



## The Forgetting Moon (The Five Warrior Angels Book 1)

By Brian Lee Durfee

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While the eldest son of the fallen king of Gul Kana now reigns in ever increasing paranoid isolationism, his two sisters seek their own paths. Jondralyn, the older sister, renowned for her beauty, only desires to prove her worth as a warrior, while Tala, the younger sister, has uncovered a secret that may not only destroy her family but the entire kingdom. Then there's Hawkwood, the assassin sent to kill Jondralyn who has instead fallen in love with her and trains her in his deadly art. All are led further into dangerous conspiracies within the court.

And hidden at the edge of Gul Kana is Nail, the orphan taken by the enigmatic Shawcroft to the remote whaling village of Gallows Haven, a young man who may hold the link to the salvation of the entire Five Isles.

You may think you know this story, but everyone is not who they seem, nor do they fit the roles you expect. Durfee has created an epic fantasy full of hope in a world based on lies.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"This is high fantasy in the vein of Stephen R. Donaldson or David Eddings, with generous helpings from George R. R. Martin. Durfee's world building is exceptional: detailed and immersive, with a deep history and believable cultures. The plot is paced and driven, compellingly structured, with a conflict large enough to fuel forthcoming titles in the series." (Booklist)

"Durfee's artist's eye and fertile imagination populate this complex tale." (Publishers Weekly)

"This is an epic, EPIC fantasy." (Rob Bedford SFFWorld.com)

"The Forgetting Moon provides plenty of well crafted spectacle, thrills, suspense, blood, thunder and general sense of wonder." (Locus Magazine)

#### A Bookworm Blues Annual Epic Best Books of 2016 List You Can't Miss! Selection

"Durfee has a knack for crafting an incredibly intricate, surprising story. This book set out to do a few very specific things, and it did every last one of those things with brutal efficiency." (Bookworm Blues.com)

#### About the Author

Brian Lee Durfee is an artist and writer raised in Fairbanks, Alaska, and Monroe, Utah. He has done illustrations for Wizards of the Coast, Tolkien Enterprises, Dungeons & Dragons, Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust (Denali National Park), and many more. His art has been featured in *SPECTRUM: Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art #3* and *L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Vol 9*. He won the Arts for the Parks Grand Canyon Award and has a painting in the permanent collection of the Grand Canyon Visitors Center-Kolb Gallery. Brian has written one epic horror novel along with the fantasy series, Five Warrior Angels. He lives in Salt Lake City.

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#### The Forgetting Moon

Be we slave, peasant, knight, or lord, within all of us dwells a craving, a longing deep in our soul to know our own heritage and to identify the birthright of our fellow man. For regardless the number of good works and heroic deeds we achieve in life, the fatherless are by nature deemed unholy, susceptible to betrayal, and useless in the eyes of the great One and Only.

—THE WAY AND TRUTH OF LAIJON

## CHAPTER ONE

### NAIL

7TH DAY OF THE SHROUDED MOON, 999TH YEAR OF LAIJON

## GALLOWS HAVEN, GUL KANA

We become what we think. Leastways, that was what Shawcroft was fond of saying. Nail fancied himself a good artist. It was what made him the happiest anyway, charcoal and parchment in hand—that, and dreaming of Ava Shay. He thought about both to an alarming degree. He also thought he was good with a sword.

In fact, despite the pounding rain, things were going well. Nail ducked and raised his blade to parry. Steel cracked against steel. His hand stung with the impact. It felt good. He swung again, his momentum pushing him forward. He slipped, drawing Dokie Liddle's sword harmlessly over his head. With a clatter, Nail fell to his knees, wooden shield plowing into the mud, sword skittering off with a twang.

"Bloody Mother," he cursed, helmet cocked sideways, obscuring his vision. Fool! Concentrate! His sword had landed just close enough in the grass that he considered lunging for it, but the tip of Dokie's blade was already poised over him.

"Yield," Dokie ordered, brandishing his sword menacingly. Nail was the strongest seventeen-year-old in Gallows Haven. He wasn't easily beaten. He imagined the grin now spreading over Dokie's face under the helm. Stefan Wayland, Zane Neville, even Zane's brute of a shepherd dog, Beer Mug, watched, all waiting to see him stand and thrash Dokie good. Jenko Bruk was nearest, a look of pure amusement on his face. The Gallows Haven banner hung lifeless, sopping with rain, from the pole cradled in Jenko's arm. The other forty young men gathered on the practice field held similar looks. A grin spread over the gruff, bearded countenance of their trainer, Baron Jubal Bruk.

Frustrated, Nail sat back on his heels. Too much daydreaming about Ava Shay. Tossing his gauntlets aside, he dug grime from under his armor with determined fingers and said, "A lucky twist of fate for you, Dokie. 'Tis only this mud that's bested me." He shoved his gauntlets back on and tried to stand, feet slipping out from under him again. "Rotted angels," he cursed.

The air stirred as a chill wind stung Nail's face. The breath was sucked from his lungs. Lightning! His mind screamed in warning as a blinding flash flamed off Dokie's armor. The boy was flung away with a crack of thunder, sliding on his back.

Nail hugged the ground. The air was caustic, his lungs raw, mouth parched. White mist clung about his vision. A shower of sparks spiraled down around him, dissolving in the rain-splattered grass. The back of his sword hand sang with pain.

