

### *Chapter 3*

## *Destiny*

The boy stood petrified, gaping at the staggering vision in front of him, wrapped in snow, its face darkly visible through the tunneled hood. Rob collapsed unconscious, and the boy ran yelling into the cave. His cries brought the people—other children, old people, mothers with babies—who stood and stared in wonder and whispered. And then the wonder turned to a question, and the question converted weary hope into conviction: “The Promised One has come,” they whispered. “It is the Stipag!”

They sent the boy to the Counsel Chamber, and he burst in, proclaiming breathlessly, “I found him. I found the Stipag! He is at the small entrance.” The men looked at one another and wondered. The blind Seer closed his eyes and groaned. He felt like an old champion race horse, whose joints ache and who knows he can no longer run. But they bring him to the starting gate, and as the other horses draw up and the trumpet prepares to blow, his skin quivers at the thrill and despite himself a whinny of excitement rises to his throat. But even with the thrill he feels the inevitable humiliation that faces him, and oh, how he wishes they had not brought him here again, that they had left him at peace in his pasture. That is how the Seer felt—he who had long ago given up thrilling to the promise of joy, who had fed it to others and lost the ability to taste it himself. Now they were summoning him through the cavern for the day he had longed for from his earliest youth, and he wondered why he could not have died the night before and

left the contest of believing and rejoicing to others.

The leaders arrived and gave orders, and a man carried Rob unconscious down long tunnels and through great caverns where the people and their animals had taken shelter from the blizzard. They laid him on a bed of fleeces, peeled back his hood to expose his face, and talked in low and excited tones. They untied his boots and removed them along with his socks. Someone began to massage his feet. They struggled with his buttons and zippers and with his belt, and they finally got him out of all of his clothes and wrapped him in fleeces. They roused him a bit and tried to feed him warm broth, but he could get little of it down. He trembled convulsively. They built up the fire and piled more fleeces on him, but his body seemed to have no warmth for the fleeces to trap. The Seer gave orders, and two buxom women of middle age lay on either side of him, sandwiching him between their warm corpulence. His trembling gradually ceased. He warmed and slept.

Several times they woke him and fed him hot broth. He would swallow, mumble a few words, and fall back to sleep. It was more than a day later when he fully regained consciousness. By then the women had left him. His eyes came open, and in the flickering and inadequate light of the torches he could see that he was in a large “room” of the cave, about half the size of his high school gymnasium. He then became aware of a sort of chanted song and saw that his bed was surrounded by people—strange people, dressed in skins and rough woolens. They sat in a circle around his cot, and with arms and faces uplifted, they chanted on and on.

The boy who had discovered him kept proprietary watch beside his bed, weary, trying not to doze. He shot one of his frequent glances at Rob, and finding his ward’s eyes open, he yelled, “He’s awake!” The singing stopped. The people began to crowd closer, staring. Rob raised himself on his elbow, reached out and drew the young boy near. The boy was stiff with excitement and fear. “What’s your name, Buddy?” Rob asked him, and the boy’s face

dissolved into a grin illuminated by eyes flaming with joy. "Orind," he answered quietly. "Thanks for helping me, Orind. I was in pretty bad shape." Orind's mother had taken her stand behind her son, hands on the boy's shoulders, beaming with pride.

A bearded man who looked like a linebacker for the Chicago Bears except that he was dressed all in skins, made his way to Rob's bed and in a quiet voice called for the people to back up and for someone to bring their guest's clothes. Turning to Rob he said, "Stranger, you are welcome among us. If you are strong now, will you eat food with us in the Counsel Chamber?" An old woman with no teeth brought Rob's clothes, dry and warm, and he began to slip on his underwear and pants under the fleeces while women and children stood near and stared. When he was dressed, the giant led him deep into the cave, and the people did not follow.

They entered a small room, dimly lit. Three men sat on the floor on fleeces. They rose quietly when he entered, and one of them said, "You are welcome among us, Stranger. Sit and eat, and after you have had your fill of food and drink, you shall tell us who you are and what purpose brings you among us." They pointed him to a fleece, and they all sat in a circle around a large cauldron. One of the men ladled steaming hot soup into pottery bowls. Another reached for bread and sliced a cheese with a wooden knife. Rob was hungry, and the stew was very good, though it had some unfamiliar flavors about it. As they ate, a skin filled with spring water made the rounds, and each man drank in turn. The smoke from the torches was pungent, but most of it rose high into the cavern and disappeared.

It was a friendly, but somewhat uncomfortable meal. The men kept casting curious glances at Rob, but they never stared and they never spoke. They smiled and nodded from time to time, and he smiled to indicate that the food was good and waited. When he had finished two large bowls of stew and politely declined a third, the giant belched loudly, wiped his mouth with the back of his

hand and sighed contentedly. The others did the same, and as their eyes turned to Rob, he too managed a belch and grinned with satisfaction.

