

Chapter 2 – On the Road

I have not really said much about my home, I suppose I must tell you a little. Where you are born and raised influences you for the rest of your life. I lived in a Village Called Willowford. It was like every other village at the time. The Hall was surrounded by homes and workshops, laid out in a circle around the hall. There was a good deal of space between the hall, workshops, and homes. The village used this space for gatherings and festivals, as well as a place for the few traveling merchants to set up a temporary shop. The homes and workshops closest to the hall were the most important, for both the people who lived in them and the work that was done. As you can imagine, all the elders lived in homes around the hall, except one. The workshops were important for the entire village, a smith, a baker, a tailor, carpenter, and the village food store. Space was left between the rows of houses and shops before the next circle of homes and storerooms. Then finally one more, but that circle was not complete. As the Village grew so would the circles. Their design also provided a little security. No group of people could just show up in the middle of the village, without first passing through the rings of homes. If they were intruders, alarms would be raised, and the village would respond. Just outside the main part of the village, the farms started. They were arranged the same as the village, in a circle around the village. The first circle was dedicated to Herbs, root vegetables and berries. Nothing that grew too tall to block the view from the Village. The next circle was still dedicated to growing, but this was Wheat, Corn, Barley, and other tall plants. It was a sensible design, a kind of wheel and spoke. The Spokes were the roads and paths that lead to the main Village center. With farms laid out like a pie wedge that started narrow but grew as they reached outward. As you progressed outward, you had livestock, sheep, cattle, and chickens. They were farther away from the main village for two reasons, the farmers needed a lot of land for the livestock, and it helped keep the smell away from the main parts of the village. The very last people you would meet leaving the village, or the first if you were coming, were the orchard farmers. The trees grew Apples, Pears, Nuts, and Peaches. The orchards were always pleasant

to walk through, it was peaceful and had the smell of freshness. They were at the very edge of the village because the trees could be a problem if closer to the main Village. They gave cover to wild animals, bandits or even a hostile force. I had never experienced any problems in my life with bandits. Although some of the older villagers would tell stories of bandit raids, many years ago. As for a hostile force, well that had not happened in a few generations. Still every village was set up the same way. It gave comfort to the people who lived there.

I was just arriving at the Farm of Orr; his orchard of Apples was the very last one of the villages. He was the same farmer I had come to get a report from the day the fish died. I spotted Orr examining some of his trees, I waved. It was almost noon by the time I had reached his farm. 'Good afternoon, Orr.' I greeted him. "Hello Viktor, why are you out here? Nothing has changed from the last visit, so I do not have anything to add to the report." "I am on my way to Ashford, with our monthly dispatch. This is my first time leaving the village. I am both excited and a little nervous." I said, "So, nothing has changed, the road is still clear for my journey?" I asked "Oh so you have become a full scribe, and this is your first assignment, well congratulations. I have not heard or seen anything unusual. I think you will have an uneventful trip." Orr said. "I will return in eight to ten days. I will stop on my way back. Have a good afternoon." I started walking again. "Safe Trip Viktor" Orr Called and returned to inspecting his trees.

I left Orr behind and walked a little more then stopped for a moment. This is now the farthest I had been from the Village, and I still had a long way to go. I looked around, and felt the whole world was open to me. The village is a decent place to live but now I felt like everything was new and exciting. I wondered where I would go and what I would see. I cannot remember a time when I felt like this. I felt like the sun was inside me, burning brightly. I unconsciously placed my hand on a tree that I was standing next to. I think it was my way of giving a handshake to the world, saying hello, here I am, it is nice to meet you and I look forward to seeing everything you have. As soon as I touched the tree, I could

feel a sensation in my hand, I looked and saw that the area around my hand was turning dark and beginning to die. I pulled my hand away and looked at it. When this had happened before I had been hungry. This time was different, I was not hungry, I was elated. I looked around quickly, I was away from the village and Orr's farm, but still I wanted to be sure no one was around to see what had just happened, I was alone. This day was full of excitement and now surprises. Why did that happen? I stood for a moment and thought about it but realized it might look strange if someone came along to find me standing on the side of the road, alone, staring at a tree, like I was having a conversation. I continued walking, thinking about what had just happened. Before when I had touched the flowers or the fish, I realized I was hungry, thinking about filling my belly with something to eat. I assumed that hunger was part of the reason for what had happened. This time was different, why? I know how I was feeling, but what was I thinking about? It was a wonderful day and as I thought about it, I knew what I was thinking. I wanted to know everything about the world. It was almost as if I had opened my mind and was just letting everything into my head. That is when it hit me. Before with the flowers and this fish, I was hungry and thinking about taking in food. This time I was thinking about taking in the world. Both times what I was really doing was thinking about taking something inside, whether it was nourishment or in the case of the tree just now, knowledge. Was that the explanation of my skill? If that was true, I needed to be more careful. After the first few times it had happened, I was careful of what I did and touched when I was hungry. Now I would really need to be careful of what I was thinking and what I touched. I needed to think more about this. It was obvious that more was going on than what I first had considered was the answer. I did believe that my emotions were part of it, but not all. It was even better to have this time alone. I just hoped I knew a little more before I returned home.