There were muffled voices, as if he was hearing them from under water. Jenko Bruk and Stefan Wayland were standing over him. "Lucky bastard," Jenko muttered, dark amber eyes shifting between Nail and the others. Zane's shepherd dog was barking up a riot. Stefan held forth a hand. Nail took it, stood on wobbly legs. He spotted Dokie sprawled in the mud, arms and legs splayed out, blank eyes staring up at the rain. Dokie's body had left a path where it had slid through the muck. His helmet was gone and smoke drifted from the soles of his leather boots. Hoarse breaths swelled from his chest.

"He's still alive!" Baron Jubal Bruk bellowed as he made the three-fingered sign of the Lajon Cross over his breast and looked toward the sky. "Let's get him into town." Baron Bruk and his son, Jenko, along with a few others, snatched up Dokie's limp form into their arms and headed for town.

The rest of the sodden troop, clacking and clattering in their armor, quickly gathered their belongings and followed the baron south toward Gallows Haven.

Nail struggled behind the rest, slogging through the muck, still in a daze. He looked skyward, eyes trying to focus as rain peppered his face. The back side of his sword hand still burned under his gauntlet.

“Your satchel.” Stefan came up behind him, draping the bag’s leather strap over Nail’s shoulder. “You almost forgot it.”

“Right, thanks.” The words felt strange on Nail’s dry tongue. He swallowed hard, still trying to regain his bearings. His satchel held his most prized possessions: prayer book, art supplies, collection of charcoal drawings.

Claps of thunder boomed behind Nail and Stefan as they hustled their pace to keep up with the others. Patches of trees added some shelter from the rain, but the road mainly bore them through fields and farmland. Hedges, wattle-and-daub fences, and rows of stone lined their path. The hollow clanking of goat bells sounded in the distance.

On occasion, Zane’s dog would bark into the gathering darkness of early evening, as if something were out there following them. Through the fog that still covered his brain, Nail’s imagination began spinning with unholy images, images that had plagued his dreams since childhood. The fiery forms of the nameless beasts of the underworld. Red-eyed beasts that seemed to haunt the minds of lonely children, those children born fatherless, motherless, and alone. Nail knew he was different. He was a bastard and unnatural.

When they tottered by a candlelit cottage, a whiff of woodsmoke swirled past Nail’s nose, the aroma clearing his mind of churning thoughts.

Soon the small company of trainees broke through a stand of evergreens and Gallows Haven was a sprinkling of lights before them. To the right of their path, on a low, sloping hill overlooking Gallows Bay, was the empty husk of Gallows Keep. It had not seen use in centuries. Now its leaning crenellated battlements rose over the village, nothing more than the ancient, broken-down remnants of a castle that was once whole.

To their left was the village chapel. Nail felt sudden reassurance in its bulky gray presence. Despite what negative things Shawcroft said about the Church of Laijon and its teachings, Nail felt there was safety held within the chapel’s great arches, in the thickness of its walls and its stoic grandeur. Above the door, three large stained-glass windows inlaid with intricate designs threw colorful shadows across their path. As those bearing Dokie’s lightning-struck form passed through the front doors of the chapel, Nail looked up at those splendorous windows. On brighter days, with tattered sketchbook in hand, he would sit outside under them and sketch. In the center window was an image of Laijon, five colorful angel stones hanging above him like halos: white, red, black, green, and blue. Laijon wore a coat of shimmering chain mail and hefted a silver battle-ax named Forgetting Moon. In the left window floated two white-robed angels, one wielding a broadsword, Afflicted Fire, the other a black-wood crossbow, Blackest Heart. In the right window were two more heavenly apparitions, one with a horned war helm, Lonesome Crown, and the other carrying a mythical shield, Ethic Shroud. These were the five ancient weapons of lore.

Once Jubal and Jenko Bruk and the others were inside the chapel, those five angelic images cast ghostlike reflections of white, red, black, green, and blue over them as they laid Dokie on the floor before Bishop Tolbret. The bishop was a plain-faced man, short and balding. He wore the dull brown cassock and black sash of his station with sacred white robes underneath.

In the vaulted apse behind the bishop was a statue of Laijon cut from rough-hewn stone, the muscular

carving thrice the size of a normal man, naught but a loincloth about his waist and a wreath of white heather atop his head. Lajon bore a flawless face but for the faint red line representing the fatal wound in his neck. He hung upon an even larger black-painted wooden replica of the Atonement Tree; its twining branches soared, almost reaching the ceiling of the chapel, filling the entire space of the apse.

When Bishop Tolbret saw Nail, muddy and disheveled, he shot him an unfriendly look. Nail dropped his gaze and peeled off his gauntlets. His right hand, his sword hand, stung something fierce. The back of his hand bore a thin burn in the shape of a cross. The fresh wound, so raw and red, almost seemed to glow.

Nail didn't even notice the bile rise in his throat, or the gentle twisting of his stomach, for he'd seen the image of a glowing red cross on the back of his hand before.

As a child, alone and afraid, he'd seen it in his dreams.



Nail and Stefan sat alone, Nail's charcoal drawing unrolled on the table between them. The Grayken Spear Inn's tavern was abuzz about Dokie Liddle. Late winter days along the southwestern shores of Gul Kana were likely to bring sudden bursts of rain that oftentimes turned to snow. But lightning strikes so close to town were rare indeed. Dokie's injury had reined in the normally boisterous mood of the tavern to a somber crawl.

