

Chapter 2 — The Knob

DURING HIS WEEKS AWAY from home on his first solo ranging, Goran had taken every opportunity he could to soar above the tree line, above the world of humankind. Aloft, he felt safe and free. Aground, he felt small and alone. Now, having finally completed his mission, Goran was flying west as fast as his tired wings could manage, through the stillness of a moonlit night, to the Knob. He was flying toward a warm welcome, a sumptuous feast, a father's pride, a sister's embrace. He was flying home.

The journey would be brief. While Goran had tracked the Catawampyrie back and forth for weeks, zigging and zagging through forests and hills, his hunt had ended on a mountainside only about twenty miles east of his home. Almost immediately he could see the Knob's distinctive gray cliffs shining in the moonlight, which also danced across the leaves of its green-topped dome. The sight thrilled Goran and spurred to him to beat his wings still harder.

Rangers born to the task and rigorously trained could spend long stretches in the Blur. It was their responsibility. Many even found meaning, diversion, and pleasure in their work beyond the Shimmer. But the human world would never be theirs. It would never be home.

As he approached the Knob, Goran banked left and turned to approach the south entrance to the Sylph village. Landing first on the branch of a chestnut oak, he glided to the rocky ground next to a rhododendron bush, its palette of pink-purple blossoms conjuring up cherished memories of wandering through his mother Wenna's elaborate garden.

Of course, there had been no flowers native to America in that garden. Goran's childhood had been spent far over the sea, in Cornwall. The Sylphs had lived there for generations atop a hill the humans called Brown Willy. Wenna's garden there had boasted daisy, buttercup, spring squill, broom, and gorse, along with ferns, heath, a range of medicinal herbs, and a small apple tree. But the garden was on the far edge of the Sylph settlement, distantly removed from the village proper.

The garden was, therefore, still back on Cornwall's Brown Willy. It hadn't made the Crossing.

Goran remembered the Crossing as if it were yesterday —indeed, it hadn't been all that long ago, although his lengthy trips in the Blur meant that the Crossing was further in his past than it was to his friends and family. The Sylphs had, in truth, only just arrived in the Carolina backcountry a few months earlier. Before that, their village had been secreted for some years on a low ridge in Pennsylvania called Haycock Mountain. Before that, before the Crossing, the Sylphs had lived on Brown Willy for generations.



So it wasn't really the sight of the Knob itself that filled Goran with longing. The sight of Haycock Mountain wouldn't have, either. What thrilled him was the mental image of the Sylph village within, of its cherished halls and walls and faces. That, not the distinctive outline of the Knob, was what truly drew him home.

Looking past the rhododendron bush and up the cliffside, Goran saw a tell-tale glow. It was the Shimmer, the wall of magecraft and spellsong that surrounded the village, contained its time and energies, and protected it from incursion. Most earthly creatures couldn't see it at all. Magical creatures had no trouble spotting the wall but couldn't traverse it without voicing or playing the proper musical phrase. Goran approached the Shimmer and began humming. He felt the familiar tingle of magic from head to foot. He felt the wall give way as he pushed through.

As Goran headed toward the settlement, his eyes scanned instinctively for flora in the orange light of dawn. Perhaps his meandering thoughts about his mother's Cornish garden had suggested the idea. But, of course, there were no lush gardens here. Not yet. The Sylphs hadn't been on the Knob long enough. Sylph greenweavers were still experimenting with the local vegetation, learning how to infuse the plants with magic so they could sprout and flourish in surroundings quite different from their native soil — in a place where time could not be reckoned by the rising and setting of a sun that streaked through the heavens twenty times a day.

It was one of the oddest things to get used to in the Blur, that sun. Behind the Shimmer, in a Folk realm, the sun was barely discernible in a sky shrouded by mist and refracted by magic. As a child, Goran had spent hours lying in the cool grass, gazing up at that misty sky. It lightened and darkened on a nearly hourly basis, cycling through a spectrum of hazy, diffused colors.

