

A detailed illustration of a fantastical city at night. The city is built on a hillside, with numerous spires, domes, and towers illuminated with warm golden light. A large flag with a star emblem flies from a tall pole. In the foreground, a body of water reflects the city lights and the vibrant colors of the sky. The sky is filled with a massive, swirling aurora borealis in shades of green, blue, and purple, set against a dark, starry night sky. The overall atmosphere is magical and awe-inspiring.

EVERLIGHT'S REACH

AUGUST CROWE

A decorative horizontal line with a central star symbol and small diamond shapes on either side.

Everlight's Reach

BOOK PREVIEW

A novel by August Crowe

This preview contains Chapters One and Two.

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CHAPTER 1

Dance With the Tarot

Long ago, beyond the reach of common maps, at the place where the night bent upward and met the vault of the sky, there existed a land untouched by the sun. No dawn broke over its horizon, no golden afternoon passed across its fields, and no sunset marked the ending of its days. Instead, the land was bathed in the glow of the Everlight, a mysterious source of illumination suspended in the heavens. It stretched across the sky in vast, wavering veils of color, like rivers of emerald, violet, and ghostly blue flowing silently through the dark. Its radiance did not flicker, fade, or burn away, but shimmered in slow celestial tides, casting the world below in a light both beautiful and unknowable.

Five Great Kingdoms existed beneath the enduring glow of the Everlight, each one divided into four ancient principalities, each principality bearing its own customs, borders, and old inheritance. Together they formed the known lands under that mysterious radiance, spread across north, south, east, west, and center like a vast emblem upon the world.

To the north stood the Kingdom of Dunirn, cold and distant beneath the pale sky. At the heart of the lands rose the central Kingdom of Algarath, clad in golden walls and remembered for its shining towers. To the west stretched the Kingdom of Hizark, land of the Myriad Desert, where countless sands reached toward the horizon. To the east lay the Kingdom of Mulnarn, where the waters gathered, divided, and rose as walls of their own. And to the south brooded the Kingdom of Punshna, where the swamps thickened, the earth sank deep, and the marshlands rose into the mud of temples.

The story begins in Velmora, one of the four principalities of Mulnarn, a land where water did not merely flow, but rose into the air like walls. Near its western road, in a small forest village beneath the sound of those distant waters, was raised a young man named Atsergerald, called Atser or Ats for short. He was in charge of herding the large Waterling Toads that hopped here and there in the forest fields. He herded a flock of one hundred and thirteen toads each day at the behest of the village elder, Lord Caemun.

The hut of Elder Caemun stood on a quiet rise near the heart of the village, round and low beneath its heavy dome, as if it had grown from the wet earth rather than been built upon it. Its walls were made of dark river-clay packed smooth by hand, strengthened with bands of woven reed and pale strips of shellwood that curved around the structure like ribs. The dome above was layered in broad, overlapping marsh leaves, lacquered by age and mist until they shone faintly in the glow of the Everlight.

Around the doorway hung strings of blue glass beads, fishbone charms, and small polished stones, each one clicking softly whenever the water-wind passed through the village. The entrance itself was narrow and arched, framed by driftwood darkened almost black, with old markings carved into the grain. No two symbols were alike, and some had been worn shallow by years of rain, touch, and passing hands.

At the base of the hut, measured channels carried clear water in a slow circle around the dwelling, reflecting the dome in broken silver. Little lantern-shells rested along the edge, unlit but luminous beneath the Everlight's pale gaze. Though humble in size, Caemun's hut had the presence of an old shrine: weathered, watchful, and rooted deeply in the life of the village.

Atser entered the hut and approached the Elder, who sat at the long ceremonial table near the center, tending to the matters of his family and the village. "We've been expecting you," said the Elder, trilling a deck of rare tarot cards back and forth between his hands.

Atser sat at the end of the table and greeted the Elder with a warm smile. The Elder returned his gaze with a practiced calm that seemed almost ceremonial. "Today marks the day you leave your duties as a herder and turn toward the wider world beneath the Everlight. We will look into the tarot and see what shape your road may take."

"Ask nothing aloud," the Elder said. "The road ahead hears well enough."

Atser watched as the Elder drew a single card from the center of the deck and placed it face-up between them.

