

THE GUILD OF CLIMBERS

Michael Maw

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“Did you sleep well?” Rachel asked Emily as she joined her in the kitchen. Rachel and her husband, Vernon Handfield, owned a Townhome that was a short walk from the western gate. It was a finely built house made of southern-cut stones, boasting hardwood flooring and even a second floor – which was something typically only found in the homes of Guidemen. Though not a Guideman himself, Vernon had considerable influence in the town as he was involved in a variety of business partnerships. He had done well for himself, and Rachel had decorated their home beautifully.

“Yes, thank you,” Emily replied. “I had almost forgotten how comfortable your bedding is.”

“Oh, yes, aren’t the stuffed-wool mattresses wonderful? It certainly is a step up from straw bedding,” Rachel exclaimed as she looked at her sister-in-law with pride. “Vernon is so inventive with such things. And to think I had doubted his idea to invest in Thomson’s sheep farm. So many of the citizens are switching to wool now – it’s been tremendously profitable.”

“He definitely has a creative mind,” Emily said with a smile as she opened the cupboard to get some plates. “I remember when we were kids, he built his own little raft and charged his friends a piece of fruit each for a ride down the stream. Then he sold all the fruit to the marketers in town. I guess he was born a businessman.”

“Well, I’m just glad we have a safe, warm place here in town that we could welcome you and Alexander to,” Rachel said, her tone a bit more serious. “It really is quite shocking what happened yesterday.”

“Yes, Alex was quite excited by it all. I hope he’ll be alright.” Emily placed the dishes on the table and then stared thoughtfully for a moment. “It does make me wonder though. If that man escaped, or was rescued somehow, then...”

“Morning, lovely ladies,” Vernon suddenly interjected as he walked into the room. He pulled a chair out from the table and then promptly sat down, laying a piece of paper beside his plate.

“What’s that?” Rachel inquired.

“That, my dear, is a security bulletin.” Vernon picked it up in his hand once again and eyed it closely. “I went for a walk earlier this morning and stopped by Krell’s house to see if I could get an update. He had a couple of copyists over there helping him write these out for distribution to the Keepers standing guard throughout the countryside. I managed to convince him to give me one. Fars is planning to announce all this at noon by the Circle. Well, at least some of it apparently.”

“You managed to get an inside scoop, did you, brother?” Emily asked as she sat down at the table across from him.

“Oh, read it, Vernon!” Rachel begged impatiently.

“Very well,” Vernon said, clearing his throat, then looking towards the stairs. “Alexander is?”

“Still sleeping,” Emily answered.

“Good. This information is not for young ears.” Vernon paused a moment, his face suddenly marked with a grim expression, then he began to read the bulletin:

SECURITY BULLETIN

02:00 hours: Raiding party of Miners attacked the Becketts' homestead two kilometers west of the old trapper's cabin. The Becketts family fled unharmed to a nearby property. Keepers on duty provided defence. One Keeper wounded and taken captive. The other retreated to get reinforcements.

02:15 hours: Subsequent defence launched by Keepers in the area and was successful. Miners last seen heading southeast. Estimated size of the raiding party: 6. Rescue mission in progress to recover the captive.

The Becketts' home was ransacked – nothing of value appears to have been taken. Family has since been moved to the town. Other properties in the south countryside are now being evacuated by order of Guideman Fars.

All Keepers stationed at properties north of the town are to return immediately for reassignment to southern positions. Report to the south gate by 9 AM. Those west and east of the town are to remain in place on high alert for potential further raids.

Captain Jonathan Krell

There was stunned silence in the room when he finished. Rachel's hand clutched the top of the chair next to where Emily was sitting. Neither of them had moved even slightly the entire time Vernon was speaking. He looked up at them as he slowly laid the paper down on the table. Their eyes betrayed a sense of fear.

"Now, ladies," he said stoically, "there is no cause for alarm. Krell's men can certainly handle this, and I'm sure the wounded Keeper will be rescued in time. I also have no doubt they'll

provide an adequate reminder to those Miners why they are not welcome on our lands.”

“But Vernon!” Rachel exclaimed as she finally sunk down into her chair. “A raid on one of our homesteads? Such a thing hasn’t happened in years!” Vernon straightened himself when she said this, and he rubbed his short beard.

“Oh, the poor Becketts!” said Emily anxiously. “I can only imagine how frightened they must have been. They are too old for such excitement. I do hope they will be alright.”

“Yes, indeed! Can you imagine if the Keepers had not been there to defend them?” Rachel responded, her voice quivering. “Why, at their age, I don’t understand how they can still live out there, and so close to the border. What, with their son lost for 10 years now after his wife’s death during childbirth, leaving behind little Abigail for the grandparents to raise. It’s just all so much trouble for that family – and now this!”

“It’s strange, don’t you think?” Vernon suddenly spoke up once more, his eyes glancing upwards as he pondered. “Why didn’t they steal anything from the home? Clearly, they were looking for something.”

