

Chapter 5

The Dead Star

Keneen returned. Rob woke up and watched as the big man rested his spear against the wall of the shelter, and sat on a rock. “Well?” inquired Lydos.

“The Narrows of Tandar are guarded,” he whispered, “and by men I do not want to fight. So I scouted the Ravine of Palandir. But there they have built a garrison post, and it is held by at least twelve men. We must go through the Narrows of Tandar.”

“Who are they? Are there too many of them?” asked Lydos.

Keneen looked tired, his shoulders rounded, his features slack. “No, there aren’t too many of them. There are only four of them, and we are stronger. It is Zalu the fisherman, his two sons, and the husband of his daughter.”

“Perhaps we can go early by the Path of Dandu’s ewe and pass by them before dawn and so come to Terapu,” suggested Pilag, and he looked at Keneen, whose face softened at his old friend’s words.

“And if we are pursued?” demanded Lydos. “Then we shall have Pateray behind us, before us, and below us. And I do not think we shall find Zalu the fisherman asleep at his post. We must kill them by stealth before dawn and leave the Narrows of Tandar unguarded behind us.”

There was a cold silence as Keneen stared at Lydos, and then he said, “We shall try to pass them by at dawn. If we are pursued, then we will have to fight them.” Keneen spoke with weary finality. Rob knew from his voice that the decision went against his better judgment even though it was more to his liking. Lydos was clearly

chagrined at the decision, but he said nothing.

“Who is Zalu the Fisherman?” Rob whispered to Pilag.

“Zalu is a close friend to Keneen, as he is to me and many of the Baranay. He comes of an old and noble family. From the days of Zanari, the father of his family seven generations ago, his people have owned many nets and grown wealthy from the salmon. Never has any man of his family dealt unjustly or shamefully. They have upheld the needy and remembered orphans and widows. Many are the stories among the Baranay of kindnesses done by the family of Zanari. When Taros became king and wronged both his people and ours, Zalu the fisherman and his family gave him no help and denounced him as unjust. But Taros could not hurt the family of Zalu, for the people hold him dear. So Taros hates them and they carry on, noble men under a villainous king.”

“Why are they fighting for him then?”

“They are not fighting for *him*. They are noble Pateray. They are standing as guards for the Pateray, for they know the Pateray will live longer than Taros. But Taros is cunning. He has called upon all the living men of the family of Zanari and has given them the ‘honor’ of guarding the Narrows of Tandar. In fact, he has left them too few and has strengthened the narrows of the Ravine of Palandir. So does he hope that the Baranay will kill the last of Zanari’s line.”

“But why does Zalu agree to go without enough men?”

“He is Zalu of the line of Zanari. Latok is the husband of the daughter of Zalu, of the line of Zanari. Dalan and Doril are sons of Zalu, of the line of Zanari. Shall they fear death, or beg such a one as Taros? First will the sun rise over the Wilds of Darno.”

Rob sat silent, mystified by the strange sensation of knowing that honorable men struggling to live well under difficult conditions might meet him tomorrow and try to kill him. He hoped that the confrontation could be avoided, that Keneen and Lydos would not have to kill them.

Keneen rose wearily and spread his fleeces near the back wall.

“Tomorrow will be a hard day. We must rest. Post a watch, Lydos. I will take the last watch and rouse you before the dawn.” He fell straight to sleep.

“I’ll take first watch.” Rob surprised himself. It wasn’t that he was enthusiastic for guard duty. But he could not sleep, oppressed by his failure to find the Door. He hoped he could win at least a little respect from the others by volunteering for an undesirable task. Lydos glowered at him, but said nothing, and only much later did Rob realize that he had volunteered for the most desirable watch, the warmest, the one that allowed for an uninterrupted sleep into the cold dawn.

“You’ll need a sword,” said Pilag.

“Oh, I’ve got my knife,” he replied, deftly pulling out his hunting knife. He’d used it a few times. He liked hunting. He even enjoyed butchering the meat and smoking it for winter. It was worth the work to see his mom set the venison on the table and to know that he was helping to feed his family. The part of the process he didn’t like, the part that shocked him every time, was when he came up to the freshly killed animal. He always felt strangely embarrassed, standing alive over a creature that up until that moment had been much more alive than he, and which now lay still, unable to run away, vanquished. Then, he would slit open its belly and begin to remove its entrails. His hands, cold in the mountain autumn, would almost burn from the heat of the deer’s body cavity. It always startled him, that hundred degrees of heat. Not the blood, but the heat, which almost burns at first, then quickly rises as steam and disappears, the last traces of the animal’s life, leaving only meat. “It’s a good knife. It’s strong, and I keep it sharp enough to shave my arm with.”

“Please, Stipag, take this.” Pilag untied a bundle that hung from his shoulder and unwrapped a carefully wrought bronze broadsword. “It was my father’s. He would be honored if you would accept it.” He spoke the words as if he had carefully planned for this moment, yet his voice was weary and spiritless as though the

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actual occasion did not warrant the ceremony. Rob smiled and thanked him. He tied this gift for the Stipag to his left hip and was surprised at its weight.