In the Blur, however, the colors became sharper, lusher, and slower. The daytime sun burned so fiercely that direct observation was impossible. During his first ranging into the Blur, what had really captured Goran's attention — and his imagination — was the moon, that lustrous nighttime visitor. As rangers traveled most safely by night, anyway, the moon had become his constant companion during his hunt.

Goran bore to his left to give a wide berth to the monster pens on the outskirts of the village. If there had been a lush green garden, he'd have been heading into it. In fact, he glided over a small enclosure and a plowed field beyond, but they contained only a few spouts here and there — greenweaver experiments that might one day blossom into beds and groves. That "one day" remained far off.

Indeed, the village greenweavers would have been further along in their enchantments had they retained the services of their most talented gardener. But she hadn't made the Crossing, either. Wenna's grave marker lay back in Cornwall, in her Brown Willy garden beneath the spreading branches of her prized gillyflower apple tree.

Goran mused for a moment about the Knob. The Sylphs had been fortunate to find the place — a mountaintop so well-crafted for magical concealment that it must have been the site of a village long since abandoned by some other Folk. At best, the sharpest-eyed human could have seen nothing more than an occasional, mysterious glimmer in the foliage above the cliffs. Even when some human eyes saw through the Shimmer, they couldn't make sense of what lay beyond — an expanse of grass, trees, buildings, and streets far more extensive within the Shimmer than could be seen from without. With scarcely a hundred strides, humans could trace the perimeter of the village and never guess that an entire community of Sylphs lived within its seemingly tight confines.

But, of course, humans lived non-magical lives. Goran felt sorry for them.

As he landed and walked into the settlement, the orange sky began its transformation to light blue. Halls and homes bustled with activity. Tradesmen and craftsmen clad in tunics and stockings of brightly colored wools and linens were pushing carts along streets or carrying bags and baskets as they flew overhead. Mages, greenweavers, and other scholars wearing luxurious robes and fur-lined cloaks either scurried on their way to appointments or wandered aimlessly, seemingly lost in thought. Armored soldiers leaned against walls and posts, polishing the bosses on their shields or telling ribald jokes or doing not much of anything at all. Two hooded hunters stood in front of a butcher shop, holding aloft the opposite ends of a pole from which two skinned rabbits hung — the result of a recent larder hunt, no doubt. Mothers and fathers minded playful children or hustled them homeward. Some Sylphs were talking. Some were laughing. Some were arguing. It was all delightful.

“Goran! You have returned!”

The young ranger felt slender arms wrap tenderly around him and draw him into a tight hug. Turning, he found his sister Ailee looking up with joyful eyes. Her long chestnut hair stretched halfway down the back of her dark green gown, which was cinched at the waist with a buff-colored belt. “We have only just heard the news from the hunting party, Goran. You did it! You found the monster! I am so proud of you.”

Goran gave Ailee an affectionate kiss on one flushed cheek and freed himself gently from her embrace. “I missed you all, Little Curlew,” he said, using the affectionate nickname he'd given her when they were children. “I would love to tell you of my adventures, but first I have to report to the guild.”

“You're quite right, young man. Get a move on!” The dark eyes of his father Brae glowered beneath shaggy white brows as the thick-set man strode toward him on squat, muscular legs. But the stern expression on that weather-beaten face soon gave way to a broad, toothy smile.

“I always knew you had it in you,” Brae stated proudly, too loudly to be meant for Goran and Ailee's ears alone.

“A strong branch off the old family tree, there is no doubting that,” his father added as a crowd of onlookers gathered. “You were the most talented apprentice the guild had seen in many an age; that is what they all said. You will be a grandmaster one day!”

Goran felt his face reddening with embarrassment. “As you say, Father. I best be off to the guildhall,” he said, shaking Brae’s proffered hand and then several more as he resumed his course down the street. “I will come home as soon as I can.”

“Please do, Goran,” Ailee called after him. “We will be sitting down to dinner shortly. The spread we have prepared will astound you. And yes, you need not even ask, that includes your favorite: roast grouse with gravy.”