Upon the card stood a lone figure beneath a sky of wavering green and violet fire. In one hand, the figure carried a silver lantern, though the lantern itself was unlit. Above him, the Everlight streamed across the heavens like a river of color, bright enough to guide his steps yet distant enough that it could not be held. Behind the figure stretched a fenced pasture, small and familiar. Before him opened a road of black stone, winding toward mountains whose peaks vanished into the shining sky.

"The Lantern-Bearer," the Elder said softly.

Atser leaned closer. "What does it mean?"

"It means you are leaving the life that was given to you," the Elder replied, "and beginning the life that must be chosen. The unlit lantern is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign that you have not yet discovered your own flame. Until now, you have lived beneath the light of others: your family, your village, your duties, the herds you guarded. But the world beyond these walls will not ask what you were told to become. It will ask what light you carry within yourself."

The Elder tapped one bent finger against the painted road.

"This card speaks of departure, uncertainty, and hidden courage. It does not promise an easy path, Atser. It promises only that the path is truly yours. You will be guided by the Everlight, yes, but not forever. One day, when darkness finds

even that great radiance, you must be ready to raise your own lantern and lead others through what cannot yet be seen."

The Elder drew a second card and placed it to the left of the Lantern-Bearer.

"The Veiled Stag," he said, his voice lowering into an older cadence.

"You will be called toward a hidden path, and perhaps toward leadership, though not by means any eye can easily name. This is most interesting." The Elder raised one finger to the point of his bearded chin.

"And now, for the final card."

The Elder did not reach for the deck at once.

For a moment, he only stared at the two cards already lying upon the table: The Lantern-Bearer and The Veiled Stag. The warm calmness in his face had thinned. Something older had taken its place.

"At times," he said, "two cards are enough."

Atser looked at him carefully. "But not today?"

"No," the Elder replied. "Not today."

He placed his hand upon the deck once more. The room seemed to grow quieter around them. Even the faint sounds beyond the walls—the distant lowing of beasts, the creak of wood, the murmur of village voices—fell away until all that remained was the soft pulse of the Everlight through the window.

The Elder drew the third and final card.

He turned it over.

Upon the card was a tower of black stone standing beneath the open heavens. At its highest point burned a pale crown of light, not golden like fire, but silver-white and cold, as though a fragment of the Everlight itself had been trapped there. Around the tower, the sky writhed with ribbons of green and violet

radiance. Yet the light did not shine peacefully. It bent downward in jagged streams, striking the tower like silent lightning.

At the base of the tower stood a small figure holding an unlit lantern.

Behind him, half-hidden among the shadows, watched a white stag.

Atser's breath caught.

"The Crowned Ruin," whispered the Elder.

The name seemed to settle over the table like dust.

"What does it mean?" Atser asked.

The Elder was silent for a long while before answering.

"It is the card of fallen greatness," he said. "Of old powers that should have remained buried. Of kingdoms that build too high beneath a light they do not understand."

He touched the painted tower with one finger.

"This card does not speak only of you, Atser. It speaks of the world you are entering. Somewhere beneath the Everlight, there is a wound dressed as a throne. A place of power, beautiful from afar, but broken at its heart. Many will call it holy. Many will call it rightful. Many will kneel before it because it shines."

The Elder's gaze hardened.

"But not all light is mercy."

Atser looked again at the card. The tiny figure at the tower's base seemed painfully small.

"Am I meant to destroy it?" he asked.

The Elder shook his head. "The card does not say destruction. It says revelation. The Crowned Ruin is not brought down by strength alone. It falls when its truth is seen. Your lantern is unlit because you are not ready yet. The stag waits

because the hidden path has not opened. But one day, you will stand before something the world has mistaken for glory, and you will have to decide whether to bow before it or expose what lives inside.”

He leaned back, his face grave beneath the glow of the Everlight.

“The first card is your soul. The second is your guide. The third is your trial.”

Atser stared at the three cards laid before him.

The Lantern-Bearer.

The Veiled Stag.

The Crowned Ruin.

Together, they no longer seemed like pictures. They seemed like a road.

“You are leaving the pasture,” said the Elder softly. “You are following what hides behind the veil. And before your journey ends, you will come to a kingdom, a tower, or a throne that shines falsely beneath the Everlight.”

His voice lowered.

“When that hour comes, Atser, remember this: the brightest thing in the sky is not always the truest.”

Atser stepped away from the ceremonial table with a steadier heart than he had brought into the room.

“All who leave Velmora begin by the western road,” the Elder reminded him.

