Larmack.”

After plopping down the food, he shook a wooden spoon at Songor who cradled his bowl with his head bent down, eyes closed, sniffing the concoction.

“Don't you be expecting extra helpings, Songor. Last time you was here we had to kill two extra pigs!”

After the pronouncement, he shot a piercing stare at Songor who was already shoveling stew into his mouth. The innkeeper threw up his hands in disgust and trudged away. Before he reached the kitchen, Songor let out a yell.

“Jonathon. Could ye favor me with another bowl?”

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Later, their supper mostly done, Larmack nibbled on the honey-laced almond cake while Songor nursed his third mug of mead.

The jovial din trailed off when two men entered the room from the blackness of the night. Their uniforms were bright red tunics with black trousers and boots. Both men scanned the inn for the cleanest table. A few men and women bowed to them and scurried out the same door. Other locals put their heads down and silently studied the flat, wooden surfaces. Soldiers in these parts were sometimes like mean dogs and a stare could excite them into snapping and attacking. Larmack alone watched the two men saunter through the lower level.

Gorm and Eusibius were well known in the village and not much liked. They acted as the local police force, collected taxes (usually a bit more than what the books required), and ostentatiously practiced swordplay while they laughingly crashed into stores and bumped into people. Eusibius was older and a bit more polite. Gorm was short, rash, and devilishly handsome. It was Gorm who noticed Larmack staring at them. Hand on his sword, Gorm stomped up the stairs toward the farmer.

All that could be heard was the noisy rattling of his sword and spurs. Gorm stood over Larmack who casually cut a small piece of cake with his spoon.

“We want this table, farmer. Move on and let us eat.”

Pen started to get up, but a stern glance from Larmack sat him back down. The tall, bearded man slowly brought another bite to his mouth, closed his eyes and shook his head in appreciation.

“Gorm, you really should try this cake. It’s delicious.”

The muscular soldier kicked Larmack’s chair and repeated his order. Instead of rising, the farmer merely looked around the inn.

“I see many empty tables.”

“Well, we want this one, you impudent trash. Get up and get out,” he yelled with a face that matched the red of his tunic.

Songor slowly backed away from the table and stepped down past Eusibius, who watched the proceedings with a smirk on his

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face. Pen would have only been too glad to follow Songor, but his father had given him no sign to leave.

Larmack ignored the command and cut off one more small piece of cake.

“Insolent pig! I’ll teach you a lesson!” Gorm reached for his sword.

What happened next was such a blur that even Pen, as close as he was, could not say for sure what happened. But a moment later, weapon cast aside, Gorm was face down on the floor as Larmack twisted the man’s arm behind his back. Then, another moment later, Larmack released his hold and sat back down on his chair. The enraged soldier, his hand reaching for his knife, immediately sprung up and lunged for the farmer. Larmack’s left arm grabbed the soldier’s shoulder while his right hand pressed a knife against the Gorm’s throat. It was the same knife Gorm had futilely reached for just a moment before.

Eusibius reached for the hilt of his sword, but couldn’t find it. He looked down to his scabbard and saw it had disappeared. Then he felt the tip of a blade in his back. Songor pressed the point of the extracted sword just enough to make it felt.

“Ye mustn’t move, Eusibius, sir.”

Up at the table, Larmack held the blade close to the kneeling man’s throat. “Now you will rise very slowly and sit down on that chair.” As Gorm carefully sat down, he stared down at his own blade touching the exposed fleshy part of his throat.

“Hands to your side... ah, very good. Sit there while I finish my dessert.”

Gorm sat across from Larmack who held the knife in his left hand as his right casually spooned into his mouth the remaining few bites. He savored the last bite, his eyes closed in epicurean satisfaction. Finally he patted his stomach, pushed himself up from the seat, and smiled at the soldier who smoldered with anger. The old farmer leaned down and whispered into the ear of the soldier, “Hurt me or mine and you will die.”

The soldier turned defiantly toward the farmer, but paled when saw the cold, unblinking gaze. Larmack stared until Gorm

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turned away. The farmer bent down and picked up the sword and returned it to the owner, along with the knife. “Now you may have my table.”

Larmack then jauntily skipped down the steps, and Pen, stunned by the events, found himself momentarily alone with Gorm who gulped air and blew it out of flared nostrils. The boy shot up, knocked his chair down in doing so, and quickly followed his father and Songor out the door.

During the moonlit ride home, the boy looked sideways at the man riding beside him. The man who steadily worked from dawn to dusk, the man who tenderly cared for him when he was sick, the man who avoided confrontations, now a mystery to Pen.