Goran’s mouth watered. Then the mention of grouse reminded him of the human hunter he’d just met. Daniel Boone had proved to be a skilled tracker and brave hunter. He was also intelligent and curious. The other humans Goran had met in his travels seemed small by comparison. Most never noticed Goran at all, due to a mixture of inattentiveness and Goran’s spell-song. Of those humans who did catch a glimpse, or to whom he chose to reveal himself, some fainted at the sight. Others, convinced Goran was a demon or ghost, tried to attack him or to flee. None escaped his memory charms.

Daniel hadn’t either, Goran thought sadly. It was, he supposed, a shame that such a refreshing curiosity would have to remain unsatisfied. But that was the way of things.

The guildhall of the rangers was just north of the village square, its stone walls adorned with brightly hued banners and ringed at the top with sculptures depicting a wide variety of magical creatures. The menagerie included many that Goran recognized readily from his studies or from the fabulous stories that his father Brae and other retired rangers had told around the dinner table. A few shapes he now knew from personal experience. Some statues exhibited outsized or oddly misshapen forms of animals that would have been familiar to any human: felines, canines, ursines, bovines, equines, cervines, porcines, rodentia, avians. Others, Goran, thought, would appear fantastical even to imaginative humans such as Daniel. Fish-like creatures of sea, lake, river, and bog. Spheres of light and spirits of shadow. Serpents with two legs or four, serpents with three heads or nine, serpents with wings, with fins, with the beaks of birds or the jaws of lions. Some forms were stranger still.

Goran ascended the steps and knocked on the massive doors of ash and bronze. Soon, as a journeyman, he’d be able to push his way right in; he wouldn’t need to knock. But not just yet.

The doors creaked open. “Well, Apprentice Goran, it took you long enough,” said the owl-faced Sylph who beckoned him inward. “We expected you to transport with the hunters, not take the scenic route. But perhaps you have grown so fond of the Blur that you decided to linger a bit among the English. It has been known to happen...”

Goran wasn’t fooled. He knew when he was being teased. “I could not have been more than a few minutes behind the hunting party, Ceredan,” he said, pretending offense. “It only took me about half an hour of Blur time to reach the Knob. And, yes, while I ‘lingered among the English,’ it is only because I had to sing a memory spell.”

Ceredan and Goran had been walking along the hallway toward the council chamber. Now the older ranger halted and faced the young man. “Yes, I heard about that,” he said, a little hesitantly. “There is always a chance of encountering humans on larder or monster hunts. Each of us has had the experience, but rarely do we enlist a human’s aid. Did you really deem that wise?”

Goran looked back at his long-time teacher, now less sure he was being teased instead of scolded. “I had no choice. My flute was broken by accident. Without the keen ears of the human, I would have lost the quarry.”

Ceredan cocked his head sideways and considered. “There are worse things than a failed ranging. You could have returned home and gotten a new instrument. Perhaps the Catawampyrie would still have been in the area. Or perhaps you would have had to embark on a new journeyman trial. Involving humans in hunts invites danger.”

Goran offered a deferential nod of his head. “I understand your words, Ceredan, but there was something about Daniel that inspired confidence. Besides, I knew that even with a broken flute I could still cast a memory spell.”

“Such a spell can treat the memory, Goran, but it cannot treat a broken limb or, worse, a broken neck,” Ceredan responded. “Still, all rangers must make judgment calls. I suppose you did what you thought best. You can explain it to the other guildmasters. They have assembled to receive your report and evaluate your trial.”

Ceredan preceded Goran into the council chamber, where a dozen rangers ranging from middle-aged to elderly sat behind a semi-circular table. Goblets of wine sat before each, as did plates filled with pastries and sweetmeats. The sight reminded Goran of his own hunger and thirst. He resisted the impulse to seek refreshment. Now was the time to report. And he knew his family had a celebratory feast waiting.