Pilag showed him where to sit. Right atop their shelter was a high shelf of lightish rock that shone in the moonlight. And in the middle of the shelf stood a circle of brush. "Sit here in the middle. You can watch all around, but nobody can see you. If you see an enemy, Stipag, give three hoots of the owl. Lydos will replace you at the end of your watch."

The starry night surrounded the boy with lonely silence. He had not felt like this since his arrival among the Baranay. He had been captivated by adventure and exhilarated by a sense of purpose. Not once had he missed his home or his family. Not once had he felt alone and helpless. But under the huge sky, silent and still, all the exhilaration left him, and he felt as though he had by some terrible mistake misled the Baranay and deceived himself. He thought of Lydos' angry disappointment at him and Pilag's unspoken disillusionment.

Even in "his place" he had felt like this. There, too, he had wanted to be very good, and instead he had hurt and disappointed his parents. He had fallen in love with a couple of girls, but looking back he suspected he had used them more than he had loved them. They, at least, had felt betrayed and angry afterwards, and Rob had felt vaguely ashamed of himself. In his world as well as this one he had been unable to escape the sense of failure that came to him in the quiet of sleepless nights. But there, even though he sometimes resented it, he knew he would awake to his parents and the Kid and his dog Pal, to breakfast and love even if they were mixed with nagging and arguments. He sat alone on the mountain and wished that the adventure were over, that he could fall asleep in his own bed and wake up among his own family.

He knew, though, that he would not, that he would rise in the morning on this mountain and set out with the men sleeping beneath him. And then what? Perhaps they would have to fight.

For the first time it occurred to him that he was not invulnerable. He wondered what it might feel like to die from a spear in his belly or a sword in his neck. His family would never know what had happened to him. The thought was intolerable. He shut it from his mind. He would have to get back home. He couldn't die here.

And then, for the first time, he contemplated the real possibility that he might *never* find his way back home. Just as Gandalf was destined finally to discover the meaning of the runes and say "Friend" to open the magic door to complete his life's work, Rob had assumed that he, too, was destined to find the way back to the weapons the Baranay needed. But now he felt no force of destiny. He felt lonely and tired, and he wanted to go home. As he framed the thought, "I want to go home," he knew that his return was not destined and that he had no idea how to go home.

He had looked for the door, and he couldn't find it. And what if there was no door? What if he was merely the victim of a tragic magical accident? What if, quite by chance he had eaten exactly the right things, gone to exactly the right place, and happened to speak exactly the right magical syllables to pop himself out of his own world and into another. He was no wizard. He could never reverse the spell.

Or maybe there was a purely scientific explanation. Maybe there really are warps in the universe, he thought—time warps, dimensional warps. What if he had somehow tumbled into one of those. He could never find his way back.

But either way, magic or science, there was no plan to it. He was not a hero called from another world for a glorious destiny. He was like someone who had boarded the wrong boat, who woke one morning to find that he was not bound for London on a passenger liner, but would spend the next eight months at sea on a fishing vessel in the Grand Banks. But there *had* to be a way home. He had to set things right with his parents. He wanted to tell them he loved them and that he was sorry, sorry for something, just sorry. He couldn't disappear from their lives without telling them at least

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that much. And he wanted to talk to the Kid again. He needed to tell him something, though he wasn't quite sure what. So he had to find his way home.

Years ago he had taught the Kid how to get his bearings at night in the woods. He had shown him the two stars that point to the North Star. He'd told the Kid that no matter how lost you are, if you find that Star and keep your head, you'll always get back home. Deep in forlorn reverie Rob turned to the familiar Dipper, tracing the line, and suddenly he leapt to his feet, stark straight, stiff with terror, staring into the cold blackness of space.

He sighted along those two stars, and the realization came, like Zeus' lightning bolt, shattering the container of his fragile soul, spilling out the chaos of teeming winds and waters within. It was a little thing really. It should not have surprised him. He knew he was in some kind of different world. But this! This was chaos and madness! His eyes drew the line to its end again and again, but the sky would not change. There was no North Star.

Terror constricted his chest. He fought for breath. His thoughts raced and found no reason, but only a conclusion: This was not *his* sky! This was not the sky he had grown up under, the sky of his childhood. Then finally the Boy knew to his very depths that there was no door, that there would be no return journey for him, that he had come into this world by accident and not for any purpose.

"Oh, please no. Jesus, please no," he whispered. He could not contain the terror. The bolt of Zeus had flown, and it had shattered him. After the briefest stillness all his dreams and all his joy spilled out and sank into the ground. Rob stood alone on the cold stone under a strange sky, and filled the silence of the night with a tortured wail: "No...ooo!" Off in the darkness, wolf cubs huddled closer to their mother, knowing that somewhere nearby a human child's heart was being ripped out by its roots.

A hand grasped Rob's shoulder. It was Pilag. "The star! Jesus, Pilag, the star! There's no North Star. It's not my sky! Where am I?" He was clinging to the old man's shoulders, shaking him,

screaming. Another, harder hand spun him round. He saw the face of Lydos for only a second before a fist crashed into his jaw, and the terrible sky went black.