Still, the barmaids were busy doing their jobs. And one young lady who worked here always had Nail's attention—Ava Shay. She was his age, seventeen. Over the past year, when Nail could break away from working the mines with Shawcroft and come into town, they had grown close. At times Nail wondered if they weren't boyfriend and girlfriend. He found it nearly impossible to keep his mind off her.

Thin and delicate as a willow leaf, Ava weaved her way through the tavern toward him, hands laden with two fresh mugs of beer. She wore a simple gray shift tied about the waist with a black sash. Her blond hair fell in rippling clusters down her back, and in the torrid glow of the tavern's many hearths, those silken curls danced about her face like flame. As she drew near, her eyes met his with open interest, deep-green eyes that always left him spellbound. He glanced down at his drawing, a sketch of a long-haired girl in a simple dress carrying a water pail through a knee-high meadow of flowers. Nail imagined the flowers to be white daisies, and the girl to be Ava Shay.

"Sad about Dokie," she said upon reaching their table. "Will he be okay?"

"His parents are with him," Stefan answered. "As are Bishop Tolbret and Baron Bruk. The baron will bring further word, I'm sure."

Ava placed a wooden mug of birch beer in front of Stefan. "One for you." She slid a mug in front of Nail. "And one for you, too, m'dear." She saw his drawing. "I'm not near as talented as you, Nail, but Ol' Man Leddingham displayed one of my fish carvings today." She motioned to the shelf above the bar that stretched along the far wall—her wooden carving sat next to a clear jar holding the rare daggerlike teeth of a mermaid. "If I carve some otters and seals, he said he'll place them on the mantels of the travelers' rooms."

"Your work is terrific," Nail said, happy for her accomplishment.

"You're so sweet." She smiled a winsome smile, then dipped a small curtsy in acknowledgment before making her way back toward the bar.

“I see Ava still sets her charms about you,” Stefan said, pulling Nail’s drawing across the table. “Calls you m’dear whenever you’re in the Grayken Spear.”

“She calls everyone m’dear.” Nail’s eyes followed Ava as she drifted through the crowd. The tavern was fifty paces across and a hundred deep, and tables lined the breadth of it. A bar ran the length of the left side. The scarred surface of the wood floor was covered with a film of soot and ale. Cobwebs hid in the rafters, while the low-hung beams were draped with the pelts of silver-wolf and black bear. The walls were lined with the mounted heads of boar, elk, and stag. Near the door hung the ivory tusks of a walrus and long dried strips of grayken baleen. The owner of the inn, Ol’ Man Leddingham, tended to a haunch of venison cooking on a spit in the open hearth in the center of the room.

Every Gallows Haven young man of seventeen and eighteen, most still in some form of armor to impress the girls, was crowded into the tavern. It was tradition. After arms training, the girls working at the Grayken Spear Inn prepared a meal for the conscripts. Nail lived for the arms training with Baron Bruk and the hot meal at the Grayken Spear afterward. It was one of the few times Shawcroft allowed him to come to town—arms training was mandatory; it was the law.

Stefan pushed the drawing back to Nail’s side of the table. “Ava seems quite taken with your drawing. She didn’t smile once at me.”

“You suffer from no lack of attention.” Nail noticed Gisela Barnwell approach, her eyes fixed on Stefan, who was now blushing. Gisela set two steaming plates of food on their table, curtsied, and said, “Poor Dokie,” before heading back to the bar. The dainty girl, two years younger than Nail and Stefan, wore a wreath of blue heather on her head. She had recently been crowned Maiden Blue of the upcoming Mourning Moon Feast, the annual honor bestowed upon the fairest young girl in all of Gallows Haven.

It was clear Gisela liked Stefan. But Stefan Wayland didn’t see it. Nail’s friend had the beginnings of a strong jaw and hawkish nose. Dark hair fell in a tumble over his shoulders. He had the hard eyes and tanned skin of one who had spent the last few years on Baron Bruk’s grayken-hunting ship. Where Nail was strong and fast on the practice field with a sword, it was the longbow where Stefan excelled. He was a lock to win the archery competition against the conscripts from Tomkin Sty and Peddlers Point during the annual tournament between the towns. After all, he’d won every Mourning Moon archery competition since he was ten. And from the look on Gisela’s face when she’d brought them their food, Stefan had likely won her, too.

Nail knew how he himself looked to others. At seventeen he was bigger and stronger than most men in Gallows Haven. He had grayish-green eyes, a thin nose, and a pleasant smile on a youthful face under locks of blond. He continually flicked wild strands of hair from his face, a habit he couldn’t shake, but a habit that made the girls notice him even more. Nail kept his hair just long enough to cover his ears—thin ears that he felt poked out from his head a bit too much.

Stefan had stopped eating, eyes staring into space.

“Eat,” Nail said. “Don’t mope; Dokie will be fine.”

“I know,” Stefan muttered. “It’s not that.”

Nail set his fork down. “You’ll soon be dancing with Gisela at the Mourning Moon Feast like man and wife.” He pointed a finger at his friend. “And you’ll ask her to dance even if I have to force open your mouth and move your lips about for you.”



Stefan smiled weakly. Zane Neville walked up.

“I’ll have that beer if you’re goin’ to do naught but stare at it.” Zane plunked himself down on the seat beside Stefan, a heaping plate of food in hand. He snatched Stefan’s beer as promised, and in two gulps, it was gone. Zane’s shepherd dog, Beer Mug, sat next to him, long snout resting on the table. Zane slid a piece of smoked salmon the dog’s way. Beer Mug gulped it down, tail thumping the floor. Zane’s large dog reminded Nail of the stealthy silver-wolves that roamed the mountains near the gold mines above town. But unlike those wild wolves, Beer Mug was a good-natured fellow.

