

Chapter 3 – Ashford

I woke the next morning, and went to the farmhouse again, still no one was home. That was a little strange, but not unheard of. I headed to the village center, along the way I finally spotted farmers out working the field. Many stopped to look at the stranger who had arrived, but when they saw the scribe tube I carried, they smiled, waved, and went back to work. Like I said before, the message tube was recognized everywhere. It was like a pass to come and go as you pleased. Out here in the country it was not really an issue. People were alert to strangers, but friendly. Now in the cities and the capital, the message tube could be very beneficial, because people were more suspicious of everyone. I arrived at the main village hall a few hours before lunch time, by my estimates. I entered the hall and walked to the back. If their Hall was like ours this is where I would find Abe. Just as I suspected there was a small room at the back of the hall. I went to the door and knocked. "Come in" a voice called from the other side. As I entered the room, everything looking just how I expected it. It was like I never left home. There were shelves stacked with papers and books. It was a little more disorganized than the way Daana kept our records. Willowford had the advantage of two scribes, Daana, and Conroy, well three now including me. I spent many hours cleaning and straightening up under Daana's watchful eye. There were two exceptions. First was the desk. In our village Daana and Conroy had set up a long table to work on, here was a large desk in the center of the room, with stacks of papers on tables around the room. The other difference was the man sitting behind the desk, he was older than Danna but not as old as Conroy. He had white hair and a short beard and wore the outfit I had not seen before but reminded me of descriptions of teachers in the larger cities. He wore a robe that was a dark grey color with buttons down the center, what looked like fancy shirt underneath, but was mostly covered by the robe. At home Daana, Conroy and myself just wore the same clothing everyone else in the village did, plain and simple. This must be Abe I thought. "Good morning, sir," I said as I entered the room. "My name is Viktor from Willowford; I am bringing our report. I believe you might be expecting me." I said to Abe as he looked up

from a book he was reading. "Good morning young fellow, welcome to Ashford. You are correct, Daana had told me about you in some of her reports, I knew eventually you would probably come here. It is nice to meet you." Abe replied, "Is this your first time from the village?" "Yes sir" I said. "Well, have a seat, would you like something to drink or eat?" "No sir, I am fine thanks" As you can see, I was being very respectful and polite, I remembered Daana's words, that I represent the village as I travel and that I must do my very best to show the world that the people of Willowford were a good and decent folks.

"Well, young man, Daana and Conroy spoke well of you, said you were an intelligent young man who learned fast and had a good future as a scribe. I can see you are doing your best to remember your manners and be respectful. That is a good idea in any new situation, however you can take a deep breath and relax, our profession does not have so many members, at least not out here away from the main cities and towns. When we are alone you do not have to be so formal. When you are with the Elders of other people from the village, it is good that you keep your respectful manners, we want to protect the image of the scribes, after all. When we are alone, please relax and just call me Abe. I am sure we will see each other often so would be better if we were friends as well as coworkers" Abe told me. Abe was soft spoken, but I could sense he was very serious when he spoke. My intimal instinct told me he was a good man; someone I could learn from. I had a feeling that Abe was not from Ashford well not originally. His manner showed that he had probably spent some time in one of the larger cities, and probably even studied at one of the finer schools. "I will do my best. This is my first time leaving the village and I want to make Daana and Conroy proud as well as the Elders for trusting me not to shame my village, and show that they people of Willowford are good, honest, and hardworking." I told him.

"Good, now why don't you have a seat and tell me about your trip and the current conditions of the road." Abe sat back and waited for my report. "Well Sir, I mean Abe, the road seemed very good to me. I had no problems or could see no major issues with condition of the road. However, as I have never been on the road before, it is difficult for me to judge its current condition compared to what you or others

might have experienced. I encountered no animals that would be of concern and saw no indication of anyone traveling the road recently.” I said in one breath, I was still a little nervous as this was my first time outside the village and this being my first assignment as a scribe. “I did encounter one thing that is out of sorts, but I am sure you are aware of. When I arrived in Ashford last night, I was going to ask the apple farmer if I could stay in his barn. No one answered the door, both last night and this morning.”

“Oh, yes” Abe spoke “It is a little bit of a sad tale. You see the Farmer whose orchard you stayed at, was killed when one of his trees had grown rotten inside, he had not noticed, and the tree fell on him. A sad fate, but also one that we can learn from. You must take care and truly dedicate yourself to your task.