The most ancient of the rangers, Grandmaster Cono, clapped his hands to silence the others. “We welcome you home, Apprentice Goran, and congratulate you on the successful capture of your quarry,” the elder said with a quivering voice that nevertheless commanded the guildmasters’ rapt attention. “We are eager to hear the details of your ranging and the lessons you have taken from it.”

Goran complied. He told the masters about receiving his assignment from Ceredan, who’d relayed stories of mysterious attacks in the Carolina backcountry. He told them how the details of the attacks had convinced him some kind of monstrous feline, likely a Catawampyrie, was responsible. Goran described the painstaking process of surveying the countryside, flying by night and moving stealthily through forests by day, singing and playing summoning spells to entice the cat. On two earlier occasions, he explained, the beast had responded to the call but was so far away that even Goran’s most skillful spells had failed to pinpoint its location. For weeks he had tracked the beast, stopping only to eat, rest, and avoid the occasional human hunter, trapper, or party of settlers.

Finally, in what was nearly two days ago in the Blur but only a couple of hours to the Sylphs of the Knob, he’d picked up the trail. After sending a preparatory signal, he’d headed after the

beast. Goran related his encounter with Daniel, his decision to enlist the human's aid, and the final confrontation with the monster. Then he fell silent.

The guildmasters looked at each other, some conversing, some speaking more with their eyes than their tongues. Presently, Cono spoke again.

“Apprentice Goran, the Catawampyrie is one of the most elusive of magical creatures in the wilds of the New World. The only event of your report that strikes us as noteworthy is your decision to attack the bear to save the human hunter. While we wish no harm on any human, you could have been injured or killed during your rescue, leaving the Catawampyrie to continue ravaging the countryside. Explain yourself.”

Goran looked at the floor for a moment, then lifted his gaze and squared his shoulders. “It was an impulsive thing to do,” he admitted, responding first to Cono and then looking each guildmaster in the eye in turn. “I do not have a clear explanation. It just seemed wrong to let the human die before my eyes, not when I had a chance to save him.”

Another guildmaster, a small man with graying temples and a long, thin nose, cleared his throat. “Goran, to say that something is noteworthy is not necessarily to say it is wrong,” said Bren, a long-time friend of his father's. “I, for one, think your actions were admirable.”

“We are all quite well aware of your thoughts on the matter, Bren,” said yet another master, a burly Sylph with a shiny bald pate and a massive grey beard extending halfway down his nut-brown tunic. “Your voice at council is ever for greater engagement with humans. Where the rest of us see peril, you see opportunity.”

“Yes, I do, Borva — and why not?” Bren answered, his volume and pitch of his voice rising in his excitement. “For generations, we have seen our humans merely as providers of sustenance. We send our rangers to human homes to obtain food, cloth, building materials, precious metals. They make offerings. They give us what we seek in exchange for a few magic tricks. We profit from their superstitions. And what, really, do we offer in return?”

“What, indeed?” snorted Borva. “We risk our lives to track and capture the monsters that would otherwise overrun and slaughter them. What we get for this service is scant payment, to my mind.”

“Borva only scratches the surface of the truth,” Grandmaster Cono broke in, and the others fell silent. “What our humans receive from us goes beyond just protection from beastly attack. There is much more to it, as we all know.”

Almost all of the seated rangers nodded in assent, some vigorously, some more hesitantly.

Bren was the exception. “I agree that our actions sometimes benefit our charges,” he told his fellow guildmasters. “But it is not by design. We protect our humans much as they protect their own herds of cattle and flocks of sheep — and for the same reason, because the safety of the herd is in our interest. The difference is that humans are not cattle or sheep. They are reasoning beings.”

Borva again snorted derisively. “In my experience, human behavior rarely meets that test,” he insisted. “I have found them to be ignorant, simple-minded, and violent. Even the best of them suffer from impatience, arrogance, and perpetual dissatisfaction. They have no facility for

spell-song, magecraft, or any of the higher arts. Their appetites are insatiable. They enslave their fellow humans and treat them like beasts. And they are constantly at war.”