Zane’s round face boasted a plump nose, a smattering of freckles, and a bush of carrot-colored hair that stuck up from his head like a big lit torch. He was tall yet portly, and his sloping shoulders and pear-shaped body defeated his best attempts to squeeze completely into his training gear. Still, despite his plumpness, Zane was one of the best new grayken cutters on Baron Bruk’s crew.

“You two talkin’ about Gisela Barnwell?” Zane asked, chomping a mouthful of potatoes. “She made mention she was glad to see you here tonight, Stefan. As Laijon is my witness, I swear it’s true. She was glad you weren’t lightning-struck, as was Dokie.”

“Stefan’s frightened to death of Gisela,” Nail said. “Wouldn’t acknowledge her if she came up and slapped him in the face or grabbed him by the pecker.”

“Well, he’s blushin’ redder than a billy goat’s arsehole now,” Zane said. “I’ll wager he’s probably already took her up in Farmer Wetherby’s hayloft and buried his face under that skirt, her pretty little legs wrapped around his—”

“It ain’t like that,” Stefan snapped. “I would never—”

“Well, spank me rosy, someone’s bound to. All you ever do is moon over her like a heartsick pup. Act now lest some other fellow snatch her up. I swear it, as Laijon is my witness, someone will snatch her up right from under you.” Zane had the irritating habit of saying as Laijon is my witness a half-dozen times in every conversation.

Zane stood. “Perhaps I’ll just throw Gisela to the floor and dry-hump her right here in front of you.” He leaned over the rear of his dog and mimicked a humping motion, tongue out, moaning.

“Don’t be crude.” Stefan looked around frantically. “She might be watching.”

“Humorless as always.” Zane sat and chomped a mouthful of salmon, spitting bits everywhere. Beer Mug eyed the food as it tumbled from Zane’s chest-plate armor to the floor, then licked it up.

Zane’s hefty older sister, Liz Hen, set a bowl of stew in front of each of them—the Grayken Spear was generous with its many courses of food. She was nineteen, tall, broad of shoulder, thick of gut, and bore a thatch of hair wilder and redder than Zane’s. Beer Mug was glad to see her, tail wagging, ears alert.

“I can’t eat this.” Stefan sniffed the steaming bowl. “Chunks of turnip, radish—”

Liz Hen swatted Stefan upside the head with a beefy backhand. “Feed it to the dog then, you clodpole.”

“Ouch,” Stefan exclaimed, poking at the stew. “I’m only saying—”

“Does it look like I give a goat’s fart what’s in the stew? Could be pigeon shit for all I care. I’m only the innkeeper’s big fat errand girl.” With that she stomped away.

“Don’t anger her so.” Zane watched his sister waddle off. “I swear she’ll take it out on me later. As Laijon is my witness, she thinks she’s the most important person in the whole Five Isles. You’re so damned dour tonight, Stefan. Dokie’ll be fine.”

“I’ve other news that weighs heavy on my mind,” Stefan said. “My uncle Brender sent word from Bainbridge this morning. The rumors are true. The White Prince’s armies have almost reached the Laijon Towers. They’re almost to the eastern shores of Wyn Darrè.”

A chill traveled through Nail. Rumors of the White Prince’s complete victory over Wyn Darrè were true. It was dire news indeed.

“Absolution is near,” Stefan said. “Fiery Absolution, as prophesied in The Way and Truth of Laijon. On a clear day, from atop the walls of Lord’s Point, you can see all five Laijon Towers lit up across the straits. Soon they’ll be completely dark, extinguished by Aeros Raijael. Adin Wyte is conquered. Now Wyn Darrè. The armies of Sør Sevier are coming. Soon Sør Sevier will own all the Five Isles.”

“What of the beacon atop the Fortress of Saint Only?” Zane asked, patting Beer Mug.

“Still afire,” Stefan answered. “But only at the sufferance of the White Prince. My uncle says Aeros Raijael will attack the coast of Gul Kana with his full might. Gul Kana is Aeros’ ultimate prize. Sør Sevier men are bred to war and hunt. I’m for getting out of Gallows Haven. Come with me to Bainbridge. We can join a real fighting company there. My uncle will sponsor us. If he sponsors you, Nail, you’ll no longer be ward to Shawcroft.”

“You’re smack full of ideas tonight,” Nail said, though he did like the idea of no longer being beholden to Shawcroft—the man had a cruel streak in him that was unpredictable at the best of times. Stefan always kept abreast of the goings-on in the realm. Nail admired his friend for that. But though he was full of lofty ideas, Stefan was wrong about a few things. “We’d hang for sure if we abandon Baron Bruk and our duties to Gallows Haven,” Nail said. “Two years’ service to the church and the Silver Throne. We are all called to serve. We must all put in our time. Who would defend Gallows Haven if we up and left? Who’d protect the women and children?”

“Nail’s right,” Zane added. “Conscripts like us can’t just skip from town to town.” He nodded at Nail. “Even bastards are not excused from service to Laijon.”

