



PART I

*Autumn, Cold Coast*





I

*Parting Words*

Drew knew that there was a predator out there.

He looked out over the barley field, mottled shadows racing across it, and the crops swaying rhythmically as storm clouds flew by overhead. Behind him his father and twin brother continued to load the wagon, backs bent as they hauled sacks of grain on to the wooden boards. A heavy grey shire horse stood harnessed to the front, tugging with its teeth at tufts of grass it found at the base of the tethering post. Drew stood on the roof of the rickety old tool shed, scouring the golden meadow for a telltale sign, of what he wasn't entirely sure.

'Get your idle bones down off that shed and come and help your brother,' shouted his father. 'We need to get this loaded before the rain hits.'

'But, Pa, there's something out there,' Drew called back.

'Either you get yourself down from that thing or I come

over and knock you down,' he warned, pausing momentarily to glare at his son.

Begrudgingly, Drew searched the barley field with narrowed eyes one last time before jumping down on to the muddy, rutted surface of the farm's yard.

'I swear you'd rather do anything than a bit of hard work,' muttered his father, hefting a sack up to Trent.

Drew snatched up his own load, struggling for purchase against the rough hemp as he hoisted it up to his brother. Their father returned to the barn to haul out the remaining grain, destined for the neighbouring market town of Tuckborough.

Tall, broad, blond-haired and blue-eyed, Trent was the very image of Mack Ferran. Shorter and slighter in build than his brother, with a shock of black hair that tumbled over his finer features, Drew was an exact opposite in all aspects. Though the twins were sixteen years of age and on the verge of manhood, Drew knew it would be clear to the most casual observer which of the two had eaten the bigger portions of porridge at the Ferran breakfast table. But, different as they were, they were as close as any brothers could be.

'Don't mind him,' said Trent, taking the weight of the sack and dragging it across the wooden boards. 'He just wants to be off so he can get to market on time.' He slammed the bag down as Drew pulled forward another to the foot of the wagon. Trent rarely had any trouble believing Drew – if his brother said something was amiss when they were in the wild, nine times out of ten he'd be correct. 'What do you reckon it is?' he asked.

Drew paused to glance back at the fields surrounding the Ferran farm. 'Can't say. A wildcat? Dogs maybe? Possibly a wolf?' he guessed.

'At this time of day, so close to the farm? You're mad, Drew. I'll grant you it might be wild dogs, but not a wolf.'

Drew knew he wasn't mad. Trent might have been strong, athletic and a natural horseman, but he knew little about the wilderness. Drew, on the other hand, was a born outdoorsman and with this came the gift of an innate understanding of the countryside and the creatures within it. Since his first trip out into the fields as a boy with his father, he'd taken to shepherding with an uncanny ease. He found he was completely in tune with the animals, his senses seeming to match theirs. From the smallest field mouse to the largest (and thankfully very uncommon) bear, Drew could usually recognize their presence readily, be it from the reaction of the other animals, or the tracks and signs they left behind.

But today's feeling vexed him. Something was out there, watching them, stalking them, but it was unfamiliar. He knew it sounded crazy, but he could pick up the scent of a predator when the air was clear. This had proved invaluable on many an occasion, saving several of the family's sheep and cattle. Although today was blustery, there was still the faint hint of a creature that was out of place, foreign to these parts. A large animal was out there, looking in, and it irked Drew that he couldn't figure out what it was, even less spy it.

'You think it's the thing from last night?' asked Trent.

That was exactly what Drew had been wondering. For the last few nights Drew's shepherd watch had been unusual. The

sheep had not been themselves and all the while Drew had been consumed by an awful sense of foreboding. Ordinarily the sheep would be very receptive to his commands and calls but, bit by bit, they had become more erratic. This had coincided with the waxing of the moon, which often spooked the animals and had even caused Drew to grow ill with worry. It wasn't a pleasant sensation, the feeling of being stalked by a predator in your own backyard.