“The man who escaped?” Emily proposed. Vernon turned to look at her.

“Or, more likely, something the man had taken with him,” he replied, raising his finger in the air. “There are only so many places to hide in the Beckett’s cabin. They needn’t have turned the whole place over if they were only looking for a man.”

“Rinesalt!” The word slipped out of Emily’s mouth almost unexpectedly, and Rachel’s eyes widened at its mention. Rinesalt was the fabled mineral of the Southland, rumoured to be buried deep within the mines located there. Its effect on a person was overwhelming – producing such an intense sensation that those who tasted it or even smelled it quickly became enslaved, willing

to do anything to find more. Men would give large sums to acquire even a small amount of the substance. This had lured many from Northland, desperate for wealth or escape, to seek it out – yet most were never heard from again.

“I think you’re right, sister,” Vernon said as he rose from the table. “And my suspicion is that our mysterious visitor from the south hid the Rinesalt somewhere before he was found yesterday. If that’s the case, the Miners will not stop their raids until they find it.” He turned and began striding toward the front door. “I need to warn Krell and Fars – they must get the answer out of that man before more citizens are attacked.”

“But what of breakfast, Vernon?” Rachel exclaimed from the kitchen.

“I shouldn’t be long, darling,” he called back, the sound of the door creaking as he shut it behind himself.

“Well, Rachel, I’ll be glad when this is all over,” Emily stated as she stood up to resume setting the rest of the table.

“Yes, it’s all too much for one day, I must say!” Rachel replied. She then held out her hand toward the table. “Let me finish here, Emily. You should go and wake Alexander now. Let’s not mention any of this to him, of course.”

“Yes, of course,” said Emily, and she turned toward the stairs.

Rachel placed a pan on the stove and loaded it with chopped onions, mushrooms, peppers, and a spoonful of oil. She then swung open the stove’s iron door to inspect the fire inside and promptly added an extra log. She was just closing the door again when Emily suddenly came rushing down the stairs – her face pale white.

“Rachel,” Emily shouted with alarm, “Alexander is gone!”

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The morning air was cool in the shadows of the back alley as Alexander quickly made his way along. He had left his coat behind at his uncle's house and now the skin on his forearms bristled with goosebumps. However, as he turned a corner a glimmer of warmth washed over him as the rising sun peeked over the distant wall of the town. The streets and pathways were mostly empty, as the citizens were still getting ready for the day or eating their first meal. Up ahead, Alexander saw a door open and a plump man wearing a white apron stepped into the doorway, taking a deep breath of the crisp air.

"Morning, Alexander," greeted the man as he turned, noticing the boy walking down the street. "Aren't you an early bird this morning!" It was Mr. Daxon, the town's baker.

"Yes, sir," Alexander replied. "I'm just on an errand before breakfast. Say, you wouldn't happen to know where they took the man from yesterday, would you?"

"The Southerner? I'm afraid I missed out on all the excitement when it happened, as I was in the country getting a load of flour from the mill. But my wife told me that he looked to be in very poor condition, so I suspect he's in the recovery house in the southeast quarter."

"Thank you, Mr. Daxon," Alexander said, and picked up his pace.

"Tell your mother I'll have fresh biscuits on sale today if she's interested!" Mr. Daxon yelled after him.

A short while later Alexander turned onto a cobblestone road lined with one-story wooden buildings. As he neared a collection of barrels standing to one side, a black Pellenbird suddenly streaked through the air overhead and let out a screech. Alexander's eyes darted up and at that exact moment his foot

caught the edge of one of the stones. He tripped and his body lurched forward, his right knee crashing down onto a flat stone as he put out his arms to break his fall.

“Owwww!” he yelped, and he rolled over onto his back as he cradled his knee in both hands. The pain surged through his body, and for a moment he thought he might cry. But then he thought to himself, ‘*You’re almost 12 years old now – you mustn’t cry!*’

His ears picked up the sound of voices ahead. Quickly, he scrambled to hide himself behind the nearby barrels, his knee still throbbing. Looking through a narrow space between two barrels, he spied ahead to where the voices were sounding. From a side alley emerged William Fars followed by two elderly people and a child wearing a long jacket with a hood. Trailing behind them were two Keepers, each armed with a weapon. They crossed the street and then filed up two stairs and in through the doorway. A weathered sign hung above the door frame with the words *Medical Recovery* written across it.

Alexander waited for a moment, and then quickly limped across the road toward the building. He then ducked into a narrow space between the recovery house and the building next to it. He walked a few steps and then spotted a small hole in the wood siding, about 10 cm above the interior floorboards. He crouched down and put his right eye up to it. He could see the legs and shoes of the people inside and could faintly hear their muffled words.

“You’re sure it’s him, Fars?” an older man’s voice was heard.