“I will remind you that warfare is hardly confined to the human realms,” Bren said icily. “We have warred with other Folk from time to time. With the Pixies of the Cornish coast. With the Gwyllion and Coblynau of the Welsh highlands. And have you so soon forgotten the border conflicts that prompted us to leave the human colony of Pennsylvania for another new home?”

“Our memories are quite intact, Bren,” replied Grandmaster Cono with a sharpness that startled Goran. “We need no reminders. And, as you also know, we undertook our southward journey from Pennsylvania for many reasons, not just because of border conflicts. Besides, the Council of Elders has already discussed your ideas at great length, and found some of them persuasive. Even the latest orders brought over the sea from our own King Briafael bear some similarities to your argument for more engagement with humans. So why are we debating here? This is an examination judgment, not a council meeting.”

Both Bren and Borva bowed their heads in acknowledgement of the ancient one’s authority.

“Goran,” said Cono, returning his attention to the young ranger standing before them. “Thank you for your service. You will be judged fairly by the masters of your guild. If you are invited to become a journeyman, you will be assigned your first long ranging. That is all for now. You are excused.”

THE TABLE WAS SET for six but there was food enough for thrice that many. Salads of tossed greens and crisp vegetables. Platters of sliced fruits and cheeses. Trays of roasted grouse, turkey, and pork. A huge bowl of steaming rabbit stew. Sausages of venison, cured and delicately spiced. Trout pan-seared in butter. Loaves of freshly baked bread. Cakes, cobblers, and pies.

Goran sat to his father’s right, the place of honor, longing to grab at the roast grouse. Weeks in the Blur eating field rations, wild onions, and an occasional charred haunch of rodent had left Goran famished. Just how ravenous had not become evident until he neared the house and smelled the aromas of Ailee’s handiwork. His pace quickened, his pleasantries little more than perfunctory when he reached the doorway. Almost immediately, Goran had been sitting at the table awaiting his father’s blessing and the beginning of the feast.

Both came quickly. “For the bounty before us, we give thanks to the Maker of All Things,” Brae intoned, “as we do for the victory we commemorate today.”

Then the clanking and chewing began.

“Welcome back, brother,” said a broad-shouldered Sylph sitting across from Goran as both began lifting generous portions onto their plates with their hunting knives. Kaden, his elder brother, had joined the Warriors Guild two years before the standard age of admission. Demonstrating impressive skills of body and mind, Kaden soon commanded his own squad and was studying advanced warcraft with his guild’s grandmaster, General Eyrn. “I was drilling spearmen today and could not join the hunting party. I trust the battle was a glorious one.”

Goran had just stuffed his mouth with a hunk of bread dipped in stew. He waved helplessly to Kaden, swallowed so quickly he nearly choked himself, and then took a drink of ale.

“As it turned out,” he said momentarily, “the battle was fairly short. You might have been a bit disappointed, Kaden.”

Now it was his brother’s turn to finish chewing before replying. “I have never battled a Catawampyrie before, but the tales say it is massive and dangerously quick. Did your fearsome prey turn out to be nothing more than a little kitten? Or an old grandmother cat on her last legs?”

Kaden’s friend Jodoc exploded in guffaws, nearly spraying Ailee with half-chewed trout. She glared at the young soldier, who immediately began profuse apologies as she turned up her nose. It was a pattern Goran had witnessed many times before. Jodoc was very interested in Ailee. She was very uninterested in him.

Although Kaden initially flashed a mocking smile, his expression quickly turned apologetic. “I meant no disrespect, brother. Just making a little jest.”

Goran believed him. As children, the two had quarreled, as siblings do. But they also had great affection for each other. Goran was immensely proud of Kaden’s prowess as a soldier. He could tell Kaden felt the same way about his little brother’s ranging.

“Of course, Kaden,” Goran reassured him. “To answer your original question, the reason we took down the monster so rapidly is that it sustained a wound from an instrument of human design — a hunting weapon called a rifled musket.”

