

THE GUILD OF CLIMBERS

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He watched her as she stepped cautiously through the sparse rocks and grasses that dotted the forest floor. Overhead towered the Licknamus trees, their slender trunks rising like fingers out of the soil and exploding into a glorious canopy of thick green leaves above them. Every few feet a ray of sunshine poked through the foliage and shone downwards like light from a lamp post. Alexander made sure to avoid these spots so that he would not be seen. Far to his left the stream raised its gurgling voice and provided the perfect cover of sound to hide his footsteps as he moved along.

She was about 30 meters ahead of him, and he did his best to keep this distance as he followed her. Though he was young, he was also quick, and so far he had been able to keep up. *Be careful not to go too fast*, he thought, *or else you'll make a noise and...*

At this very instant his foot cracked a small branch underfoot. He froze, and his wide eyes shot upwards to peer through the forest. The woman ahead of him had stopped moving also, and her head swung around to try to discover the source of the sound. Ever so slowly, Alexander shifted to his right and pressed himself against a nearby tree trunk. His left eye gazed out from behind the smooth bark to keep her in view. For a moment, the woman stood motionless, her eyes looking right in the direction where Alexander was standing. He thought that perhaps she had seen him, but then he was in a dark patch and she was partially exposed in the light ahead. An eternity seemed to pass, and if every clock in the town far behind him had stood still, he would

not have doubted it. Finally, her eyes turned away from him and looked somewhere else. Then, satisfied, a smile formed on her lips and she shook her head, turning again to continue walking.

Alexander's chest gave way and he let out a quiet sigh, his body relaxing under him. He realized that he had been holding his breath the entire time, and now he filled his lungs with a deep breath and pressed forward again after her. *That was too close*, he thought.

After a short while, the forest opened into a clearing, and a dirt pathway could be seen which cut through the grass towards a building made of wood and stonework at the opposite end. The woman hurried along this path, while Alexander stopped at the edge of the clearing between two large trees. He watched intently as she made her way to the door of the building and knocked on its solid wooden exterior. A moment later it opened, and she disappeared through the entrance, the door closing after her.

Alexander hesitated to move, but he knew that he had not come all this way for nothing. Quickly, he made his way along the edge of the clearing, trying his best to stay hidden among the trees, until he finally came closer to the building.

It was an impressive structure, with four walls made up of large stones held together with mortar, spanning some ten meters across on all sides. The door, window frames, and roof were all constructed of red wood from the Borden tree, which could only be found on the lower slopes of Northland. A chimney penetrated through one side of the roof, and as his eyes gazed up at the smoke rising from it, his attention was drawn still higher. There, to his astonishment, stood the great mountain. As he had wandered through the forest, it had been kept from view, but now it towered above him through the clearing like a giant pyramid, almost obscuring the sky. He had never seen it this close.

"I'll let in some fresh air," a voice suddenly spoke as a window on the side of the building opened slightly. The sound

startled him back to his senses and he instinctively crouched behind the bush just in front of him. Alexander was facing the rear of the building, which had no windows – it was the perfect spot to begin his stealthy approach. He looked back and forth to make sure no one was coming, and then he made his way silently but quickly out of the forest and into the clearing. Fourteen steps later his back was against the stone wall of the building. He crouched down again, and peered around the corner, looking intently at the window that was now partially swung open. Next, he crept along the side of the wall and made his way closer, until he found himself just below the window. There were voices talking inside.

“...down to seventeen of us, I believe. But then Jayden Thomas hasn’t come around lately,” a man’s voice stated.

“I heard he went south,” said another voice, which sounded very much like an elderly lady to Alexander. Following this there were many hushed voices exclaiming “Oh, no!” and “Not Jayden, too!” Finally, the room quieted down again.

“Well, that would explain it then. Tragic.” The first man was speaking again. “We’ve lost too many to the Southland. For some, the pull is too much.”

“My husband...” Alexander’s ears pricked up instantly. He recognized that voice – it belonged to his mother. “He... I mean, I haven’t seen him. It’s just that, he said it wasn’t true, that there was no harm in trying it.” Alexander could hear the pain in her words. His lower lip quivered slightly.

“Emily,” a woman spoke sympathetically, “you’re not alone.”

“I just don’t know what to do.” Alexander could hear his mother, Emily, sobbing quietly. It was almost too much for him to bear. His hands clenched into fists, and a tear formed at the edge of his right eye, silently slithering down his cheek.

“Many of us have lost loved ones to the south.” Another man was speaking now, with a deep and serious tone. “Since you are new to our group, Emily, you should know that some of us have escaped from there. It’s not a one-way ticket, as they say. I am proof.”

“But how?” Emily asked, somewhat startled by his assertion.

“I was rescued by a Climber.”

Alexander’s eyes widened when he heard this, and a look of shock appeared on his face. He knew of some people who believed in the existence of the Climbers, but he had never seen one before. Many thought they were the stuff of myth or legend – but here was a man who had a real-life encounter with one!