When they reached the farm, Songor mumbled goodnight and walked quickly to his room in the barn. Pen returned the horses to their stalls. On the way out, he paused at Songor’s door and knocked.

“Come in, Master Pen.”

Songor was sitting on his rumpled cot. “I ‘spected you might be visiting tonight.”

Pen sat down on a chair facing the servant. “What happened back there, Songor?”

The round face contorted into frown lines so rarely used. He worried a piece of thread out of his bed sheet and shook his head.

“Pen, I promised your Da’ not to talk... to ye or anyone. He says to me ‘Songor, ye mustn’t tell what we done.’ How did he say it... wait, let me think...” the man scrunched up his face and closed his eyes.

“I gots it now... your Pa said... ‘The past be dead, it canst have no part of now.’ Or sumtin like that. So I canst talk about us soldiering. Canst, Master Pen, canst.” Songor’s eyes pleaded with Pen’s. The boy held his stare for a few seconds but he was thinking about his father ‘soldiering’. Gradually his eyes refocused on the confused farmhand. Whenever the large man worried, sleep would be denied him. The boy patted him on the shoulder.

“I understand, Songor. You can’t tell me. You go to sleep now.”

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Relieved, the portly man lay down on his bed and promptly started snoring. Pen covered him with a blanket, patted him one last time, and walked out of the barn.

His father *had* been a soldier! Why hadn't he told him?

When Pen reached the house, it was dark. His father must have retired immediately. Pen hesitated at his father's bedroom door and then went to his own room. After an hour of turning from one side to another, staring into the blackness, squeezing his eyes shut to stop the questions, the boy fell asleep. But, his sleep was plagued by strange dreams. In the middle of the night the gray eye of the moon peered into his bedroom and Pen sprung up, sweating and afraid. Afraid of a dream about a white deer. Then, as he laid back down on his cot, his eyes wide open, his mind recalled odd events six years earlier...

CHAPTER FOUR

IN A SECLUDED GROVE A YOUNG MAIDEN LAY on her stomach and stretched out her arm. Her fingers extended with a bit of cheese offered to a timid chipmunk. The girl's companion, a younger boy, stared toward a thick wall of trees just beyond the meadow. Eight-year-old Pen turned back and pleaded. "Liana, we're so close."

His finger pointed to the tall trees, a natural boundary that separated his known and, as far as he was concerned, boring world from the unknown and exciting realm of Markwood forest.

"It's just a short walk," he tempted.

The girl had successfully coaxed the nervous chipmunk from its hole when Pen's interruption, quite rude as far as she was concerned, scared away the little creature. Liana glared at him.

"I almost had him eating out my hand, you stupid boy. Quit talking about Markwood. Your father told you never to go there, Penda. Why don't you ever listen?"

Pen ignored his companion and continued staring at Markwood, wondering, wanting, waiting.

Liana groaned, got up, and pointed to dark forest.

"There are terrible monsters in those woods, Pen. And don't forget the Green Men."

"Yes, but we would just sneak a peek, Liana."

"Not even a peak, Pen. Bad things happen there." She stood up and walked away from the forbidden woods, deciding for both of them that the conversation and the time with the chipmunk had ended.

The pair mounted a young mare and slowly plodded back to the farm. Jostled right and left, Pen was held on the horse by the Liana's arms extending around him to the reins.

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“Tomorrow I leave. I’ll be gone a week or so.”

Every so often, she and some older ladies went on some mysterious trip.

“Where do you go?”

“You know I can’t tell you, Pen.”

“Why not? You tell me everything else. Like not going into Markwood.”

“I can’t tell you, Pen.”

“I hate you.”

Liana laughed and her arms pressed against his shoulders.
“Well, I love you.”

She kissed him on the cheek and he angrily wiped it off.

Dropped off at the farm, Pen waved goodbye to her. He watched her canter down the path toward the road. In the distance he saw Cross Fell Mountain, its top rising above Markwood. An idea came to mind and he smiled. Maybe this coming week wouldn’t be so boring after all.

The next morning after Songor and Larmack left to the work the fields, Pen jumped out of bed. Before the sun was halfway to its peak, the boy had finished his chores, more or less, packed cheese and bread, and pocketed a rusty knife from the barn.

An hour later, huffing and puffing from his long run, he stood along the bank of a creek that somehow penetrated through tightly packed trees and thorny shrubs. His heart raced as much from the exercise as the excitement. Before impulse could be bested by reason, he eased between two scraggly bushes, and followed the fast moving stream into the unknown.