His brother perked up at the mention of weapons. “The Warriors Guild has been studying gunpowder, cannons, and muskets for many years, ever since rangers brought samples from the Blur,” Kaden said. “We have even heard lately of cannons with grooves cut into their barrels to spin the metal shot and make it more accurate. The humans call that rifling. Are you saying they rifle their shoulder weapons, too?”

“Some do, it seems, although I do not know how widespread the practice is,” Goran said. “The weapon has a very long barrel and takes quite a while to reload. It is a useful tool for hunting. But I am not sure how practical it would be in a pitched battle.”

Kaden looked intensely interested. “I will ask my captain about this tomorrow. Most human guns are too large and heavy for us to wield, even if we could get enough of them to outfit more than a handful of warriors. As for making our own shoulder weapons, I understand the Craftsmen Guild has tried. So far, they have failed with bronze and brass. The humans often use iron, but of course iron and magic do not mix well.”

Goran cut off another hunk of bread and put it on his plate. “I will ask if there is an updated ranging report on human musketry I can pass along,” he said. “At the very least, if our Folk could produce a few rifles and learn to use them as Daniel did, it would make both our larder and monster hunts easier.”

“Making things easier does not necessarily mean making them better,” Brae cut in, sounding annoyed. “Do not be so quick to throw out the tried and the true. The old ways have

served us well. They have filled our tables and defended our borders for generations. I will take tradition over comfort any day.”

“I have no taste for ease, Father,” Kaden said. “Our soldiers train hard, and well. The Warriors Guild is as strong as ever. And I would still rather have a good bow or a stout spear in my hands than some human contraption belching smoke and fire. But what if some other Folk figure out the secret of firearms? We owe it to our Folk to be prepared for anything — even if that means borrowing an idea from humans.”

“It is not as if we shy away from ‘borrowing’ other things from them,” Jodoc said, laughing at his own joke and glancing not-so-discreetly at Ailee for a sign of approval.

It never came.

“Always be prepared — that is what I always say,” said Brae. He looked back at Kaden. “I am sure your guildmasters know best, just as the masters of our guild know what is best for ranging. Speaking of: Goran, when will you receive their judgment of your application?”

Goran smiled. “I am not sure, Father. But, after a meal like this one, the prospect of some rest and relaxation with my family is sounding better and better. Perhaps it will take the masters a week to make up their minds, or a month.”

IT TOOK ONLY A single day.

Goran was at the back of the house the following afternoon, fixing a door latch, when he heard a knock on the door and Brae’s deep, loud voice conversing with someone. When he came around to the front, he saw his teacher Ceredan.

“It is time, Goran,” he said simply. “Pack up your kit and come with me to the guildhall. I shall wait.”

Goran went to his room to get ready. He pulled out two clean tunics, an extra pair of stockings, a bedroll, and his hooded travel cloak. He stuffed them in his knapsack, then filled his pocket pouches with writing paper and his spare spellsong flute, feeling its familiar contours and finger holes as he stowed it away. He strapped on his hunting knife and picked up his unstrung bow and quiver of bronze-tipped arrows. Compared to that of hunters and soldiers, ranger equipment was sparse and light. Yet he still felt the weight of responsibility as he turned to make his goodbyes. He supposed he ought to have been more excited — Ceredan wouldn’t have asked him to pack if the news were bad — but he had hoped for more of a respite.

“I did not think your first journeyman mission would come so soon,” Ailee said, wiping a tear from her eye with one hand and pulling him forward for a kiss with the other. “This time, you may be gone for more than just a few days. Here, put these in your pouch.” She handed him several thick squares of cornbread and a roll of venison jerky.

“You are headed back out so soon because you impressed them so much,” a beaming Brae assured Goran. He clapped his son on the back and turned to Ceredan. “Is he not a branch off the old tree, my friend? Did I not tell you?”



Brae clearly had, many times. Ceredan nodded his head good-naturedly and motioned for Goran to follow.

When they reached the guildhall, Ceredan paused for a moment at the door. “You have done well, Goran. You are about to take a new and fateful step in a long journey, in a lifetime of service. The masters think you are ready. I think you are ready. But you must *know* you are.”