The oldest man of the group spoke up. “Now that you have taken your fill of food and drink, Stranger, tell us who you are and what purpose has brought you among the Baranay.”

“My name’s Rob, and I live in Portland. My buddy Pete and I just came up to spend a few days at my family’s cabin above Gold Creek. I got lost in the blizzard and was lucky enough to smell your smoke and reach the cave. But what about you? Are you guys mining gold up here or something?”

The men looked perplexed and exchanged strange glances. Finally, the aging seer spoke. “I am Pilag the Loremaster. I have traveled far from here in many directions, but I have never heard of the Portlanday. Where do these people of yours live?”

The question planted strange feelings and thoughts in the boy, but he answered automatically, “Portland is a place, not a people. It’s a city—in Oregon—where the Columbia flows into the Pacific.”

“Please, Young One,” the loremaster asked (and he was tense with excitement). “I have never heard of your ‘Columbia’ or your ‘Pacific.’ Where are these?”

“Well,” Rob answered, “the Columbia is the largest river in this region. It must be a two- or three-day walk from here.”

“Ah. The Great River.”

“Okay. The Great River runs South, then West—toward the setting sun—into the Pacific Ocean.” There was a blankness in their stares. “You know, an ocean. The water is salty.”

There were stifled gasps, and they looked to one another with excitement. Pilag said, “So it is true! We had heard that there was a huge lake far to the setting of the sun. We call it the Great Water. And some of the stories said that it was salty, but we never knew whether to believe them. Is it really salt?”

“Sure. I’ve been swimming in it. I’ve tasted it, lots of times.”

“So, you have come a very long journey.”

“Yeah, it took us the better part of a day.”

“One day!” the giant interjected. “Surely you could not go so far in one day, not even on a fast horse!”

Now Rob had known for some time of course, that he had stumbled into some sort of a mystery. When he had first awakened he assumed that these people were the beginnings of a new town who hadn't had time to build houses yet, or perhaps a religious sect like the Amish. He had wondered why they had chosen such a hard life—without lanterns or normal dishes or even zippers. Then he had been puzzled that they were so ignorant of geography. But never even to have heard of cars! That was not just weird. It was impossible. Strange feelings churned within him: a fear mingled with pleasure, a thrill in his soul. He began to suspect that he had fallen into the sort of adventure he used to read and dream about when he was The Kid's age. Perhaps he had somehow stepped through a magic door and passed clean out of his world.

“Haven't you ever heard of cars?” he asked, and the big man's blank stare answered the question. “In my place we have wagons made of steel that run faster than any horse and never get tired,” he said, and all their eyes grew wide. He turned to Pilag and saw that he too was amazed.

If you had been there, you might have noticed that the same thrill that had seized the boy was gripping the old loremaster. They stared at one another, and each knew what the other was thinking: the long and tedious sequence of ordinary life had been shattered; magic had broken in. Neither of them dared to break the silence, afraid that it would all turn out to be a mistake, afraid the magic would disappear. Yet at the same time they were afraid it might prove real. For if the magic was real, they would have to become anew the kind of people who live in a magical world. They would have to become again as children who wait expectantly for the magic to reveal itself. They stood on the verge of believing, afraid

to step in.

“What is steel?” asked a stocky man with dark, intelligent eyes, breaking the silence.

“It’s a metal,” Rob answered. He took his hunting knife from its scabbard and passed it to the man, who inspected the blade and passed it round the circle. They murmured at its quality.

“I think the Stipag has indeed arrived, Pilag,” said the stocky man to the loremaster.

“Perhaps, Lydos,” Pilag replied.

Lydos: “Tell us, Stranger, are such weapons as these common in your place? Are your bows this good?”

“Sure. They sell these knives everywhere, and we have really fine bows. Of course, most people hunt with guns there.”

As Rob explained about guns, Lydos’ eyes shone. At the conclusion of the explanation, he said, “Yes, Pilag, I think the Stipag is among us.”

“What do you mean, ‘Stipag’?” Rob asked, and even as he asked he felt a thrill, anticipating the answer.

“This is not our home,” Lydos began. Our rightful lands are a two-day walk from here, just across the Whitewater, near where it meets the Great River.” Rob figured he must mean the area where the Methow River meets the Columbia. “Three years ago the neighboring tribe, the Pateray, treacherously attacked and killed most of our warriors and many of our women and children. We were forced to flee here, to our summer pasturage. We have lived here ever since, desiring justice but unable to obtain it. The ancient stories which Pilag has told promise that in our time of darkest trouble Tandaleoh will send a stranger to deliver us. We call him the Stipag, the Trusty Leader.”