“Then you believe that it can be done?” Emily’s voice changed when she said this, and Alexander pushed himself up closer to the window so that he would not miss a word.

“We believe that the stories are true. Yes,” an older man interrupted before the other man could respond. “But we should be careful not to say that it is possible for us to climb all the way. Such thoughts are dangerous and will only lead to disappointment... or worse.” Several in the room murmured in agreement when he said this.

“Many have tried the ascent in the past,” the elderly lady’s voice sounded from the back of the room, “but no one has ever made it. Well, except two.”

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Nathan’s grandfather hunched himself over the smoldering fire in front of him as he added more kindling in an effort to get it started. A large iron pot hung above it, dangling from a thick, straight branch supported by two Y-shaped sticks driven into the

ground. Behind him stood a log cabin of modest size, with the dim light of a lantern emanating from one of its windows. He looked up suddenly as he heard footsteps approaching. The young figure of Alexander came into view as he walked along the path.

“I sent him down to the Circle to get us some water,” Nathan’s grandfather said. “But that was over an hour ago. He’s probably collecting words instead of water.” The Circle was the main water source for the entire town, but it wasn’t a well. It was more like a large pool, deep, surrounded by a stone wall two feet tall, and fed by the stream that came down from Northland. It also happened to be where intelligent men gathered to talk, or at least those who thought themselves intelligent. “When you find him, tell him to get back here quick. Sarah wants to cook up his favourite – red stew – but you can’t have stew without water!”

“I’ll tell him,” Alexander responded, and instantly spun around to start out towards the center of town.

“You’re welcome to join us, if you’d like,” he called after him. Alexander looked over his shoulder and waved but didn’t slow his pace.

“I can’t!” Alexander yelled. “Haven’t done my chores yet.” Nathan’s grandfather shook his head and grinned, then turned back to his work.

Alexander quickly followed the road from Nathan’s house towards the northeast gate. The town had seven gates in all – one at each corner, enhanced with a tower above it, and then three more facing west, south, and east. The north wall had no gate, for that is where the stream entered the town and then flowed through a covered conduit, spilling out into the Circle at the town’s center. There were several small farms on the outskirts of town, each one fed by irrigation ditches that all siphoned off the main stream. Nathan’s home wasn’t a farm, however, so they had to go into town for water daily.

“Gate’s closing early today,” the Keeper stated, pushing himself off the wall he was leaning against as Alexander approached.

“Early? What for?” Alexander asked. The gates were always closed at night but left open during daylight.

“Someone came back from the south. Could be trouble.” Alexander stopped in his tracks, a look of disbelief on his face, then he bolted through the gate and down the road. “They’re all talking ‘bout it. He’s in rough shape, looks like!” the Keeper shouted after him.

A few minutes later, Alexander reached the Circle. A large crowd had gathered around it, all talking excitedly. Looking around, Alexander spotted Nathan at the top of some steps, looking intently through an open window towards the center of the crowd. He rushed over and jumped up the steps two at a time.

“Alex, you’ll never believe it!” Nathan exclaimed as he turned to see him. “A man’s come back from the Southland! They found him by the old trapper’s cabin. Look!” Nathan’s finger pointed out the window and Alexander’s eyes followed it. There, hunched over, sitting on the edge of the stone wall surrounding the pool, sat a lonely figure. His hair was dark and wild, and his beard was fully grown. He had no shirt on, and his skin looked pale and white. There were several large sores on his chest that Alexander thought looked awfully painful, and his left arm had scrapes on it. His pants, if shreds of fabric could be called pants, were filthy. On either side of him stood the Guidemen – the leading men of the town.

“Citizens,” the voice of the head Guideman, William Fars, rose above the crowd as he stepped forward. The noise of all the people died down. “Until we can identify this man, and determine how he managed to escape, I recommend that we take some necessary precautions. We will send two armed Keepers to each homestead outside the city to protect those families not

dwelling with us. Then, we will close the gates and set up a rotating watch of twenty-one on the walls – three Keepers above each gate.”

“You really think they’ll come after him, Fars?” a man’s voice sounded out from the crowd. Fars’ head turned to the right, and he paused, as if carefully choosing his next words.

“There have been reports,” he said, hesitating. “One of our scouting parties saw some movements in the forest on the southwest side just three days ago.”

“Miners!” a woman’s voice shouted out shrilly, instantly followed by a cascade of alarmed voices and moans throughout the surrounding crowd. Alexander and Nathan looked at each other with shocked expressions.

“Three days ago? Why were we not told this sooner?” demanded another man in the crowd. The people murmured. Fars held up his hand to calm them.