Goran took the old ranger’s hand. He understood, even if he wasn’t as sure of himself as the moment required. *Will I ever truly be sure?* he thought. Ranging was an unpredictable and varied profession. You had to be part scout, part hunter, part scrounger, part diplomat, and wholly committed to the safety and wellbeing of your Folk.

Goran had studied. He had trained. He should be up for what lay ahead. Was he? Time to find out.

They walked into the council chamber. A much smaller cast of characters greeted him this time: the aged Cono, the pensive Bren, and the irritable Borva.

“Welcome back, Ranger Goran,” said the latter, his long beard trembling as he spoke his words forcefully. “You have been awarded the rank of journeyman. May you range long, range wide, your song your guide.”

“Range long, range wide, our song our guide!” echoed the other Sylphs, repeating the familiar chorus of their guild spellsong.

Borva pointed to an empty chair. Goran sat.

“Ranger Goran,” began Cono, “what I tell you is meant for your ears and ours alone. You are bound by the Code to secrecy, and to the successful completion of your mission.”

“Understood, Grandmaster,” Goran replied.

“While you were in the Blur, the Council of Elders received a ranger sent all the way to the Knob from Cornwall, from King Briafael himself,” Cono began. “His message generated significant debate among the guild grandmasters. We understand its import and are obligated to carry out the king’s directives. Still, there are mysteries and uncertainties here.”

Borva, his arms crossed over his barrel chest, grunted his assent. Bren stroked his chin and looked searchingly at Goran.

“In brief, Briafael expressed concern about the current state of human affairs,” Cono continued. “Their realms have been unstable for as long as Folk have recorded their history, since the bygone days of the Arrival. Of late, however, the events of the Blur have become even more turbulent, more unpredictable.”

Cono paused, seemingly shaken. Bren cleared his throat and picked up where the grandmaster left off.

“Goran, King Briafael observes that the kingdoms of Europe continue to be at constant war. For the most part, we Folk seek to stay out of such conflicts. But as longtime residents of Britain, and now of the British colonies in America, we do have an interest in making sure the balance of power is maintained — that the Crown maintains its authority over all the lands we inhabit. We also have, I might add, a moral obligation to lift up those humans among whom we have lived for generations.”

“You may keep your personal opinions to yourself, Bren,” snapped Borva. “This is not about the welfare of humans. It is about our own protection. With any domination of the humans by a foreign power would inevitably come domination by a foreign Folk. This is *our* domain. We will not surrender it to the Goblins of Paris, the Duendes of the Spanish plains, or the Kabouters of the Dutch marshes.”

“Be that as it may,” began Cono, his voice once again calm and authoritative, “we have been ordered by King Briafael to find out more about potential threats to Britain’s North American colonies. You, Goran, will act on our behalf in these matters.”

The young ranger looked in stunned disbelief at the three masters across the table. “Why me?” he heard himself ask. “This sounds like a complex matter of intelligence and diplomacy. I am only now a journeyman. Surely a more experienced ranger would...”

“Silence, Goran,” said the grandmaster, not unkindly. “It is not your place to challenge your guildmasters. Your duty is to carry out your assigned mission.”

“Or, if you wish, you could refuse the assignment,” Borva suggested with a mocking leer. “We do not conscript into the Rangers Guild. Perhaps this pursuit is not for you. Perhaps you would be better suited to your late mother’s occupation of greenweaver. Or to your father’s current occupation of village...”

Borva stopped short, seeming to realize he’d gone too far but disinclined to make apology. The other two masters glared at him, then turned their attention back to Goran, whose face had reddened.

“I meant no disrespect,” said the young ranger, “nor did I mean to suggest hesitation. I accept the assignment, of course. I will do my best to live up to your expectations.”

Cono gave a brief nod and leaned back wearily in his chair, eyes closed. Bren smiled and inclined his head in approval. Borva merely gave Goran a sideways, sneering look, as if to say that living up the level of his expectations would require no great effort on Goran’s part.

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