I also started to think what I had done to the flower, fish and now the tree. In every case I was causing destruction. I thought about it, I was taking something from the flowers, fish, or tree, but what? The Flowers and Fish had died, and I would guess the tree would have as well, if I had continued to

touch it. I was taking life from them. I do not pretend that I understand death, it is one of the great mysteries. The Church tells us that after we die our spirit lives on, but we must be forgiven for that to happen. We are all born corrupted in some way and only the church can help us. I never really believed that, and now even more. I do not feel bad, I do not have evil thoughts and I know for sure I have not made some deal or pact with some evil spirit. I know I live in a small village, in a very remote part of the world. We do not know everything, but I think even in our little corner of the world, we would have heard about someone with the touch of death. I was also sure that I did not need to go to church and confess or ask for forgiveness, I am not controlled by something, or have a desire to rule, money was of little value in the village. All the things that the church would tell us lead to evil, just did not apply. Something else was happening and I was determined to find out what.

I continued thinking about it as I walked. It was getting to be late afternoon. Soon I would need to find a spot to camp for the night. I had camped outside a few times with my father and brother. Normally when we were helping another farmer with a harvest. I was not totally inexperienced, but I will say this. I do not care what you have read before or what people have told you, there is nothing good about sleeping on the ground. It is cold, sometimes wet, there is always a branch, root, or rock poking you. You can build the biggest fire you like, but sometime during the night it will go out, unless you do not sleep. So, it is difficult to stay warm. You cannot really cook a decent meal; it would be too inconvenient to carry all the kitchen things you need. Mostly you eat cold food. I have heard people say that meat roasted over an open fire is delicious. I think they say that to make the experience of sleeping outdoors feel better, because we cook almost all the wild game over a fire at home, unless they are making a stew. Fire is Fire, I do not think a fire here tastes different than a fire at home. I would not know for sure; I have never tasted fire and I am not going to try. Then there are the insects and animals that you worry about. Most are harmless and are a bother more than anything, but then you have the Bears, Wolves, Cats, and other assorted creatures that would really ruin your day. No, sleeping outdoors

is nothing special and I would recommend that you avoid it as much as possible. This was a slight problem for me, because of my new status as a scribe, and the fact that Daana had said this was the first of many trips I would make, I needed to get used to it. I had spoken to the hunters on many occasions because I needed to write the information about game movements in the village log. They had shared a few suggestions on sleeping outdoors. First was to find a spot that you could put your back against. A rock or big tree protected your back so you could focus most of your attention on your front. Second, a cave might sound like a perfect spot to sleep, but almost all caves were already home to some wild animal. If they were not home when you first looked, there is a good chance they will come back, and more than likely you will be asleep when they do. Try to camp next to water, but not too close. All the animals of the forest drink water too and will come to the source at some time. If you find a spot that looks good, say a flat area, next to a stream, with plenty of protection and soft soil to rest, move on. Animals are not stupid, if you think it is perfect, so will they. The same thing goes with food. A patch of wild berries seems like a suitable place to stop. Again, the animals will all know this spot too, and will come to eat. It is never a good idea to put yourself between an animal and food, because you will more than likely be considered food as well. Generally, the best place to stop is close to the road, as most animals avoid humans. The animals know the human paths and avoid them if possible. The risk of stopping near the road is bandits, or other travelers that might not be so friendly. It is best not to make a fire unless you have a risk of freezing to death. The light of fire can be seen for miles at night and can attract unwanted attention. The best approach is to consider everything around you as hostile, be on alert always, move as quietly and unnoticed as possible. When you do stop, make sure you look around the area, check for signs of other travelers or animals. Then plan for at least three separate ways you can flee if something does happen. Really when you consider all these things, the best place to camp is the coldest, most uncomfortable spot you can find, a spot where no person or animal would want to sleep. Does camping still sound like fun?