Nail was not offended. Zane meant no harm. What he’d said was true: even bastards served Laijon and the Silver Throne. Everyone in Gallows Haven knew Nail’s heritage. His master, Shawcroft, was the closest thing to kin he had, save a sister Shawcroft mentioned on occasion—a lost twin sister Nail dreamed he would someday find. Never having known his real mother or father, he wondered if they’d ever existed at all. Those vague but real memories of the tender touch of the nurturing woman from his childhood were fading more each day.

“If we flee to Bainbridge, Baron Bruk will hunt us down,” Zane said. “Bishop Tolbret would see to it. Your uncle would be hard-pressed not to turn us in himself. Why must you always see things so contrary to The Way and Truth of Laijon?” Zane snatched Nail’s beer away this time and stole a long drink. “Stefan the Skeptic, I name you. Always thinking too much. To question the laws of Laijon is to show a weak mind.”

Nail felt stuck somewhere between Zane's blind devotion to the tenets of The Way and Truth of Laijon and Stefan's cynical view of things. Master Shawcroft was no help in matters religious. Seemed he had a huge dislike for all things to do with the Church of Laijon. But the man rarely explained himself. For his part, Nail enjoyed the church and its Eighth Day services—mostly for the social aspect, and as an excuse to get out of mining with Shawcroft and the tedium of swinging a pickax with the exacting precision his master required. Attending the weekly Eighth Day services brought Nail closer to his friends, closer to Ava Shay. Plus, the ritual Ember Lighting Rite was this spring. Nail had committed the Ember Lighting Prayer to memory, repeating it in his head daily to the point that he could recite it forward and backward.

“Stay here and die by the blades of an invading army, or leave and become hunted by our own countrymen.” There was frustration in Stefan's voice now, a resignation echoing the futility of their situation. “That's if Baron Bruk doesn't get us killed. Can't he see our helms are lightning rods out there? We're likely to be fried like chicks in a kettle. I daresay, even Bishop Tolbret's white priesthood robes would offer more protection.”

“Don't joke,” Zane said. “The silk robes of Laijon are anointed by the grand vicar himself and rendered stronger than armor. Tolbret would be well protected in any squall.”

“Tolbret's priesthood robes are woven of silk, not iron, and certainly not magic. Tales of their holy properties are only fables meant to impress the children.”

“The Way and Truth of Laijon speaks of their sacredness and strength.”

“All I am saying is our armor is naught but rusty relics dug out of that old keep. We can't stand against Sør Sevier with but forty of us village conscripts and a few codgy sailors and farmers with rakes. Jubal Bruk. I know he's the baron of our lands, the owner of the grayken-hunting ship upon which I work, but sometimes I think the man's brain has been addled.”

“Addled?” Baron Jubal Bruk materialized from the crowd and stood over their table, his son, Jenko, at his side. The baron was wrapped in a rain-soaked cloak that smelled of wet horse. Beer Mug sniffed the man and backed away.

“Baron.” Stefan stood abruptly, bowing, looking like he'd just swallowed a frog.

“How goes it with Dokie?” Nail stood also and bowed. Despite what Stefan claimed, Jubal Bruk was no dribbling fool. His eyes darted angrily over the table. The baron had broad brows and deep-set eyes that always appeared fixed in a fearful squint. With a bearded face and forehead sloping back to a scruff of gray hair, the baron intimidated all in town—especially with his huge sword and its thick, leather-wrapped hilt and black opal-inlaid pommel. Rumor was, before he had settled in Gallows Haven five years ago, he had served as one of Amadon's famed Dayknights. Most in town thought him a good fighter, but ill-equipped as a leader of men.

“Dokie is burnt, but not bad.” The baron motioned for Stefan and Nail to sit. “Bishop Tolbret watches over him. With the blessings of the priesthood, Dokie'll recover.”

“A lucky slip in the mud, Nail.” Jenko smiled. “Otherwise it would be you cooked instead of Dokie.” Still wearing most of his battle gear, the baron's son had a leather scabbard at his hip and a black shield slung across his shoulder. Jenko was a strong, swaggering fellow of eighteen. Tousled brown hair crowned his head and fell to just above his shoulders. Towering even over his father, arms stacked with muscle, Jenko

was probably the stoutest man in Gallows Haven.

“In battle, you need to keep your feet,” Baron Bruk said. “Lying facedown in the muck whilst garbed in heavy armor is a horrible position to find oneself in. Truth is, I don’t think any of you boys have a holy prayer’s chance against the White Prince’s army. Regardless, the Silver Throne requires land barons to train all conscripted young men the length and breadth of Gul Kana in the art of warfare. That’s my charge. Believe me, if for some reason Sør Sevier should ever reach Gallows Haven, I guarantee, they won’t wait for a sunny day just so you fellows don’t have to get your feet wet. I was in the Iron Hills with King Borden when Sør Sevier first invaded Wyn Darrè. A snowstorm and freezing wind struck the walls of Oksana like needles of ice. Did that stop Aeros’ slaughter? No. Our legion of Amadon Silver Guards and Dayknights lent Wyn Darrè what aid we could, but our numbers were few. The White Prince marched straight through the snow and straight over us. Very few of us were lucky to escape that day. I saw King Borden fall with my own eyes. I have seen war.”