Pen stepped into a world without sun, the diminished light a green mist covering him. The boy was delighted to discover that within a hundred or so yards of the creek, the great forest was not much different from the woods near his home. Small creatures scurried here or slithered there, surprised by his entry. Birds

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tracked his progress with scolding chirps. It was altogether wonderful and Pen was delighted.

He knew there were monsters in the woods but he reckoned he could hear them coming and run away. Pen was more concerned about the mysterious Green Men. Liana insisted they could change from bush to person and back again. Walking slowly, he nervously scrutinized each large bush.

A half hour later, he arrived at a small meadow, neatly bisected by the stream, lush grass on either side of its banks. Here he saw bright blue sky instead of the tedious green canopy. After he sat down on the soft mattress of the thick grass, he took out the cheese and bread and commenced to eat. His eyes continually scanned the meadow, especially behind him. One can never be too careful when dealing with monsters and green men.

A noise. Barely a rustle. His heart threatened to pop out of his chest. He propped himself up slightly and prepared to sprint away. Slowly the boy turned around. A small, thin rabbit, ears back, stomach flat to the ground, emerged from a bush. Pen eased back down and coaxed it with soft words. His small fingers held a piece of cheese, offered to the rabbit. A moment later the rabbit snatched the offering and scampered away. Then the rabbit returned for another bite.

Before long, squirrels, rabbits, and chipmunks darted back and forth extracting one proffered tidbit after another. Pen was thrilled. When the food was finally gone, a few of the animals were enticed to accept his gentle caresses. *Liana is going to be so jealous*, he thought happily.

The sun was past its peak and gliding home when the animals, all of them and at the same time, scattered. Pen looked nervously around for some monster which might have frightened them. All he saw, across the meadow, was a singular deer, perfectly proportioned and pure white. Pen had never seen a white deer. From the stories he had heard, he placed them in the same category as elves and dwarves... things of the distant past, never to be seen again. So, he was suitably impressed, but he was even

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more amazed when the creature walked toward him. The deer showed no fear, but Pen was nervous. This was certainly not the usual behavior of deer or, for that manner, any wild animal. The white deer stopped a few feet away from Pen. She cocked her head and stared. A voice entered his mind.

“Pen, finally I meet you.”

He looked around for the person talking to him, but there was no one. The voice began again and the blue eyes of the deer met his own blue eyes. The voice. It somehow came from the deer.

Her words were soft, soothing. The sun seemed warmer and he became strangely calm, sleepy, in fact. Most of her words were lost in that land of drifting scenes between sleep and wakefulness. But a few made their way through the sweet molasses in his brain. Something about the king. And a gift. And sadness. It was all disjointed and very confusing to the eight-year old.

A sharp sound startled him. Pen’s eyes opened wide and he saw the source of the sound was the deer’s hoof striking a granite rock. Sparks flew from the rock with each clack.

“Listen well, Penda. I am about to tell you a secret. Forget this and you may forfeit your life as well as the lives of others.”

The soft words from a kind friend were gone; these were commands from an angry goddess. He trembled, instantly alert.

“In all this land, only one person knows my name. Repeat my name only to him so he will know you are the one chosen by me. He will be wearing a pure white robe, and when he requests the word, say ‘Angelus’, for that is my name. Now close your eyes and whisper it back to me.”

“Angelus... Angelus... Angelus.”

Between each pronouncement made by the boy, the deer repeated:

“Only the one in white, Penda, only the one in white.”

When he could hear her no longer, he opened his eyes. Though it seemed like only a few seconds had passed, the

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afternoon was spent and the sun had disappeared behind the trees. Pen looked across the meadow. The animals had disappeared as well. Where did they go? It was rapidly getting dark and the eight-year old was afraid. He got up and ran from the emptiness.

While he ran, for some reason, he started crying. *Liana was right. There was something wrong with the forest.* His adventure was over, too quickly and yet not quickly enough. Never again would he pester Liana about visiting Markwood. It was a mean, dangerous place, but not in the way Liana had described.

In a few days Pen's life was back to normal and what dim memories remained of this singular visit returned only in infrequent nightmares that always included a white deer and, strangely enough, blood.

Besides the unsettling dreams, something in Pen had changed. He kept hearing sounds in his head.



Now, shivering in the gray light before dawn, he wondered if his long ago visit to the forest was real or just a dream. And, two words emerged from his memory, one *Angelus* which he would never forget and the other word *chosen*, barely recalled, but always in the nightmare. Why those two words? What did they mean? At fourteen, Pen had little experience with worrying. He disliked the distasteful activity as a rule. So, he decided, it must be a dream and nothing to worry about.