As you can see, sleeping outdoors is not the amazing adventure some people say it is, or the fairy tale stories they tell you when you are young. All in All, it is miserable. I had gone off the road, not too far, but enough that I could not be seen, unless you were really looking. I found a spot with a small group of young trees. They offered a little protection; I had discovered a little secret about willows and young trees, during a time when I was exploring around the village, they made a perfect place to sit and lay back. The main trunks of these young plants were still soft but strong. You could lean back, and they would bend, giving you support. It was not perfect, but they were comfortable, if you found a good group that were just the right distance apart and the right age. The trees I found were exactly right. I placed my bed roll down and leaned back to relax and eat a little of the food I had brought. It had been a good first day, no surprises on the road and I discovered a little more about my talent. I did not make a fire that night, following the advice of the hunters. The weather was fair and even if I got a little cold, I would not freeze. I slept a little but woke up often from the sounds of the night. Your ears and mind play tricks on you at night and in strange places. Every sound seems like some huge creature is just a few paces away, ready to reach out and grab you. Even though the village was small, at night the sounds that I heard were usually people or dogs. You would be surprised just how loud an insect can be. I knew in time I would get used to these sounds and know which ones were of concern and which were just the passing or harmless animals of the night. However even knowing that, it did not help me tonight. Tonight, I slept with both ears open and one eye looking into the darkness.

At some point in the night, I finally fell asleep, I arose as the sun was coming up over the horizon and was falling on my face. I opened my eyes and stretched my arms above my head. I was still warm with my blanket covering me, so I dug into my pack and ate a little of the dried fruit. I did not have all day to lay here, so I rose and packed my belongings, I was already on the road when the sun fully rose. It looked like it was going to be a clear and sunny day. I had tried my new skill at various times since I discovered it, but until yesterday I thought it was related to being hungry. After my experience

yesterday I knew that was not the case. I needed to try again and really pay attention to everything I was thinking, feeling, and doing. I assumed I could learn to control it, so I did not accidentally hurt someone or show this talent where other people could see. I just wanted to stop and test my skill, but I also had a job to do. I had been thinking about that for a little bit and had an idea. The trip should take eight or nine days. Daana had said no more than ten. If I just went as fast as I could to Ashford, I could complete my job and then on the way back I might have a day or two that I could try some experiments. That was the reason I was up so early, and tonight I would continue to walk well past dark. If I could see the road, I would not get lost. I had noticed last night that the moon was almost full, it would give enough light that I could follow the road, if I paid attention. Even if I wanted to stop and test my skill, I had responsibilities. I and almost everyone in the village took our jobs very seriously. It would be better to finish the job and then you would have time for personal interests.

As I walked, I made mental notes of the weather and road conditions. I will report this when I return home. I would also need to report to Abe. I had also considered this first trip a test of sorts. My job was to gather and report information. This was not limited to what other people told me, but my own experience as well. As much as I would like to focus on my skill, I still had a job to do. I needed to maintain that I was the same person, nothing had changed, and nothing was different. I knew Abe did not know me, but I was sure Daana had sent some information to him. I was sure that the village of Ashford would add my information to their log, and the information should be good. I realized that what I did and really what all scribes do, was more than writing a report, it was collecting information and determining what was important and to whom. I needed to remember that. Everything seemed normal and in good condition on the road so far. It was difficult for me to judge what was normal as I have never been here before. As I made more trips, I would become more familiar with the route and could more accurately report any changes to things I thought might be of concern. I was not completely focused on my work or surroundings if truth be told.

I was constantly thinking about my skill. It would float around in my head, random thoughts, or ideas. I let this happen on purpose. When I am trying to figure something out or solve a problem, I find that letting my thoughts be random would help me discover the answer. Think of it as a giant puzzle in your head. You can look at the pieces as much as you want, but sometimes they just do not fit. Letting the pieces float around, things would connect naturally, and the puzzle would become clearer. I know it is a strange way of thinking, but it works for me.