The farmer should have known the tree was getting rotten and worked to remove it, I am not sure why he did not notice, and now I cannot ask him. It has been a little over a month since his passing and currently we do not have anyone in the village that is old enough to move in and take over the farm. I

was going to send a dispatch to your village and a few others, to ask if they had anyone that would be willing to move to Ashford and run the farm.” Abe spoke and seemed more disappointed in the farmer

than sad at his passing “Sir, in Willowford, just last month we had a wedding, a very responsible and young couple. They are living with husband’s family, helping run the farm. I know that family has three other boys, so more than enough hands to help to run the farm, maybe they might like a place of their own to harvest and raise a family.” I realized that maybe I was saying too much “It is not really my

decision I think I spoke too much, but I could ask when I return if you like.” I was speaking a little more calmly. “That is interesting news and maybe a solution to both Willowford and Ashford’s problem. It would be good for the village to have new young folks here. I will speak to the elders, it not as simple as just giving the farm to someone, they would need to come and talk with the Elders. If they seem like they would fit into the village then the Elders would make a written offer. I think it is fortunate that you arrived when you did. I will speak with The Elders and write a letter to Daana.” Abe seemed excited by my news of the young couple. “Now why do not you give me your reports. I have one I will send back

with you, maybe more after I speak with the elders. Why do not you look around the village, if you go two houses down you will find Mira. She often puts up visitors and cooks a meal for them, if you tell her who you are and that I sent you, she will take good care of you. You are also fortunate that we have a merchant that just arrived yesterday. He will be staying at Mira's house; you might have something you would like to buy. I will have the reports ready by sundown. Then you can start your return journey in the morning." Abe rose from his chair and walked out with me into the village. "See you this evening Victor." Abe said as he walked off, in search of the Elders I would assume. Ashford was very similar to my village the people were friendly and greeted me as I walked to Mira's house. Mira greeted me as I knocked on her door. I explained that Abe had sent me and told her who I was. Mira smiled and sat me down at a small table. She brought me food and some apple cider to drink. So far, my first trip had gone rather well I thought. Besides the uncomfortable sleeping conditions on the road, it felt good to see new and different things. I was sitting finishing my meal, I was looking out the window and noticed the old wagon parked in the main part of the village. I had seen something similar before, at least once a year a Merchant would arrive in Willowford to trade their wares for anything the village had left over from the harvest. They often traveled in Wagon's like that. They were a combination of a small home on wheels with the back part of the wagon built to open like a shop. The merchants would set up in the center of town, and people would come to look and trade. This must be the merchant that Abe told me about. I finished my meal and thanked Mira, then walked over to say hello and see what this merchant had. Normally a merchant would have a supply of food stuff, but not much. Here and in the villages of this part of the kingdom, most everyone was a farmer of some sort, so food was not something people were looking for. In the few times I had seen the merchants in Willowford, some had specialized in steel, cooper, tin, and iron. Having things such as pots, pans, nails, knives, swords and anything else that was made from metal. Others had cloth and clothing, while others dealt with herbs and medicine. Very rarely would they have wood craft items, as most villagers made their own things. They all seemed to

have little bits of odds and ends, special little items they had traded in their journeys. It was these things that were the most exciting to look at. I wanted to see what this merchant had, this was the first time I had seen a merchant and actually had coin in my pocket.

“Good afternoon young man, it is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Trinket” The merchant said before I even arrived at his wagon. “Perhaps I have something you might like to purchase.” He said “Trinket? That is an unusual name.” I said as I greeted him “Well, I sell odds and ends a mixture of things, some people used to say ‘here comes the trinket man’ when I would arrive in a village. The name stuck, so I just accepted it as my own. It is not my real name of course, but I am used to it now.” He replied, “I am Viktor from the village of Willowford,” I told him “I am not really in need of anything but thought it might be good to see what you sell and report the information to my village. Are you planning to travel to Willowford?” I asked, “Well Viktor, let me show you what I have.” He said as he pulled back the cover of the wagon. “I am planning on visiting some of the villages in this part of the world, so I would say yes, I would come to Willowford at some point in the future.” Trinket said. “So do you travel much?” Trinket asked. “This is my first trip, but I think I will travel more in the future.” I told him. “Well then, I think I might have something you might like; it is something new, was going to show any hunters I met. But you look like you might have better use for it.” Trinket was busy digging his wagon, until he found a small lump of what looked like cloth. He handed it to me. “Here you go, it would cost you three irons, but I think you will find it is well worth it.” He spoke. I looked at the bundle of cloth I was holding, a little puzzled. Trinket was watching me and laughed a little at my expression “It is Called a sling bed. It is tied between two posts, or trees. It hangs between them. You can sit on it or lay down to sleep. It takes a little time to get used to the way it swings as you get in, but after a few tries it is easy. Sleeping off the ground keeps you dry, and you do not have any rocks or sticks poking your backside. It comes from the far south, well the idea does. Most of the people that far south are, fishermen, they use nets to collect a great many fish at once. Someone figured out that they could tie the nets between the trees

