

## CHAPTER 6

I threw the sticks down. It wasn't going to work. Once, I had seen Hunter light some dry grass by rushing a thin branch up and down a furrow in a larger one - until the little nest of dry grass popped into flame. But all I had for the last fifteen minutes of violent exercise was a stinging broken blister on the palm of my right hand. I had jogged halfway back to Aysling but there had been no sign of Moe. And now it was almost dark. I was staring up at the branches wondering if I should climb a tree when a little gold metal block, held between a very dirty finger and thumb, moved slowly into sight past my right eye.

"What!" My cry was more a yelp as I scrabbled frantically away.

"Hey, he he. Hey! Stop. He he. Really stop. Hee, ha." A man. A man struggling to get his words out between guffaws.

I stopped crawling. The man got to his feet - he'd been crouching to play his little joke -wiggling a little gold block. And behind him was Moe, placidly swishing his tail! The man smiled through his dark goatee beard and leant forward as though we were in a conspiracy, "Bit hard to misplace something that big isn't it?"

"That's my horse. He ran off."

"Did he now? That's not like the Moe I know."

"You know Moe?"

"Oh, I know Moe."

He began guffawing again, "Love it. You know Moe. Moe and you I know."

A dirty hand was thrust out, "But you don't know me. I'm Gale."

I got up slowly and allowed my hand to be shaken, "Pic."

"I know."

I stepped over to Moe and rubbed his nose, "Well thanks again. I better go."

"Too late. No, no. Too late. Not safe. We best camp here."

I hesitated but then looped the rope back over the branch, patted Moe on the thigh and retrieved my satchel. Gale was kneeling by my pile of twigs. He wiggled the little gold block he'd used to scare me, grinned, and flicked the top back, revealing a tiny chimney peppered with holes. He dragged his thumb down a rough wheel, waved his hand like he was doing a magic trick, and a little flame appeared! My face seemed to amuse Gale as he chuckled as he lit the twigs, "Need branches Pic."

When the fire was crackling Gale pulled out a water skin and, ferreting inside his battered backpack, produced a waxed cover containing some cheese, berries, nuts and two hard boiled eggs. I pulled out the bit of bread from my satchel. Gale plucked it from my hand before I could take a bite, "Just what our smorgasbord needed."

The man carefully divided the food onto two leaves and handed me one. I began to nibble, wondering how long I could make such a tiny portion last. Gale must have noticed my unhappy face as he said, "Our stomachs like to control us." He tapped his forehead, "You need to be in charge. It would do most people good to feel hungry now and then."

"Surely this isn't enough for you to live on? Not if you've chasing...things."

Gale shrugged, "I'll try to catch some game tomorrow."

We chewed in silence before Gale said, "You can ask Pic."

I swallowed, "You are one of them aren't you? A Mutant Reaver?"

Gale bowed as he shoved the complete egg into his mouth, "Gale Muthanch Reaver ash your service."

"And you patrol around here? Our valley? Around Aysling?"

Gale nodded, chewed and said, "You seem disappointed?"

I shook my head emphatically, "Oh no. Not at all."

But I was. I was disappointed. And shocked. Mutant Reavers were supposed to be huge and terrifying. Not thin and guffawing.

"I've seen a few mutants," I said.

"Have you now?"

I nodded, "Just the bodies. Hunter sometimes finds them in his snares. One was like a massive rat. With long teeth. Then there was this cat thing. It had lots of missing fur and blood oozing from its ears."

Gale nodded, "They don't tend to be very attractive. It's the chemicals. They don't live long either but their bite would give you an infection you wouldn't relish."

"Do you see many?"

Gale shook his head, "Far fewer than when I was young. I got rid of a nasty pack of dog things two days ago but that's all for the last six months. That's how I know Moe by the way." The man snorted but held up a hand, "Sorry. I've seen you both quite a few times. You must be a special lad to have been chosen to do the Tithe run."

I just shrugged. Gale was looking at me thoughtfully so I ventured, "Have you saved me from mutants and I didn't even know?"

Gale nodded, "On occasion."

"Why...why didn't you say hello?"

Gale poked the fire, "Oh we Reavers tend to keep to ourselves. But I will say it's a nice change to share a meal. Kittite is not much of a conversationalist."

I said excitedly, "Your goshawk? Kittite is your goshawk?"

Gale nodded.

"That's all true? Do Reaver's really have pet goshawks that help them kill mutants?"

"She's chasing mice or voles. Be back soon."

I glanced up, "She won't attack me? I'm safe?"

"Not unless you call her a pet again."

I nodded emphatically, "Oh right. Got it."

"How did you lose old Moe?"

"We were on the wall. CoggsHill. Right when we were dropping the Tithe a bunch of Redelmen jumped - well were sort of flung up by a catapult thing - onto the wall."

The man wasn't guffawing anymore. His eyes were now focused on me. All the twinkle gone.

I looked down, "Moe got scared. I almost got speared."

"Did they wipe out the Guardians?"

I shook my head, "For some reason they all suddenly jumped back into the water and their boat rowed off. But they killed about six. They lost some too."

"Well, well." Gale was staring down the track and stroking his beard.

After a while I said, "What was that device? The little flame box?"

Suddenly the little gold block was back between his finger and thumb. Gale grinned and tossed it across to me, "Try it yourself."

I opened the lid and dragged my thumb down the tiny wheel. Even though I was expecting it, I gasped when the flame jumped up. I held it near my hand, feeling the heat.

I heard the Reaver without raising my head, "A Flick-flame. They only contain so much flame. No way of knowing how many. Best not to use it all up."

I clicked the lid shut. The Reaver was deep in his pack, "Ah here you are." He pulled out an almost identical, silver, little block, "I was just issued this one when I was last at HQ. That one in your hand I've had for so many years the Elders are sure it will run out any day. In fact..." he paused, "You know what, why don't you keep it?"

"You can't mean that?"

The Reaver gave a dismissive wave, “It’s not every day you survive a battle involving the Redel. But don’t be too excited. That might have been the last time it works. I may have just given you a little metal block.”

I turned the block over. There was cursive script on one side which I read slowly, “Vivir ...con miedo es como vivir a...medias.”

I looked a question at the Reaver who shrugged, “It’s one of the old languages. Says something like ‘a life lived in fear is a life half lived’. All right. Time to get off the ground.”

The Reaver gestured to a nearby tree, “You can snuggle into that wee vee up there.”

When I woke, rubbing my face, at dawn, the rain had gone and Moe was impatiently stamping his hoof. The Reaver was nowhere to be seen.