Atser went on to finish his final day of toad-herding beneath the dim, patient glow of the Everlight. The work was familiar to him now, almost too familiar, worn into his bones through years of repetition. The process was simple in appearance, though it required a steady hand, a calm mind, and the sort of patience most villagers never bothered to learn. Atser would tap his staff sharply against the packed earth, and the toads would follow

the sound, each one lumbering or hopping toward its proper place as though answering an old command.

The toads had been trained over many years by this same method. They knew the rhythm of his staff, the difference between a guiding tap and a warning one, the pause that meant wait, and the dull double-knock that meant move along. They moved quite obediently, their slick backs glistening with pond-mud and field-dust, their wide eyes blinking slowly as they returned to their dull-pens. It took him all of two thousand four hundred fifty steps and three hundred twenty-two taps to bring them in. Atser counted each step and each strike with respect, duty, and authority, as though the numbers themselves were part of the ceremony.

This was not merely a chore to him. It was the closing of a life he had known well. Every tap of the staff seemed to echo against the years he had spent in the field, guiding stubborn toads through rain, fog, cold mornings, and breathless warm spells. Tomorrow, the duty would belong to Dunair, the Elder's next trainee, a younger hand with quicker feet and far less silence in him. Atser hoped the boy would learn that toad-herding was not about force, but rhythm; not command, but understanding.

When Atser was done, he stood for a while at the edge of the field and looked back over the quiet dull-pens. Then, without ceremony, he removed his cloak and placed it carefully upon the small bush at the end of the field. He set his staff beside it, leaning the weathered wood against the branches as if leaving behind a trusted companion. The field no longer needed him.

From there, Atser headed toward Velmora Square. There he intended to gather the last of what he needed for the road: a lantern for the dark places, hides for warmth and trade, and a mace and shield for the dangers that could not be soothed by tapping a staff against the earth.

CHAPTER 2

Preparations

Reedmere Square was a broad, low circle of timbered stalls, stone counters, hanging awnings, and old market archways darkened by years of smoke, rain, and passing hands. Its paths were packed flat by the boots of traders and the wheels of burden carts, and every stone underfoot seemed to have been rubbed smooth by generations of bargaining.

The place smelled of oiled leather, iron filings, tallow, dried moss, smoked fish, wet rope, and the faint sourness of marsh hides left too long in the sun. Lanterns hung from bent hooks along the outer posts, their glass panes cloudy with soot. Some burned with pale yellow flame even in daylight, not for light, but as a promise that Velmora's trade never fully slept.

At the eastern row stood the provisioners, where travelers bought lantern oil, hard bread, salt wraps, waterskins, stitched packs, and bundles of reed-twine. Their goods were arranged with severe care, each object placed in neat stacks or hanging from pegs according to size and purpose. Nothing there was decorative unless it had first proven useful.

To the south were the hide merchants, their stalls heavier and darker, roofed in patched canvas to keep rain off the cured skins. Toad-hide, goat-hide, marsh-calf leather, waxed cloaks, gloves, straps, and saddle pieces hung in stiff overlapping rows. Some were dyed in dull earth tones, others left the color of mud, ash, or old bone. The hides creaked when the wind moved through them.

The western side belonged to the smiths and armsellers. This was the loudest part of the Trade Center. Hammers rang

against rivets. Shield rims were tested with short iron rods. Maces hung from chains or rested head-down in barrels of sand, their flanged heads dark with oil. There were no shining hero's weapons here, only honest tools of defense: battered bucklers, kettle helms, traveling knives, spearheads, and broad shields painted with simple village marks.

At the center of it all stood an old stone weighing table known as the Measure. Every serious trade passed across it sooner or later. Elders claimed the table had been there before the stalls, before the square, and perhaps before Velmora itself had a proper name. Its surface was scarred with cuts, burns, ink marks, and ancient tally lines. Deals made at the Measure were considered binding, not by law alone, but by custom.

Above the market stretched a web of ropes, banners, charms, and drying herbs. Small clay tokens clicked in the breeze, each marked with a merchant's sign. The sound gave the whole Trade Center a restless whisper, as though the market were constantly counting, weighing, and remembering.

Velmora's people moved through it with quiet purpose. They did not shout unless there was need. Bargaining was done in low voices, with long pauses, steady looks, and the occasional tap of a finger on wood or stone. Outsiders often mistook this for suspicion, but it was only the Velmoran way: every item had a use, every coin had a burden, and every journey beyond the square deserved respect.