Still a boy, Pen did not know when you lie to yourself, it was the worst and most dangerous lie of all. Nor did he know that the grinning face of everyday life had a snap-jaw mouth which could rip a person's stomach for the simplest mistake. Soon he would know both unpleasant facts.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SUN, LOW IN THE MORNING SKY, shot her rays at fourteen-year old Pen. He squinted and one eye opened a bit. He remembered a story Songor told him about a hungry wolf that chased the sun through the sky.

“Good morning, Goddess Sol. You rise early and will surely win your race with the wolf Skoll today.”

The disturbing dream and his recollections disappeared like the morning dew. Pen’s mind focused on food, friends, and fighting with the sword.

Working steadily all morning, he finished his chores, hopped on Mirus, and rode the short distance to Kirkland. Pen’s first stop was always at the large barn directly across from the Loki Inn.

Door ajar, Pen looked into the cavernous building and saw the blacksmith struggling with a large horse. Jack, the smithy’s son, kept the rope tight, but was pulled off the ground when the animal bucked... a prodigious feat considering Jack’s size. The two struggling men had seen Pen enter the barn. The blacksmith waved him closer.

“Pen, we need you, lad. Git over here.”

Pen trotted toward the two struggling humans and a horse, greatly agitated.

“Do it, Pen. Do your thing,” yelled the man while he was dragged by the straining horse.

His ‘thing’ was an unusual ability to communicate with animals, enough, at least to calm them down. Pen somehow heard the simple thoughts of animals. His words or perhaps just his thoughts could calm nervous horses or reassure snapping dogs. He acquired this strange ability when he was nine or ten. He couldn’t exactly pin down the exact moment.

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The boy grabbed the harness and started petting the muzzle of the great animal. A mixture of harsh colors flashed in Pen's mind. Gentle words from his mouth slowed the wild rotation of the horse. Pen conjured images of the blacksmith with other horses, calmly trusting and unhurt. Finally, the great head eased onto Pen's shoulder accepting both affection and direction.

Minutes later, Griswold easily shoed the unfettered animal.

"Pen, you do have a way with animals. Not that I understand it, mind you. Not at all, lad. But glad you have it."

After securing the animal in a stall, father and son sat on a bench by the door. Griswold shared interesting tidbits about a few of the villagers. Then he waited, looking expectantly at Pen.

The boy sighed. The large man wanted information about what happened at the Loki Inn the night before.

"I really didn't see much. It all happened so fast."

"But your Pa took him down? A soldier?"

"Oh, yeah and took Gorm's knife too."

Griswold slapped his knee.

"I knewed there be more to your Pa. He's got that look. I knewed it. Me." He added, tapping his chest.

"What did you know about him, Griswold?"

"Your Pa?" He laughed. "He be different, that's fer sure. But I knewed naught else. He be mystery. No one knewed him, 'cepting maybe Songor. He come along the road a carrying you as a babe. And Larmack, he ain't much on talking that's fer sure. So none here could figure he be army or not."

The sweating man leaned into the boy and smiled.

"He be a soldier and a good un. That's what Griswold knows now."

The sun sliced through the opening of the door. High noon meant lunch. Not one to tarry when food was involved, Griswold abruptly rose and bade Pen good-bye. Jack followed his father. Pen

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was the last one out of the barn. He walked Mirus along the main road of Kirkland.

Griswold was bombastic, smiling, and always willing to share a bit of advice or an interesting observation. His son, Jack, was a good friend and more than once used his brawn to extract Pen from one predicament or another. Unlike his father, the taciturn young man, embarrassed with his great size and slow speech, spoke only to Pen who was his sole friend.

Pen looked across the dusty road bisecting the village and spied Alric walking with some of his friends toward the Loki Inn. Already known for his considerable skills with the sword, it was quite possible Alric would join the king's guard. At least that's what everyone said. Son of a merchant, Alric was usually clad in fine cloth from the city of Tamworth. Pen waved to him. The young man nodded to the boy and then spoke to his friends. They laughed and looked at Pen. Red-faced, Pen jumped back on Mirus and reined him along a small road leading to an impressive abode. A minute later he arrived at Thatcher's house.

The structure was large, but not ostentatious, and it was within an arrow's shot of Loki's Inn. Pen walked through the great room, adorned with tasteful tapestries and well-constructed, expensive furniture. He continued to the slate-covered courtyard where the heavy odor of sweat trumped the fragrances from flowers which defined the perimeter. A short man, shirt off, muscles in his back rippling, turned toward the lad.