Towards the end of last night's watch he'd gathered and penned the majority of the flock and picked up the stragglers that had wandered further afield. Only one had remained – the ram, naturally – and it had managed to find its way up on to the bluffs that towered over the coast below. The Ferran farm was situated on a rocky promontory of land that reached out from the Cold Coast into the White Sea, cut off on almost every side by the rock walls that surrounded it. He'd found the ram in a state of panic.

It had bucked and started, panicking and throwing its head back in fear. Drew raised his hands, which should have calmed it down, but it had the opposite effect. Shaking its head from side to side, mouth open and gulping at the salty air, the ram had backed up a step. Then another. Pebbles had tumbled over the cliff edge, dislodged by frantic hooves, as it struggled for purchase. One moment it was there, an eye fixed on him in stricken terror, the next it was gone, disappearing off the cliff.

Drew had scrambled the remaining distance to the edge, white-knuckled fingers clutching the earth as he peered over. A hundred feet below, heaped in a broken mass, the sheep lay unmoving, its life dashed away on the sharp rocks.

As the moon shone down Drew had looked about, convinced he wasn't alone, sure beyond reason that whatever had startled the animal was still nearby. He'd raced home through the sickly moonlight, heart thundering, not stopping until he'd hit the farm's front door with an almighty crash. Now, on this stormy morning, Drew had the same familiar feeling. He'd be keeping the sheep penned in tonight, close to the farm where he could keep an eye on them.

'Drew!' His father pointed in the direction of the remaining sacks that were lined up outside the heavy timber doors of the barn. 'Get a move on. I want to get to Tuckborough while there's still daylight, lad.' Drew trudged to the barn, speeding up when he caught sight of his father's glower.

His mother, Tilly, stood on the doorstep of the farmhouse, drying her hands on her apron.

'Try not to be hard on him, Mack,' she said as her husband approached, reaching out and brushing the sweat-soaked hair from his brow. 'He's probably still raw from what happened to that ram.'

'*He's* still raw?' said Mack incredulously. 'It's not him who has to fork out for another animal. If I don't get there before noon, the best on show will be gone to some other bidder.' He saw his son dragging the last two sacks across the farmyard to the wagon. 'If you tear those sacks, then it'll come out of your wages, lad!' he shouted.

Tilly had to bite her lip, mother's instinct telling her to jump in and defend the boy, but thought better of it. Mack's mood was bad enough without one of their rows darkening it further.

Drew stopped to throw one of the sacks over his shoulder, looking back to his parents who stood talking beneath the farmhouse porch. His father was pointing his way, his hooked thumb gesturing, while his mother shook her head. A few choice words to her husband and she walked indoors in annoyance. The boys' father looked back towards them, shaking his head wearily before following his wife indoors. Drew trudged over to the wagon.

'Are they arguing again?' asked Trent, positioning the final sack and binding them to the timber hoardings with a heavy length of rope.

Drew nodded, aware that the words his parents had exchanged were probably about him. It always seemed to be about him. It felt as though they were keeping something from him, but he didn't know what.

Times were undoubtedly changing at the farm, and Trent was biding his time before he finally left home to join the military. Under duress, their parents had agreed to their son's constant badgering to allow him to become a soldier, something he'd wanted to do since childhood. As a matter of routine, their father had trained both his sons in skill at arms from an early age, teaching them things he'd picked up himself a long time ago. A member of the old king's Wolfguard, there were very few places across the continent of Lyssia that Mack hadn't visited. Times changed, though, and with Leopold the Lion on the throne it was a very different monarch Trent would serve if he pursued his dream. This part of the Seven Realms was a changed place from days gone by. Leopold ruled with an iron paw, and it was rumoured that many of Lyssia's



people had fallen on hard times. Their father would mutter that the Lionguard were now little more than glorified tax collectors, a shadow of their former selves. He had done his parental duty in basic self-defence, with both boys now proficient with a sword, but there was only so much he was prepared to teach.