Beyond the market's outer edge, the sea did not lie flat. It rose in long vertical swells, towering walls of green-black water ribbed with white foam, as if some vast hand were lifting the bay by its edges. Mist drifted from them and silvered the leather stalls, while the sound of their slow collapse rolled through the square like distant siege drums. Beneath awnings and soot-dark lanterns, the merchants of Velmora went on weighing hides, oil, and iron as though the sea's enormity were only another neighbor to be endured.

For Atser, arriving there after his final day of toad-herding, the Trade Center felt like a threshold. Behind him lay duty, repetition, and the familiar counting of steps and taps. Before him waited iron, flame, hide, and the uncertain road beyond Velmora.

Atser stepped over to the armsellers. Six maces had been set out side by side upon a strip of oiled hide, each one resting with its head toward Atser and its handle pointing away, as though they had been waiting for him long before he entered the stall.

The first was plain iron, dark from use, with a short grip wrapped in cracked brown leather. It looked dependable, the sort of tool a guard might carry for twenty years and never praise, only trust. Atser lifted it first. Its weight dropped immediately into his wrist, heavy but honest. He gave it one careful turn, feeling the pull of the head. Strong, yes—but stubborn.

The second mace was slimmer, its flanges sharp as split reeds. It had a narrow handle of pale wood, polished smooth by hands that had known more practice than battle. Atser held it, swung it once in the small space beside him, and heard it cut the air with a faint hiss. Fast. Too fast, perhaps. It wanted to move before he had decided where.

The third had been decorated with small brass rings beneath the head. They chimed softly when he picked it up, a pretty sound that made the merchant smile.

“Fine balance on that one,” the merchant said.

Atser frowned at the rings until they quieted. He imagined himself in the dark beyond Velmora, every step measured, every breath held, while his weapon whispered his location to whatever waited ahead. He placed it back down without a word.

The fourth was brutal and square-headed, its iron corners blunt enough to crush stone. It took both certainty and strength to lift properly. Atser managed it, but only just. His shoulder tightened. His elbow complained. There was power in it, but it

was the kind of power that asked a man to spend himself too quickly.

The fifth mace was old. Older than the others by far. Its metal had been cleaned, but not polished, and faint marks ran along the head in patterns too worn to read. The grip was wrapped in faded black cord, tied with patient knots. When Atser took it up, he expected awkwardness. Instead, the handle settled into his palm as if it had been measured there.

He raised it slowly.

No boast. No chime. No eager bite through the air. It simply waited with him.

Atser looked at the sixth mace last. It was the finest to see: a bright steel head, a red-dyed grip, and a little sunburst stamped into the pommel. It belonged in a hero's hand, or in a painting of one. He did not touch it. Some things announced themselves too loudly to be trusted.

His eyes returned to the fifth.

The merchant leaned forward. "That one?"

Atser tightened his fingers around the faded cord. He gave the mace a single, measured tap against the packed earth.

The sound was low, dull, and certain.

"This one," Atser said.

Atser showed his coin to the merchant.

"Twelve pieces," the merchant said, his eyes surveilling Atser's coins.

"I will part with ten," Atser said. "Take it or leave it. I must be careful with my provisions."

The merchant considered the mace, then the money, and finally took the ten pieces with a sour nod.

Atser then shifted his focus to the shields. Three shields had been leaned upright against the back wall of the stall, each one

angled carefully beneath a strip of hanging canvas where the Everlight's glow could find them.

The first was round and broad, made of layered wood and banded with iron. Its face had been painted once, though the colors had worn down into scratches and old dents. Atser stepped closer and ran his fingers along the rim. It had seen use. Not display, not ceremony—use. The kind that came with hurried footsteps, bad weather, and men shouting too close.

He lifted it by the inner grip.

The shield rose heavily, pulling at his forearm. It covered him well, but it felt like carrying a door torn from a stubborn house. Good for standing still. Less good for walking far.

The second shield was smaller, narrow and curved, with a polished face of dark metal. It caught the light cleanly, almost proudly. Atser turned it once and saw his own face bent across its surface, thinner and stranger than he knew it to be. It was quick in the hand, lighter than the first, and he could move it easily from hip to shoulder.

The merchant gave a pleased nod. "That one's favored by caravan guards. Fast to raise. Fast to wear."