I spent the day walking on the road and lightly thinking about my skill. It was a very uneventful day. I saw a few animals, nothing bigger than a squirrel and birds. I guess I should be thankful my trip was going so well. I may wish for excitement, but as they say, be careful what you wish for. I walked for some time after the sun had gone down. I was not tired, and the moon provided enough light that I could see the road. I finally settled down and ate a little food late into the night. Again, my lack of experience prevented me from really being a good judge of time, if I were to guess it was past midnight. I picked a small blade of grass and held it in my hand. I looked at the grass and tried to feel it, feel what was inside and for that to come to me. Nothing happened. I thought about hunger, as I stared at the grass, but I had just eaten so I had the thought but not the feeling. That is when those puzzle pieces I told you about connected in my head. I needed to think and feel the same thing at the same time. It was difficult, I had never really tried to connect my thoughts and feelings. The truth is I did not really think about feelings very much at all. Yes, I have them, I can be happy, sad, angry, or frightened. I just never thought about it in this way. I looked at the grass again. I thought about knowing, connecting with the grass, what it was, how it came to be. With my thoughts and feelings, a little more aligned, I saw the grass fade. If you had seen me at that moment, you would have seen the biggest grin on my face, the biggest I have ever had. It had worked. This was the first time I purposely tried my skill and it worked. I wanted to shout, or dance or really do anything to celebrate. Instead, I took a few deep breaths and calmed myself down. I do not know how long I sat trying my skill before it worked, but the moon was

starting its path down for the night, so I knew it was extremely late. I needed to rest. I still had my work. I could not get distracted testing my skill right now. I needed to focus.

This was one of the most difficult things I have ever done. I am sure you are thinking, and trust me I was thinking the same, get another piece of grass and try it again. Try something else, forget about Ashford. This was something special, and I should spend my time understanding and learning more. That sounds all well and good but remember the time I was living. The village was your entire world, and everyone needed to contribute to the survival of the village. People who did nothing to support the village were sent to serve the crown or became thieves and bandits. To serve the Crown you were sent to the capital city to be forced into military service. Not a grand military service, basically you were used as a human shield expected to perish in your first battle. Some people were put to work in the mines or the worst of them all, human waste disposal. You were basically a slave. If you did not perform the jobs given to you by the crown, you were put to death. It really did not matter what happened, Crown or thief, the result was the same, death.

Then there were the people who did not work very much, because they were odd. Talking to themselves, acting with odd behavior. Things that were not easy to explain or what people thought was normal. These folks were sent to Apainar. Apainar was the Holy Center of the church. It sat on an island in Crystal Lake. It was not really a full Island, there was a small strip of land that connected it to the mainland. It seemed like an idyllic place, but even the lake was not what it seemed. It was called Crystal Lake, because the water that filled it flowed directly from the snow top mountains. It was clear and would reflect the sunlight like a group of crystals, however, it was bitter cold and often was completely frozen. Apainar itself was supposed to be a city that welcomed all, a shining city of God, a place to worship and become better people. Learning to serve God and the kingdom. However, it had a very unsavory reputation. First, the most fanatical people were there. Their views on what was good and

proper were extreme. Anything you might say that did not align perfectly with the views of the higher-ranking priests could get you into a whole lot of trouble. Anything you did could be viewed as an affront to the church, looking at a priest the wrong way, not having a proper greeting or they just did not like the way you looked. In Apainar the priest's word was law, there was no court, no recourse, no explain yourself. You were guilty, no questions asked. Punishment could be various things, most common was public whipping, public castration, public beheading. Everything was done in front of the public to set an example of what would happen if the people broke the law or offended a priest. Death was probably the best punishment you could receive, at least your suffering would be over fast. There were rumors of offenders being sold as slaves, being used for experiments on the physical body. Then there was rehabilitation, where they said they would help you learn the teachings of the true God. This process involved suffering, the priests felt that if you suffered enough, you would repent and accept the word of God. They would inflict daily beatings, cut your skin, and apply acid to the open wound. They might remove an eye, because really you only needed one. They thought the same of your hand or arm. I am not sure if it is true, but I have also heard that sometimes they would insert a sharp needle up your nose, push it all the way until it pierces the brain, they would ask you about God, what was right and wrong, how best to serve the church. If you did not answer correctly, they would repeat this process until any sign of self-awareness faded from your eyes. You were alive but with no thoughts or will. It is one of the things that made the city so dark. The people that had this treatment could be seen around the city. Their faces blank, eyes sunken, and the skin on their bodies hung from their bones. Many of these people could be seen in the city cleaning sewage, that they collected in buckets of waste, some people even said that the waste was all they were allowed for food. It was a horrible city with a very nasty reputation. This is not a place anyone has ever returned from. It was a place I never wanted to go.