Regardless of his own skills, Drew had no desire to travel to Highcliff with his brother and join the Lionguard. His home was on the farm, and he felt no need to see the world. He knew his mother found his homebird nature heart-warming and loved the fact that her younger boy would always be around. Drew suspected that his father found his lack of ambition disappointing, but the old man never spoke of it if he did. It seemed that his father had written him off at a young age, and if he were to stay around here for the rest of his life then so be it. After all, as Mack Ferran often said, another pair of hands was always needed on the farm, so the boy was good for a few things. It was as close to a compliment as he was likely to get.

Straining against his harness, the great grey shire horse kicked his hooves into the earth, keen to be on his way. He threw his head back and took a couple of forceful steps, almost causing Trent to fall off the back of the wagon.

‘Whoa there, Amos,’ called Drew, slapping his hand against the wooden side. The horse relented, stepping back gingerly and dipping his head by way of an apology. ‘He wants to set off,’ said Drew, looking up at the gathering storm clouds. ‘Can’t say I blame him.’

Trent jumped down and Drew followed him indoors to say

farewell. They found their parents standing in the kitchen, embracing.

‘Right, then,’ said their father. ‘I guess we’re ready for the off. Trent, get that basket off the table, lad. It’s our lunch in there.’

Trent picked up the basket and sidled past, back to the front door and the waiting wagon. They always took it in turns to accompany their father on the road to market. Tuckborough was some ten or so miles away from them, the nearest spot of civilization. By horse it was a brisk gallop, the coast road skirting the edge of the Dyrewood, weaving one way and the other along the cliff top past bays. By wagon it was a far slower affair. With a number of shops, watering holes and other more diverting interests, it was usually a welcome break from mundane life on the farm. Come autumn, however, it was decidedly less enjoyable. Cold winds and sleet rain seemed to instinctively appear on market days. Even the prospects of a sly mug of ale with their father or a flirtation with a pretty girl proved lean enticements.

Their mother cleared up the breakfast pots from the kitchen table. Drew reached up and unhooked his father’s heavy hooded cloak from its peg, handing it to him as he made for the door.

‘We should be back around nightfall, depending on the road and weather,’ he said as he fastened the brass clasp of his cloak under his chin. ‘You may want to see about keeping the flock a little closer to the homestead today. After yesterday and all, yes?’

Drew nodded his agreement as his mother squeezed by,

looking to say her goodbyes to her other son. Beyond the doorway, a light rain had started to fall.

‘Try not to lose any more of them. And look after your ma,’ his father added as she passed.

The old man patted his hip, checking his hunting knife was at home in its sheath. Drew handed his father’s longbow to him before picking up the quiver of arrows that lay at the foot of the stairs. He’d rarely had to use any of these weapons on the road, certainly not in recent years anyway. There had been a time, when the boys were toddlers, that bandits had stalked the coast road, and bows and blades were a necessity for travellers. Eventually the local farmers and road traders had come together to form a makeshift posse that dispatched the brigands. Those that weren’t slain or hanged in Tuckborough had fled to pastures less feisty. Now the most dangerous encounter they might face would be a boar, big cat or wolf. Still, old habits died hard for the ex-soldier. Trent followed his father out into the drizzle, wrapping his scarf tightly about his face and pulling up the hood of his cloak.

They both climbed into the cart, and Drew followed them to pass up the quiver of arrows. Amos gave a whinny of excitement, feet stepping in anticipation, aware that they were about to be off. Drew stepped up to pat the horse’s nose with an open hand, but the beast pulled back, uncharacteristically arching his neck with a nervy snort. Clearly the horse was also on edge, and Drew guessed he was picking up on the same unsettled atmosphere.

‘Gee up,’ called Mack Ferran, snapping the reins in his hands

and spurring the old shire horse on. With ponderous heavy footsteps the horse stepped out, pulling the great long wagon behind him. Drew stood clear of the vehicle, the huge wheels cutting up the mud as it went. As the drizzle slowly turned to downpour and a storm rumbled overhead, the wagon disappeared into the rain.