Atser tested the straps. They were fine leather, too fine perhaps, soft at the edges and dyed a rich black. The shield was clever, handsome, and bright enough to flash across a field. He imagined it glinting in moonlight, offering his position to eyes he had not yet seen.

He set it down gently.

The third shield stood half in shadow.

It was neither large nor small, shaped like a softened kite with a dull iron boss at its center. Its wooden face had been covered in dark hide, stitched around the edges with thick cord. There was nothing elegant about it. No polished metal. No painted mark. No promise of glory. Only a quiet curve, a firm rim, and a pair of straps that looked as though they had been repaired by someone who expected the shield to survive.

Atser slipped his arm through.

The fit was not perfect, but it was close. Close enough that his hand found the grip without searching. Close enough that when he raised it, the shield did not fight him. It moved when he moved, stopped when he stopped, and seemed content to be forgotten until needed.

He turned his body once, then again, letting the weight settle into him.

The merchant waited.

Atser gave the shield a firm knock with his knuckles. The sound was plain and deep, not hollow, not proud.

"This one," Atser said.

The merchant glanced at the brighter shield, then back to him. "Not much to look at."

Atser lowered it to his side.

"Then it will have one less duty," he said.

"Twenty-three pieces for that," the merchant said firmly.

Atser nodded and handed over the coins. That left him with about thirty pieces for the rest of his provisions.

Atser stepped away from the armseller and turned south toward the hide merchants. Near the rear of the heavier stalls, Griswald waited behind a cedar table.

The hides were laid across a cedar table near the rear of the stall, away from the dust of the square and the careless hands of passing buyers. There were five of them, each brushed clean and folded with a certain pride, as though the merchant had arranged not goods, but choices.

Atser stood before them quietly.

The first hide was thick and dark, nearly black, with a weight that promised warmth before anything else. He pressed his palm against it and felt the dense grain beneath his fingers.

Good winter hide. Good mountain hide. It would keep out rain, wind, and the mean breath of cold nights. But when he lifted one end, it pulled heavily from the table.

A cloak made from it would protect him, yes. It would also slow him.

The second was pale gray and soft enough that his hand sank into it. It had been worked carefully, scraped thin without becoming weak, and there was a smoothness to it that made the merchant watch him with hopeful eyes.

"Fine traveling wear," the merchant said. "Comfortable. Clean-looking."

Atser rubbed the hide between his thumb and forefinger. Comfortable, certainly. Too comfortable, perhaps. It looked like something worn by a man who expected inns, roads, and welcome fires. Atser was not sure his journey would be so polite.

He moved to the third.

This one was reddish-brown, with darker streaks running through it like old roots in river clay. It was handsome without being bright, flexible without seeming fragile. Atser lifted it and gave it a quiet pull. It answered with strength. No complaint. No stretch beyond its nature.

He imagined it cut into a tunic, bracers, shoulder pieces, perhaps a hooded mantle if there was enough left. It would not make him noble. It would not make him feared. But it might make him ready.

The fourth hide had a faint sheen to it, almost golden where the light touched the grain. It was beautiful. Too beautiful. Atser knew that before his fingers reached it. The surface had been polished smooth, the edges trimmed clean, the whole piece prepared for someone who wished to be seen arriving.

He left it where it lay.

The fifth hide was rougher than the rest, mottled brown and ash-gray, with a few old scars still visible in the surface. It had not been made perfect. It had been made usable. Atser liked that at once. He bent closer, examining the marks. Each scar had been worked around instead of hidden, and the hide still held its strength.

He set his hand on the third again, then the fifth.

The merchant leaned in. "Both will last."

Atser nodded.

The reddish-brown hide would take a stitch well. It would bend at the elbows and knees. It would not drink every drop of rain that touched it. The mottled hide would serve better as outer covering, something to turn briars, mud, and the first bite of weather.

Atser looked from one to the other, then lifted both.

"These two," he said.

Griswald's brows rose. "For one set of clothing?"

"For one journey," Atser answered.

He folded the hides over his arm with care, feeling their different weights settle together. One for movement. One for hardship. Neither proud. Neither delicate.

That seemed right.

"Seven pieces for the red hide," Griswald said, "and five for the other."

Atser paid him without argument.

With the mace at his belt, the shield against his back, and the folded hides tucked beneath one arm, Atser stepped away from the merchant's stall and back into the moving noise of Velmora Square.