The baron leaned over, planted scarred and calloused hands on their table. His steely gaze, angry and filled with purpose, cleaved through Stefan like a sharp knife. “In battle, not all die gloriously. Not all die instantly. Lest you forget your lessons, when armies face off, there first comes an onslaught of arrows. A Sør Sevier longbow is a six-foot-long affair. And their archers can launch near twenty arrows a minute. And when armies finally do clash, be glad for what plate armor you have, even if you it’s naught but rusted junk from that old keep. It will block most attacks. A well-placed sword thrust may not cleave chain mail. But it can drive the links down into your flesh. Then you’ve got yourself a real mess of a wound to deal with. Try running around the battlefield with chunks of your own mail lodged in your gullet as you slowly bleed out. Take your training seriously, all of you.”

“I’m good with a sword,” Nail interjected. “Getting better with the—”

“Where is Shawcroft?” Baron Bruk tersely asked. “Still pissing his time away at the mines, I wager?”

“He went to the mines early this morning,” Nail answered, stung that the baron had so casually dismissed his swordsmanship skills. “He made mention he would be gone digging for a week. I’m to stay with Stefan’s family whilst he’s away.”

The baron met Nail’s gaze. “I was hoping your master would see fit to help me with you conscripts. But, Laijon knows, everything that man does in those gold mines is of utmost import.” With that, Baron Bruk withdrew from their table and made his way toward the tavern’s front door.

What does Shawcroft know of swordsmanship or archery? Nail knew there had been some tension between his master and the baron as of late. It had something to do with the gold mines. Nail thought it of little import. But Jubal Bruk had just now said his master’s name like it was poison on his tongue. That the baron wanted Shawcroft’s help with the conscripts seemed laughable in many ways.

Jenko Bruk remained. He sidled up to their table, looking at Nail unflinchingly. “My father’s right, you know. All the gold was stripped from the mountains centuries ago. No Mourning Moon Feast was ever held for gold digging. Grayken hunts are what Gallows Haven was built upon. The grayken are what sustains Gul Kana. Spend your days at sea doing men’s work, Nail. Bring home a grayken or a load of salmon. Feed the entire town. Now that’s a true living. When is your master going to realize that?”

Nail cared little for Jenko’s tone. Jenko’s two-year conscription to the church and crown was nearly over. It was well known that he would soon inherit his father’s grayken-hunting vessel. Jenko’s position in Gallows

Haven was firmly set. Nail, on the other hand, was heir to nothing. Still, as much as he agreed with the baron's son that mining was a waste of time, Nail knew the hard work Shawcroft had set him to all these years had built him up as a man. Swinging ax and pick had made him strong. He took some pride in that and was loath to see Jenko slander it.

"Nail means to join us on your father's grayken hunt," Stefan said.

"Is that so?" Jenko Bruk gave Nail a sharp look.

"I've Shawcroft's permission, of course, to learn the fishing trade whilst he's at the mines," Nail answered, knowing his words were a lie. Shawcroft would have no clue if he went grayken hunting and would disagree with it strongly. But the man was working the mines for the week. The average grayken hunt took less time than that. Nail knew he would be in open defiance of his master. But he didn't care. The man could be demanding, stubborn, disagreeable, and cruel. Nail was completely dependent on Shawcroft, yet at the same time, to be free of the man was his greatest desire.

"You wish to be a grayken slayer?" Jenko asked. "You'll more likely get shark bit or gill-fucked by one of the merfolk than become a hero."

"Nail will come back a hero all right," Zane piped up. "A hero covered in grayken blubber. Ava Shay can do naught but fall more in love with him then."

"Ava Shay, huh?" Jenko raised an eyebrow. "Indeed, she's one ripe skinny lass."

Nail looked over his shoulder toward the bar, where Ava was wiping her hands on a towel. She glanced at their table and smiled. Jenko threw her a nod. Nail's heart leaped in his throat. That the baron's son might see the same in Ava as he had never crossed his mind. But the look that crept into Jenko's eyes was alarming, and challenging. In fact, the baron's son was staring at Nail. A smile played at the corners of Jenko's mouth, and there was a smoldering, fierce squint to his eyes. "What say we spar for the right to Ava Shay's hand at the Mourning Moon Feast, Nail?"

"Well, kiss my pickle." Zane Neville slapped Jenko on the back. "The gauntlet thrown. A bit of fun to top off an otherwise sorrowful evening, right? Dokie would love it were he here!" Beer Mug even seemed excited by the prospect, tail thumping the floor.

Jenko was grinning now, fingers poised at the hilt of his sword. His gaze never wavered from Nail. "What say you, a spar in the street? Like Zane said, a bit of fun to lighten the mood around here. Or do you dare not draw swords with me?"

On the training field, Nail had bested Jenko on occasion. Jenko had also beaten him. Every conscript knew he and Jenko were evenly matched. But to spar in the village street was another matter altogether. In front of the Grayken Spear, Ava Shay could finally witness his prowess. At the same time, he could put Jenko in his place.

"Do you lack courage, Nail?" Jenko said, his smile growing. He snatched Nail's charcoal drawing from the table, crumpled it, and tossed it to the floor.

Nail looked at his ruined drawing through the stray strands of blond hair that now covered his face. Anger welled. The back of his right hand flared in pain, the cross-shaped mark stinging. He knew the baron's son

was only goading him. Until now, he had never harbored any ill will toward Jenko Bruk. Sure, he was the son of the richest man in town and could behave boorishly at times, but it was all talk to be ignored. However, this time his insults had done their job. Jenko's cocky grin was now poised above Nail, and Nail wanted to smack it from Jenko's face. A challenge followed by a friendly spar was normal fare at the Grayken Spear once the beer took hold. The only problem was, Jenko wasn't drunk and this challenge had grown personal.