and rest during a hot day. This one was made of cloth, but the concept is the same. It is new, and I only have the one to sell. I thought I would bring it along to see if people in this part of the world might have any interest. I can tell you from someone that has spent many a chilly night sleeping on the hard ground, this is much better, its light and adds a little comfort when traveling the roads. Long ago I gave up that way of travel, the wagon is slower, but I am not really in a big hurry. When I was younger, I would have loved to have a sling bed. I was thinking I would show this to the hunters, but you look like you have many years of travel ahead of you, I think you would appreciate it.” Tinker stood waiting for my response. It sounded good, but I had never heard of anything like it. Three irons were a lot of coins, you could buy two weeks’ worth of food for that amount, maybe more depending on what you needed. It was a lot of money for this part of the world at least. I had read the larger cities were much more expensive. I really was not sure when Trinket spoke again. “I will tell you what, I am going to be coming to your village soon enough, why not buy it, if you do not see the value on your return trip, wrap it back up. You and I can trade for something that you find more useful.” Trinket paused” To be honest, this is not the way I do business. Once I make a sale, it is a done deal. I understand that this is something new, and you are on your first journey, so being careful. I think we will see each other again, and I would like to show you that I am a fair and decent fellow. So, this time I am prepared to make this a special case. I really do think you will find the value of the sling bed.” Trinket finished speaking. The offer did sound reasonable, and if it made my journey more comfortable, I am sure it would be worth it. I agreed with Trinket, and we shook hands on it. I handed him my one silver coin and he rummaged in his wagon a little and handed me seven irons in change. I liked Trinket, he seemed like a good man.

I spent the few remaining hours I had just walking around the village, looking at the people working. It was remarkable that everything was almost an exact match of home. Daana had said the village was bigger than ours and it was, but not that much bigger. The people were all nice and friendly to me. My impression was that Ashford was a good place to live and work. It was not home, but very

similar. I thought about the farm and the young couple, if they could arrange everything with the elders, I think they would settle in well here. I returned to Abe just after sunset. Abe was sitting behind his desk again when I entered. Abe looked up at me and put his quill down. "Well, Viktor, what did you think of Ashford? I am always curious what a new person thinks of our people and village. I know you will report to Daana on your return, as you should, but if you do not mind, I would like to hear it from you. Abe asked. It was a fair question and Abe was correct Daana would ask me and I would tell her. "Sir, I really do not have much to say, I only just arrived. The village and people of Ashford appear to be good, hard-working folks, just like home. The people I have met have been friendly and pleasant. I really do not feel that much difference between our two villages. It is good to know that our neighbors are so similar and that we share the same values and treat each other with the same respect. I even thought about the young couple, I believe they would feel welcome, and would soon call this home, if the Elders agreed to them taking over the farm." I replied to Abe, I was being honest and not just saying what I thought he wanted to hear. "I am pleased that your first visit has gone so well, and the people have welcomed you. It would be difficult if it did not go well, as I am sure you will return often. I am sure you will find the same in other villages around here. We all tend to think and act the same. Sometimes you forget that you are even in a different village. Here is the dispatch for Daana, as well as a request from the Elders for your young couple to come to Ashford. The elders do not want to promise anything, they would like to meet them and see if they would be a good fit into our little community." Abe said. I agreed with Abes' thinking. Whoever took over the farm would be here for generations. It would be best to be sure they fit well into the community. I suppose you could always ask someone to leave, but that could cause problems. "There is more Viktor," Abe started "The elders also think it would be good to send notice of the opportunity of the Orchard farm to Airlon and Pineridge. I have asked Daana if you could take the notices to each of these villages. The reports are in with the rest" I was a little shocked by Abe's request. I assumed that each village scribe only did things for their own village. I think Abe could see the look on

my face and understand what I was thinking. "Viktor, most scribes in the world and especially in areas far from the main cities, are getting up in years. I am not as young as I once was; you know Conroy can no longer move about and even Daana is getting up in years that it just would not be good for her to travel the open roads. It is why we use hunters most of the time. Daana has written about you in several reports to me and the other villages. You are the youngest scribe I can remember. Daana feels and I agree that we can use your skills amongst all the villages. The hunters are good and trustworthy, and help as much as they can, but they have other tasks to perform for the community. Daana also says you are a quick learner, can look after yourself, have some skill with a bow and have also spent time with the hunters in Willowford enough that you have a good base of knowledge to survive on your own. Daana can explain more, as is proper being your instructor. I wanted to tell you face to face so you were not surprised when Daana speaks to you or felt that I was somehow dishonest with you." Abe finished.

"Thank you, sir," I took the scribe tube from him, "I appreciate you being direct with me. I am not sure what the Elders will say, but I can understand the reasoning. I would like to be helpful to the people of Willowford and Ashford. If, as you say, the people in Airlon and Pineridge are the same as here, I would be happy to help them as well. I will deliver this report and I am sure we will see each other again. It was very nice to meet you and the people of Ashford." I said to Abe. "Go back to Mira's enjoy another hot meal and rest, then you can go at first light." Abe walked me out of the main hall area. "I will say good night and goodbye for now. Good luck on your travel home, and the travels to come." Abe shook my hand and left. I returned to Mira's, ate a few bowls of a wonderful beef stew then found my bed. I was excited to return home, I could spend a little more time on the return trip to explore my new skill. If Daana allowed it, as Abe suggested, I would also find myself traveling again very soon.