He must not have been out long. As he came to, he heard Lydos' voice. "I don't care. Whoever he is, he's of no use to us, and now the Pateray know we're here. Let's kill him and get out of here."

"He is not the Stipag," said the weary voice of the blind seer, "but he is no traitor. He is probably mad. But the Baranay do not abandon orphans—even mad ones. Carry him, Keneen. We must hurry."

Then much happened all at once. Rob tried to rise as Keneen stepped forward. A shadow flew through the darkness, straight at Keneen. Had he been less a warrior, Keneen would have fallen before the sword of Zalu the Fisherman. But his reflexes were beyond belief. He saw the movement out of the corner of his eye, and faster than sight he had thrown his great bulk flat toward the ground, under the whistling blade, straight against the knees of Zalu.

Then the other three were upon them. Pilag and Lydos had swords drawn, fighting their men. Rob reached clumsily for his sword, but too late. Already a warrior stood over him. Rob watched the sword slicing down towards his head, and he could not move. By all rights he should have died then, but Pilag had seen, and in a single swift motion he had raised his sword to protect himself from his man and leapt to the left, kicking Rob's man backwards to the ground. Rob sprang on his man. They rolled on the ground, exchanging blows. Somehow Rob knew the enemy had a knife in his right hand. He seized his wrist and struggled to force it away from his body. He rolled onto his back, and screaming with fear and adrenalin, he threw the man off to the side, rolled over, and found himself on top. Still screaming, he found his own knife at his belt. In a single, smooth, easy motion—so swift that Rob was in the cracks of time, where everything was still and quiet because he was between all actions and all sounds—the knife slipped from

its sheath and into the belly below him. After the briefest silence time began again. The man gasped, his grip relaxed, and he ceased struggling.

He began to cry, "Papa! Papa!"

Gasping for breath, still screaming with fear, Rob jumped away, and then he knew. He heard it, and he knew. He spun to look at what he had done, already wishing he could fall back into the cracks of time where nothing happens and no one screams. A young boy lay in the dirt, clutching his belly, crying for his father. Rob stared at his hands. They were burning in the cold air, covered with the boy's blood. He gasped and dropped his knife, almost retching. "No!" he gasped. "I didn't do this. Not this, God! Not this!"

In the moonlight he could see the boy's face, his long hair, thick and dark. His face smooth, without the slightest hint of down. He must have been about twelve. Rob fell to his knees beside the boy. He murmured, "He's just a kid! He's just a kid!" The boy lifted himself a little and saw the results of the battle: His family was dead. "Papa!" he sobbed again. His brother, who was about fifteen, lay dead beside him. The boy's eyes met his brother's death stare, and he sobbed again. "Dalan! No, Dalan! No, Tandaleoh. Why?"

"Don't just stand there, you bastards!" Rob screamed. "Don't you see he's just a kid?" He touched the boy's face and raved in desperate apology, "Jesus, I'm sorry, Kid. I didn't mean it. It was an accident. Just relax. You're going to be okay. I'll get you fixed up." As he talked his voice began to waver and crack. A panicky awareness that he didn't know what to do seized him. He ripped a hole in the boy's clothing and stared at the thin, hairless belly. Blood poured from a small slit like water seeping through the ground from a broken pipe. It pooled on the boy's belly and Rob tried desperately to push it back into his body. It burned his hands. "We'll just stop the bleeding here, Buddy," he babbled with idiotic cheeriness through hysterical sobs. "We'll get you taken care of first, and then we'll fix up your brother. Don't worry. I've got you. I've got you now, Kid. I'll take care of you. I'll fix everything."

The boy stopped weeping, turned from his dead brother's gaze, and seized Rob's eyes with a deep, knowing stare. Rob ceased his babble. His hands fell helplessly inactive. Everything stopped as the two boys stared at one another in the cold moonlight. Finally Rob whispered, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

The boy continued to stare him straight in the eye with a face full of violated innocence and shattered dreams. And without a word, he died.

Rob took the kid in his arms, put his face against the boy's cheek, and sobbed. He wished the whole mad world would die. But it didn't. It only slowed and grew quiet. The men watched quietly for a moment. Then Pilag touched Rob's shoulder and said, "Come, young one. The family of Zalu rests with Tandaleoh now. But we must go before the garrison from the narrows of the Ravine of Palandir arrive."

Rob was beyond hearing. He clung to the dead boy and sobbed. "Leave him to the Pateray," Lydos said angrily. "We don't need a madman."

"He will go with us," Keneen answered. "He is not the Stipag. Perhaps he is mad. But he killed his man in his first battle, and he understands what he has done." With that he knelt and pulled Rob from the boy, carefully cleaned his knife, returned it to its sheath in Rob's belt, and lifted the Boy onto his strong shoulders.

Rob was scarcely aware of it. Later he had only a vague memory of dull pain, the rhythmic bounce on Keneen's shoulders, the timeless "why" in the boy's face. He was tortured by the smell of blood on his coat and its feel, caked on his hands and his face. He lapsed in and out of consciousness. Hours later, when the group stopped to rest, he curled up and slept like the dead. Soon he would rise to face life among the Baranay, life under a different sky. But for a few too brief hours he slept, and noble faces haunted his dreams.