Nail brushed the hair from his eyes, stood, and gathered his blade. "It's not lack of courage." He met the baron's son eye to eye, then jammed his sword into the table, point first. At the sound, Zane's dog jumped, as did the village conscripts sitting nearby. Nail kept his eyes trained on Jenko. "It's because we are not yet outside that I haven't knocked that smile from your face."

Zane yelled, "Nail has just accepted a challenge!"

The Grayken Spear erupted in cheers. Soon the tavern began to empty, the eager spectators spilling out onto the street. "No steel," Stefan said, looking nervously at both Jenko and Nail. "We wrap the blades in sackcloth as usual."

Jenko nodded, smile gone, eyes no longer fixed on Nail. The baron's son strode from the tavern without looking back. A snub. As if Nail was of no account.



A circle of spectators had already formed outside in the dark. Many bore torches, lighting the puddle-stained street in front of the Grayken Spear and the blacksmith shop next door. The rain was just a drizzle now. Still, footing would be treacherous in the mud. Nail stepped from the wood-plank porch of the tavern down into the sludge. Zane stood there with his dog. Stefan wrapped Nail's sword in a long strip of sackcloth and handed it over.

The crowd parted. Jenko waited in the middle of the circle, cinching his armor. His sword, already wrapped in strips of cloth, was near his shield at his feet. He donned his helm, snatched up his shield and sword, and stepped forward. Nail looked toward the Grayken Spear. Several of the tavern girls were on the porch among the onlookers—Tylda Egbert, Polly Mott, Gisela Barnwell, Liz Hen Neville, even Ava Shay.

"I'm over here!" Jenko banged his sword against his shield.

Nail put his helm on, wincing as he slipped his gauntlet over the cross-shaped wound on his sword hand. Once geared up, he felt outmatched before his foe. Jenko's sword was long and sleek with a fine leather-strapped hilt. His iron-bossed shield was painted with a silver-wolf's head. Nail's shield was all wood and painted with nothing, his sword an old blade found in the catacombs of Gallows Keep. Baron Bruk had scraped it free of rust before giving it to him last year. It was a solid blade, if a tad stumpy, and came with a crooked hilt and a patched leather scabbard lined with rotted fleece. Overall, it was thick, clumsy, ill-weighted, and terribly unbalanced. Still, ever since the baron had handed it to him, Nail had worshipped the thing and slept with it near his pillow.

Stefan stepped between Jenko and Nail and yelled for all to hear, "You spar in the normal fashion, as if the baron himself watched. Slash and counter. No thrusting. First with three strikes wins!" Stefan moved back and the way was clear.

Jenko swung. Nail thrust his shield forward, and there was a clash of sackcloth-wrapped iron on wood. Nail stumbled back and Jenko's next swing whistled over his head. Jenko swung four more times with rapid ease. Nail blocked each, but his shield arm grew weary. Jenko's next blow struck heavy and hard. Jenko then faked high. Nail raised his shield and Jenko stabbed under it, striking the armor covering his stomach. Nail reeled back. "No thrusting!" Stefan yelled. "That strike doesn't count! Slash and parry!"

Jenko backed away. A good ten paces separated them now. Nail was embarrassed. He hadn't swung yet, to Jenko's flurry of blows. Nail used the time and space to get a much firmer grip on his sword and shield and, more importantly, his confidence. He was wheezing for breath under his helm and tried to calm down. There were cheers for him, the loudest coming from Stefan and Zane. Their cheers bolstered him. He advanced with his head down under the rim of his shield, peering over it, sword poised. Jenko lunged, swinging for his legs. Nail lowered the shield, spoiling the stroke, and slashed at Jenko's helm. His sword connected with a thud, snapping Jenko's head back. The baron's son stumbled sideways. Nail hammered Jenko with his shield, and his foe fell to the ground.

"One strike for Nail!" Stefan yelled, and a smattering of applause sounded from the crowd as Jenko scrambled away on hands and knees, mud sloshing under him. Nail, with the advantage now, swung again and connected with Jenko's back. "Strike two!"

Before Nail could finish him, Jenko sprang to his feet and lunged with two quick blows. Nail blocked them with ease. Now that Nail had gotten in two good hits, there was a bounce in his step. Jenko backed off, and there was space between them again. The baron's son plunged ahead with two more strikes that landed fast and hard against Nail's midsection. "Two for Jenko!" Stefan yelled. Nail reeled back, angry, side throbbing. He came up swinging as Jenko's third blow connected the same time as his.

"Both strikes count!" Stefan yelled. "It's a tie!" Everyone cheered.

"Rotted dog shit!" The baron's son ripped off his helm and threw down his shield. "A bastard is no equal of mine." No sooner had his shield and helm hit the mud than Jenko leaped forward, gripping his sword in both hands now. His high swing came crashing in. The blow knocked Nail's shield spinning away. His second blow planted Nail's butt firmly in the mud. Instantly, Jenko loomed over him, raining blows. Nail scrambled back on his haunches, mud plowing up behind him. He kept his sword up in defense, but it was beaten back swiftly. Then it wasn't in his hand anymore. It spun off and lit in a puddle. Then Jenko was striking him about the shoulders, arms, and chest.

"Enough! Enough!" Stefan yelled, but Jenko's blows were relentless. "It was a tie, you bloodsucking oghul! You're likely to kill him behaving like that!"