I needed to continue with my life, as normal. I could not risk anything that could be viewed as odd or strange. As a scribe, we were already viewed as a little different. Most villages thought the need

to read and write was unnecessary and a waste of time. All the villagers knew the only reason to have a scribe was to file reports to the crown. Without these reports, the crown would send soldiers to the village to investigate, those investigations never went well. It was best if the crown was kept happy and the village was left alone. I have talked about the reports before, what we are really reporting is what the village produced. Yes, we reported the weather, the condition of the roads. How the crops were growing or even what was growing best. We reported strangers that might have come from far away, or other bits of information, but really what the crown wanted to know is how much tax they would be expecting from each village or town. Scribes performed this task for the village, so the villagers put up with us, they knew what we did was important to keep the soldiers away, but they also associated us with the crown, that we were responsible for taking from them to give to the crown in tax. I think everyone in the village would prefer that the crown just forget about them. Most people did not care about the crown, or the people in the capital, unless there was a problem like bandits, then they screamed for the crown to send soldiers to help. People just did not understand they could not have it both ways. My village treated us well and knew that we could help with other tasks around the village. We could write messages for loved ones that lived far away. We often wrote simple letters that formalized relationships between farmers and craftsmen, what was the amount of exchange that would be fair for all. Simple tasks but ones that helped keep any disputes to a minimum. Still, even with all this, and the fact that everyone in the village had known me from birth, they would all quickly cast me out if they had the slightest idea of what I could do. Therefore I had to keep a very focused mind on my job. My skill would have to come second, for now.

I had traveled late into the night again; I did not meet anyone or see anything unusual. The land was getting flatter, and it was a little warmer. The trees filled hillsides I could see in the distance not far from the road, but far enough that it would take at least an hour to reach them. Early in the morning I came to a cross in the road. In this part of the world, we just had the one road to the village, I knew in

more populated areas there were more roads because there were more people traveling between villages, towns, and cities. We were far from the capital and most villages or towns were four to eight days apart. Having only one road connecting them. This spot, this crossroads was a connecting point from our village to the north and Ashford to the south. The east west road led to Airlon and Pineridge. The road that went east and west followed along the path of the White River, a large river that flowed down from the mountains. This was the only spot where a bridge had been built to cross the river. Alone next to the east, west road sat a small house. This was used by the four villages in the area to watch over the bridge and the crossroad. Every month during the summer an Elder from each village would travel here and meet. Checking the road and the bridge and discussing any important issues that affected all the villages. Mostly they discussed trade. Each village had access to different resources, and this was the place where they would trade the extra supplies that had been harvested.

My plan to travel later into the night had been a good decision, I arrived here at the crossroads quicker than I thought. I would reach Ashford early if I continued hurried along. I realized it might be a good idea to study the village maps in a little more detail, if I was going to be traveling. It would be good to know more about the land, what areas would be easy to travel to and what might take more time. I continued to follow the road to Ashford, picking up my pace a little. It would be nice to arrive early. I was looking forward to spending the night in a bed, instead of on the ground. I was very glad that I was covering so much ground. It would mean that I would have more time on my return trip to explore my skill.

The sun had set but it was still light enough that I could see the first farm of Ashford. I knew from our village I was still a long way from the Main Hall. It would be best to stop here for the night and continue tomorrow morning. The question was, do I sleep here on the ground, or go ahead to the farm and see if the farmer had room for one more. At home, Orr would have extended the village hospitality to a traveler, and although his home was small, he did have a loft in his barn that he would have offered. I decided to try my luck. I continued down the road looking for the farmhouse. I expected that I would see a light at some point, but I could see nothing. Had I not been looking carefully I would have missed the house. It was not far from the road, but the farmer had planted apple trees around the house. I

walked to the house; I still couldn't see any light. When I reached the front door, I knocked and waited. It seemed like no one was home. Now I was stuck, I did not want to sleep on the ground on the farm, but no one was here to ask for a place to stay. There was a barn just a little set back from the house. I decided that I would just sleep inside. Hopefully, the farmer will understand. The Barn was like most, the main area was where the daily tools were kept that the farmer would use. There was also a spot where they could keep livestock. Most farms usually had a chicken or two, some a sheep or a work horse. Above the main floor was another area that was used to store the harvested goods. It was off the ground, so it was more difficult for animals to get to, like rats. The floorboards had a little space between them so that air could flow, keeping everything dry so it did not turn moldy. This barn was just like others I had been in, except it was completely empty. This was strange, but at the time I was tired, so I climbed the ladder to the loft area, and found a little left-over straw and laid down. It felt good to sleep off the ground, but a bed would have been better, still I couldn't complain too much. I was warmer than I had been, and the straw was a little softer than the ground. I had been walking fast and for a long time, When I laid down, I felt the rush of exhaustion and fell asleep quickly.