Rob smiled. “Who is Tandaleoh?” he asked.

“His name means ‘the burning light,’” Pilag answered. “He is the sun. He lives forever. He made all things and cares for all that is good.”

“We call him ‘God,’” Rob responded. “I used to believe in him, but I haven’t been so sure the last few years.”

Lydos smiled at him and said, “I’m like you, Boy. I never believed in Tandaleoh or in the stories. I have argued all along that since we cannot expect help from Tandaleoh, we must help ourselves. A few weeks ago I persuaded the Counsel that we must not spend another winter here. We have begun preparations for a final battle. We know that we will all die, but it is better to fight and die like men than to die of starvation like frightened rabbits.” His voice was angry and intense, the voice of a warrior and a leader. “But now you have come, Friend Rob. The Stipag has come, and it appears that both of us have been wrong about Tandaleoh. I’m beginning to believe that he’s really going to do something, and we won’t die after all.”

Rob looked around. Each man nodded solemnly, affirming Lydos’ words. Once when he was twelve, Rob had been invited to fill a slot in a sandlot football game with some high school boys. His team was behind by four points with only one down left in the game. The quarterback had unexpectedly turned to Rob on that play. “You go deep, Kid, and I’ll hit you. They’ll never see it coming.” And that’s just how it happened. The older boys probably never gave the silly game another thought, but Rob had never forgotten it—the thrill of crossing the goal line, the joy when the older boys lifted him onto their shoulders and paraded him around the field. Now, once again, in this strange magical world he had stumbled into, Rob was needed for the big play.

“Well,” he declared, “I guess we’re just going to have to kick a little ass, aren’t we?” The Counsel looked at one another and smiled, amused at the uncommon expression. “Yes, that is just what we’ll need to do,” said Lydos.

“So where do we start?” asked Rob.

“First, you need to tell us all you know about war and weapons from your place,” said Lydos. So, for the next hour Rob regaled

them with descriptions of artillery and mortars, grenades, battle ships, machine guns, shotguns, tanks, war planes, dynamite, poison gas. They sat in stunned silence, at once appalled and thrilled.

“Well,” said the oldest man present, “with even a few of these weapons we could win our lands back. We might not even need to kill any of the Pateray. We could just show them our weapons, and they would return our lands.”

“No,” said Lydos sternly. “The Pateray killed my two sons, my brothers, and most of their families. We will get some of these weapons, and we will use them.” Then he turned to Rob. “Esteron is right. We don’t need many weapons. With twenty or even ten guns we can kill them. We will summon them to battle in the open plain, and when they come, we will kill them. When can you get us the guns, Stipag?”

“As soon as I get back to my place, I can get three rifles, two shotguns, and a pistol from my house, and I can borrow another eight or ten guns and be back here in less than seven days,” he said. The men smiled at one other, a look of hope and relief. Lydos slapped his hands together and rubbed them. “Finally!” he said quietly.

Even as all this was going on, of course, Rob was wondering if he could get back to “his place.” He didn’t assume that he could just walk back to his Cabin, bringing these men with him. “His place” surely wasn’t “in” this place. It couldn’t be because in his world there was a small town, not a tribe of “Pateray,” at the confluence of the two rivers. Rob wasn’t much worried, though. He assumed that there must be a passage through to his world—like the door he used to read about at the back of the wardrobe that Peter, Lucy, Edmund, and Susan passed through. He didn’t know exactly where to find it. He assumed it must be somewhere around the Cabin. He trusted that the same power that had chosen him and brought him to this place—Tandaleoh or God or whoever—would show him the door so that he could save the Baranay.

They determined to set out the next morning to bring him to his

place, and then they all rose. Esteron, the eldest, who had said very little, embraced him and uttered a quiet prayer of thanksgiving for his coming. Keneen, the giant, objected to the idea of killing a man from so far away that the enemy would not even know who had killed him, but he agreed that it was their only hope. Pilag the seer was quiet and reflective. Lydos walked from the room, his arm around Rob's shoulders, asking for more descriptions of weapons, prodding him for a clearer explanation of guns and how they work.

That night the leaders briefly introduced the Stipag to the people, deferring any festivities or detailed explanations until after his return. But, they explained, Tandaleoh had kept his promise. The Stipag had knowledge of miraculous new weapons by which they would defeat the Pateray and regain their land. Young widows held their children close that night and wept with joy, and little children chased one another, laughing. Old people sat quietly and told stories of home. Late into the night people sang hymns of thanks to Tandaleoh and held one another close. The seer sat in his room that night, giving thanks, trying to remember old stories long forgotten, feeling again the hope he had known in his youth.

Rob could barely sleep. He was so full of wonder and dreams, so full of the thrill of living at the end of the finger of destiny.