“There is no cause for panic,” he said. “The scouts were too far away to make an accurate assessment of what group was moving through the forest. There is no guarantee it consisted of Miners.” Fars turned in a circle as he spoke, so that all could see his face. “But we will not take any chances. Krell will organize the guards and watches. If you have room, send for the farm families and have them stay with you in town. Then we can reassign more Keepers to the remaining properties.” Krell stepped forward.

“Men, gather your weapons and supplies and meet me at the south gate in 20 minutes,” he commanded. At this, the Keepers dispersed from the crowd and hurried back to gather their belongings. Two of the Guidemen behind Fars leaned over the man still sitting by the pool. They gently lifted him to his feet and walked him through the crowd, who stood back and looked

on with intense curiosity. Alexander leaned out the window hoping to get a better look. What if it was his father?

“I don’t think it’s him,” Nathan said softly. “He looks shorter than your...” Alexander raced down the steps before Nathan could finish. He pushed his way through the remaining crowd and then stumbled out directly in front of the man. The Guidemen stopped. The crowd suddenly grew silent as Alexander slowly stepped towards the man. His head was bowed down, but as Alexander came into view, he raised it slightly and their eyes met. Alexander’s face changed from hope to disappointment.

“Where is he?” Alexander blurted out. The man said nothing and looked confused. “Where is he?” Alexander repeated, more earnestly.

“He can’t talk yet, son,” said one of the Guidemen. “Give him some time and we’ll find out what happened.” Alexander felt his body shake slightly and a surge of emotion swept over him.

“You saw him, didn’t you? He’ll come back. He’ll come back just like you. I know...” Alexander’s voice faltered, and he turned around. Several women in the crowd had their hands up to their mouths, and tears in their eyes.

“He’ll come back!” Alexander shouted, as if repetition would make it true, and then he ran.

Nathan found him a short while later outside the town wall on the north side, close to where the creek came in. Alexander was laying on his side, stretched out over a flat boulder partially embedded into the bank. He occasionally cast a pebble into the creek. Nathan walked up to him but didn’t say anything, and Alexander didn’t acknowledge his presence either. He sat down a few feet away and looked at the stream flowing by. Finally, Alexander broke the silence.

“Nate, I went into Northland Forest this morning,” he said. Nathan turned his head, surprised.

“How far?”

“I was following someone,” Alexander replied. “Went right up almost to the base of the mountain. I’ve never seen it so close.”

“You should be careful, Alex. If your mother finds out, she’ll make your hands red.” Alexander turned his face towards Nathan.

“I was following my mother.” When Alexander said this the expression on Nathan’s face looked like he had just stumbled onto something he shouldn’t have seen.

“Why’s she going up there? What if one of the Keepers saw her? Besides, she doesn’t want to get mixed up with those crazies out there, does she?” Nathan asked. Alexander turned his gaze back towards the creek.

“They’re not crazy,” he stated. “I heard them talking.” Nathan jumped up and stood right in front of Alexander.

“She went to the Guildhouse?” he asked excitedly.

“That’s right. Sounds like there’s a bunch of them that meet there still – even one that got rescued by a Climber.” Nathan couldn’t contain himself when Alexander mentioned this.

“You’re fooling me now!” Nathan exclaimed and dropped to his knees.

“Am not. I heard the man say it with his own mouth.” Alexander leaned forward, putting his face only a foot away from Nathan’s. “And you’ll never guess who said it!” He paused for dramatic effect. “Charlie Bunting.”

Charlie Bunting was Krell's older half-brother. He wasn't a Guideman like Krell, but instead spent most of his time in a sort of self-induced solitary confinement, holed up in his cabin northeast of town about an hour's walk from Nathan's home. People only saw him when he occasionally walked into town to get supplies. His cabin was located close to the stream, so he didn't need to get water from the Circle in town to survive. It was not well-known that Charlie had ever been lost to Southland, and it certainly wasn't common knowledge that he had been rescued from it, too. He was a quiet man and kept out of people's business, so they kept out of his as well. If he had disappeared for several months, no one would have thought much of it.

"So, you think the stories are true – that there really are Climbers out there?" Nathan asked.

"Must be, else how would he have escaped? Besides, the man they found today – he's the only other person I know of who's come back from Southland," Alexander stated. "Who knows? Maybe that man was rescued by a Climber, too."

"Imagine that! A genuine Climber," Nathan said in a voice full of wonder. "I heard they're twice as tall as us, and real powerful – they could crack a tree in half with their bare hands!"

"Ha!" Alexander laughed. "That's what the old ladies say. It's all nonsense. A Climber is just like one of us, only better – cause they aren't afraid."

"You think so?" asked Nathan, looking towards the mountain in the distance. Alexander turned his head to look at it also.

"They'd have to be, Nate. Cause I don't know anyone who thinks they can make it to the top of that." They both stared up at where they supposed the peak would be, hidden constantly by shifting clouds. "Come on," Alexander said as he stood up. "We need to get your folks and my mother into town before they close the gates on us."