“Heard your Pa found out about the sword lessons.”

Pen opened his eyes wide in exasperation. “Are there no secrets in this village?”

The older man with tight, wiry hair, grayed at the edges, looked at the boy. “Oh, there are secrets, lad. Make no mistake about that. Maybe too many. But boys aren't good at keeping them.” He tossed Pen a sword, its blade wrapped in cloth and yelled, “Adgredi!”

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They came together with quick, precise strokes. Pen effectively blocked a few of his teacher's blows. Thatcher attacked Pen with four separate moves designed to leave him open to a 'death blow', but Pen had seen them before and adroitly avoided each trap.

Smiling, Thatcher slowly circled his opponent.

"Not bad, Pen. Not bad. You must have had an excellent teacher. Now, let's see what you can do with a new test."

With that said, the older man crouched a bit and tried to sweep his leg under Pen's to trip him. Pen jumped up and held his blade in position to block Thatcher's quick blow. The older man pressed forward with one new combination after another and Pen perfectly countered each of them. He successfully eluded all tricks his teacher challenged him with.

Pen had never bested the old man. He once came close, only to be cleverly turned and 'stabbed' in the back. The resulting 'wound', a large blackish bruise, was with him for a week. Today, he vowed silently, would be different.

Thatcher attacked again. Pen knew the older man hated the defensive position, so he parried the blow and sliced twice with his own blade, pushing his teacher back. Thatcher, frustrated, swung his blade across the air, aiming at the boy's torso. Pen slid beneath the blade and deftly moved to the side where the blade had momentarily stopped its swing. Slashing downward, he knocked it from Thatcher's grip. The boy quickly raised his clothed-wrapped sword to the master's throat.

Save for their hard breathing, absolute quiet replaced the clacking of swords.

The blade remained at his throat while Thatcher said, "Well, it seems that you are no longer in need of my lessons with the sword."

Pen smiled. "Seems that way, Master Thatcher."

The old man inclined his head with a sigh; Pen's stance relaxed a bit. Then, lightning fast, Thatcher slapped the blade from

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his throat, grabbed the wrist holding the sword, and lunged into the boy. Pen felt the cold tip of a knife blade pressed against his stomach. Thatcher smiled up at him.

“I guess it’s time I teach you how to fight with a knife.”



After Pen left, Thatcher collapsed on a comfortable chair in the shade of his porch. He closed his eyes and smiled. The boy was an excellent swordsman, even at such a young age. A natural. Almost as good as himself. He chuckled. No, truth be told, Pen was better. Maybe not as good as Cearl and certainly not as good as Petronius.

His eyes opened. Petronius. Now, there was a man. A great general. One whom Thatcher had been proud to serve under. After the general retired, Thatcher found army life boring and also retired.

He closed his eyes again, rotated his head toward the sun, and felt the warmth. Leaving the army was not one of his better decisions. At least, at first. He had spent his life savings all the way across Mercia until he was destitute and desperate in Kirkland. He took any job to stay pleasantly lubricated with mead or wine. Then, without warning of any sort, his world changed. *Changed because of that damn woman, Mother Hebron.*

He opened his eyes again and surveyed the porch, so solidly constructed. Then he twisted himself to look through his front door to the cool interior of the sturdy structure. *A change for the better, that's for sure. Gave me the house, she did. And, a fine house it is. Best in Kirkland. All for just a bit of secret work the strange woman required.* He grunted. *And that little work he even enjoyed.*

He scowled. *But the woman was still annoying. Always talking with commands. To me! A former captain in the army! And I follow her damn orders. I let her boss me around. Why?*

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He shrugged, gave a sigh, and once again looked at the tapestries on the wall. She paid him well. No doubt about that. Maybe it was the money.

Truth be told, he could stop helping her. He could comfortably live the rest of his life without so much as lifting a finger. Yet he continued to do her bidding. So, it wasn't the money. Well, it wasn't just the money.

The lady is strong-willed and single-minded. People like Mother Hebron too often got themselves and others in trouble.

He paused for moment and looked up at the sky.

Okay, I'll admit it: I'm not afraid of her, I'm afraid for her. Certainly afraid of what she was doing with all those ladies. Dangerous, foolhardy. Don't know where she's heading with it, but I'd best be there when she arrives.

He yawned.

Oh, well. Enough thought for one day. Time for a nap before the next appointment: teaching the tailor's son how to wield a sword. Should be boring enough to put me asleep again while I instruct him.