Nail felt the breath pounded from his lungs as he tried to crawl away, at the same time groping for his lost sword in the puddle, finding it, turning, holding it aloft. He would not retreat. But the blows from Jenko kept coming.

Stefan tackled the baron's son from behind and both dropped in the mud. In a heap, they struggled. Jenko threw Stefan off and stood, sackcloth-wrapped sword still in hand. He came at Nail again. "Stop!" Stefan bellowed. Zane was there, and with Stefan, the two wrestled Jenko to the ground a second time.

"Get off!" Jenko snarled, eyes blazing at Nail from under dark, wet locks. Nail, kneeling in the mud, the percussion of Jenko's crushing blows reverberating through his armor, could feel the fresh dents in the iron plate pushing in. There was a dull ache throbbing deep in his chest. He wasn't certain he could stand if he

wanted.

“Let me up, you pox-scarred scum!” Jenko fought against Stefan and Zane.

“The wraiths take you if you don’t stop fighting,” Stefan said, breathing heavy.

“Turn him loose,” Nail snarled between hard-fought breaths. “I’ll still fight him! I ain’t dead yet!”

“That’s right, lemme up! Let me finish him like he wants!” Jenko yelled.

Zane whistled for Beer Mug. Soon the big shepherd dog was snarling and barking at the pile of struggling bodies. With the threat of the dog, the fight died in Jenko and he gave up, head hanging. “I’m done then.”

“Let him up,” Stefan said, motioning Zane to hold his dog. “Be wary.” He released the baron’s son. Jenko stood, brushing the mud from his greaves, smiling, his teeth stark white shards in the lamplight as he walked toward Nail. Nail didn’t know whether Jenko was going to help him up or what. Either way, he wouldn’t allow himself to accept any help. He’d stand on his own no matter how much his body ached.

Jenko plucked the sword from Nail’s hand and threw it. It sailed over the crowd and into the darkness, landing near the narrow alley between the inn and the blacksmith shop. “Fetch that, you goose-shit-eating bastard.” Jenko stepped around Nail, shoving his way through the crowd and back up onto the porch of the Grayken Spear Inn.

Nail growled and scrambled to his feet, his mind set on tackling Jenko and ending the fight with his fists. But his foot slipped and down he went again, face-first.

“Hold steady now,” Stefan said, grabbing him by the arm. “Don’t know what you did to piss Jenko off so, but I reckon it’s got something to do with Ava.”

Nail’s gaze followed the baron’s son. Under the torchlight, he saw Ava Shay leaning against the porch railing. Jenko stepped up to the girl and whispered something in her ear, his hand brushing lightly over her shoulder before he entered the tavern. Nail was humiliated more by the small interaction between Jenko and Ava than any blow the baron’s son could’ve dealt with his sword.

“Pay him no mind.” Stefan helped Nail stand. “You’ll be stiff on the morrow. Bruises for a moon or more. You put up a real fight, though. Gave us all a grand show.”

The crowd was dispersing. Some back into the Grayken Spear, others wandering off into the darkness and home. Zane trundled back into the inn, Beer Mug bounding happily behind. Nail didn’t know how far he could walk on his own. He hunched over and clutched his stomach. Soreness blanketed his body. Despite all his hurts, he was most of all embarrassed.

Stefan ducked under Nail’s arm, propping him up. “My pa can send word to Shawcroft if you’d like. He’ll let your master know you’re hurt.”

“I ain’t hurt,” Nail mumbled. “Besides, Shawcroft’s never been concerned about me. Jenko’s right, his only concern is those gold mines.” He was envious of Stefan’s family and the comforts of a warm home, surrounded by loving parents and siblings. Nail lived on the outskirts of town in a small, cold, one-room cabin with his master. He put on a strong front, but deep down he knew how lonely his life really was. “I’ll



sleep in the coop tonight. I'm sure your mother hasn't the room inside."

"You needn't sleep with the chickens," Stefan said. "We've the room."

Nail had managed to hobble only a few steps when Ava's soft voice sounded from behind. "You fought well."

He turned. She held his sword. It was covered in mud. Nail slid from under Stefan's arm and took the weapon from her. Mud remained on the palm of her hand. In her other hand was the drawing Jenko had crumpled. "I'm sorry it got ruined," she said, handing it over. "It was pretty." Ava hesitated as if wanting to say more, then pulled a leather-thong necklace from the folds of her linen skirt. She reached up and slipped it over his head and around his neck and quickly backed away.

"A gift," she muttered shyly. "To make amends for the drawing Jenko ruined."

Hooked to the leather thong was a small carving of a turtle no bigger than the end of Nail's thumb. He held the carving in his hand, admiring Ava's delicate workmanship. Every display of her talents filled him with desire.

"Thank you," he stammered, meeting her soft gaze. That she had made this wooden trinket for him set his heart soaring. Ava kissed him lightly on the cheek and made her way back toward the Grayken Spear Inn.

And as she stepped back up onto the inn's porch, Nail saw it.

At the back of the alley between the Grayken Spear and the blacksmith shop.

A cloaked figure astride a red-eyed horse, silhouetted black and hollow against the glittering waters of Gallows Bay beyond. The glowing eyes of the horse were fixed on Nail like stark smoldering coals.

Other than within the darkness of his own worst dreams, Nail had never seen such a demon-eyed creature. His blood ran cold. "Do you see that?" He turned to Stefan.

But Stefan Wayland was already walking toward home. And when Nail looked back into the blackness of the alley, the cloaked horseman was gone.

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