“Mr. Becketts, we have every reason to believe it is indeed,” Fars responded. “He has yet to say a word, but we found certain evidence on his person to confirm his identity. It’s my hope that if he sees someone he recognizes, that might get him speaking again.”

“Well, I don’t know if Abi should see him just yet,” an elderly lady spoke up. “Darling, you sit here and wait while we go with Mr. Fars.” Alexander heard the sound of feet shuffling over to an adjacent room. He was about to follow them to see if he could find another peephole when something caught his attention inside.

Two small feet in brown skin boots walked to the opposite side of the room. He saw them turn, and then the child sat on a wooden bench against the far wall. His eye drifted upwards as the hood was untied at the neck and then lowered. Golden blonde hair emerged, and when the head lifted upward he saw her face – blue eyes that sparkled, porcelain skin with a few freckles, and very fine features. She was beautiful. He felt a light-headed sensation wash over him that he had never experienced before. She blinked her eyes slowly and looked about the room.

Suddenly, her head jerked toward Alexander’s direction. She was looking right at him! He quickly backed away from the hole, then thought a moment – he had to have one more look! He pressed his other eye against the hole once more and looked in. She was still sitting on the bench, looking straight down at him. A sly smile was on her face. This made Alexander smile also. His cheeks blushed red slightly.

“What’s your name?” her lips asked softly. Alexander moved his mouth to the hole and whispered back.

“Alex.” He then repositioned his eye over the hole once more so that he could see her.

“What are you doing down there?”

“I’m spying,” he replied, and then looked at her again.

“You’re spying on me?”

“No, I want to find out who the man is.” At this, the girl nodded slightly and made an “oh” sound. She looked like she was thinking about something for a moment.

“Well, I think he’s my father,” she finally said.

“How do you know?” Alexander asked.

“I don’t. That’s what they told us. I’ve never seen my father before.” Alexander’s eyes widened when she said this.

“How is that possible?” he questioned her further. Her face turned sideways and tilted downward.

“My mother died when I was born, and so he left. I guess he... I guess he didn’t want me.” Alexander was quiet when she said this. He just looked at her as she stared down at the floorboards, her hair obscuring part of her face. He felt a lump in his throat. A minute passed by.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said.

“Abi,” a voice called out as the elderly lady returned to the room with one of the Keepers. “Come along, darling, we’re going to head back to Mr. Fars’ house for breakfast while your grandpa stays behind here for a while.” Her voice sounded strained, as if she was very upset about something but trying to hide it. Abigail stood up and followed her to the door.

Alexander stood up also and edged himself closer to the front of the building so that he could watch them. The door opened and all three stepped down onto the road and began walking back across toward the alley on the opposite side. Abigail turned her head backwards and saw Alexander partially peeking around the corner of the building, the fingers of his left hand curled around the edge of the wood siding. She smiled at him, then turned her head again and the three of them disappeared into the shadows of the alley. He lingered there for a moment, trying to sort through the feelings he was experiencing.

“Young man!” a voice rang out at the other end of the road. Alexander’s head bolted to the left and he saw two men standing about 10 meters away, staring at him.

“Why, it’s Alexander!” said the other man in astonishment. Fear leapt into Alexander’s heart. It was his Uncle Vernon. “What in the world are you doing over here? I thought you were still in bed!” Alexander stepped out into the sunlight.

“I’m sorry uncle,” he blurted out. “I just went out for a walk this morning and somehow wound up here.” Vernon and Krell stepped closer to him with a stern look on their faces.

“You’re coming back to the house with me this instant! You have no business to be in this area of town. Your mother must be worried sick wondering where you’ve run off to this time,” Uncle Vernon scolded him. Krell turned to Vernon and motioned toward the building.

“It’s alright, Vernon,” Krell said. “Fars should be in there with the Becketts. I’ll inform him of what we discussed.” With that, Vernon grabbed hold of Alexander’s arm and marched him up the road.

About fifteen minutes later, the front door of the Handfield home opened and in walked Vernon and Alexander.

“I’ve found him!” Vernon announced. Emily rushed into the room with Rachel not far behind her. She bent forward and embraced Alexander with both arms.

“Oh, Alex!” she cried. “Never do that to me again! I can’t lose you, too!” Tears streamed down her face. Alexander teared up as well, suddenly realizing how much he had worried his mother.

“I’m sorry, ma,” he choked out. “I had to find out. I wanted to know if the man knew about father.” From behind, Rachel moved closer to them as they continued to hug each other.

“Alex,” Rachel asked. “Did he say anything?” Emily leaned back and peered into her son’s face through her tears, continuing to hold his arms.

“No, auntie,” Alex replied. “I only got to speak with a little girl named Abi. They told her the man is her father.” This prompted a shocked look on all three faces.

“Samuel Becketts!” Vernon suddenly gasped. He walked toward a window and looked at it blankly.

“Brother, what is it?” Emily asked, turning her head in his direction.

“This is not good,” he replied. “This changes everything.”