The square had not changed, though he felt that it should have. Toad-herders still argued over feed prices. Children still

chased one another between baskets of dried shellfruit and jars of river salt. A woman in a blue headscarf laughed too loudly at something a potter had said. Somewhere nearby, a mule complained with the tired misery of an animal that had understood trade longer than men had.

Yet Atser moved through it differently now.

The weight at his side was not the weight of a staff used for tapping toads into dull-pens. The shield on his back was not a field tool. The hides over his arm were not for mending old sleeves or patching winter blankets. They belonged to a road he had not yet walked.

He made his way toward the lantern-maker's stall at the eastern edge of the square, where the roofs leaned close together and the air smelled of warm oil, brass dust, and singed wick.

Old Mareth was there, seated behind a low counter crowded with lanterns of every size. Some were no larger than apples. Others hung from hooks above him, broad-bellied and glass-sided, waiting to be carried into mines, marshes, boats, and grave houses.

Mareth looked up before Atser spoke.

"So," the old man said, "you chose the things that strike, the thing that guards, and the thing that keeps weather off your bones."

Atser set the hides down carefully. "I still need the thing that sees."

Mareth's expression softened.

From beneath the counter, he brought out a lantern wrapped in gray cloth. He unbound it slowly, not like a merchant revealing wares, but like a keeper uncovering something that had been asleep.

The lantern was plain. Smaller than Atser expected. Its frame was dark iron, its glass faintly tinted with amber, and its

handle had been wrapped in old cord to keep it from biting into the hand. It did not shine. Not yet.

Mareth turned it once between his fingers.

"This one does not burn brightest," he said.

Atser waited.

"It burns longest."

Outside the stall, Velmora Square carried on without him. But for a moment, all Atser heard was the small dry sound of Mareth trimming the wick.

Then the old man filled the lantern with clear oil, closed its little door, and slid it across the counter.

Atser took it with both hands.

Only then did he feel properly burdened: mace at his belt, shield against his back, hides bound beneath one arm, and the quiet lantern in his hand.

He left Mareth's stall and crossed Velmora Square toward the tavern called the Silted Cup.

It stood where the square began to narrow into the road out of town, which was why strangers found it first and townsfolk left it last. Its roof sagged under old rain. Its sign had once shown a silver cup sinking into brown water, though the paint had peeled until the cup looked more like a broken tooth. From within came the thick sounds of cups, low voices, wooden stools scraping, and laughter that had either forgotten itself or never belonged to anyone wise.

Atser paused outside.

Choosing a mace had been simple. Choosing a shield had been simple. Even the hides had made their nature plain beneath his hand. Iron had weight. Wood had grain. Leather had give.

People were less honest materials.

He stepped inside.

The tavern smelled of sour ale, smoke, wet wool, and river onions fried too long in old fat. A hearth glowed at the far wall, though the day was warm enough that it served more as memory than need. Men and women sat in crooked clusters around the room: ditch-cutters, salt haulers, boat hands, root merchants, two off-duty watchmen, and a traveling knife-sharpener with a face like folded bark.

Atser felt their eyes move to him, count what he carried, then move away.

The keeper of the Silted Cup was a broad woman named Chel, whose left ear bore three copper rings and whose right hand never strayed far from the cudgel beneath the counter. She gave Atser a brief look.

"You're dressed for elsewhere," she said.

"Not yet."

"That means you're looking for someone foolish enough to go there with you."

Atser set a coin on the counter. "Someone able enough."

Chel snorted, but took the coin. "Able costs more than foolish."

"I know."

She poured him a small cup of bitter reed-beer and leaned closer, lowering her voice just enough to make him listen.

"There's Harl with the red sleeve. Good with a hook blade, bad with debts. There's Tovin by the hearth. Knows the marsh roads, but only when sober, which is a narrow road itself. There's the twins near the back wall if you want two mouths, four hands, and no peace for the rest of your life."

Atser followed each name with his eyes.

Harl with the red sleeve laughed too quickly and watched the door too often. Tovin by the hearth had one boot unlaced and

both eyes half-shut. The twins near the back wall were arguing over a heel of bread with the grim focus of men already tired of sharing air.

"No," Atser said.

Chel's mouth twitched. "Then you want the one who hasn't offered."

She tipped her chin toward the corner beside the shuttered window.

Atser looked.

A woman sat alone there, one boot braced against the opposite bench, a cup untouched before her. She wore a travel coat of faded green, patched at the shoulders and elbows with darker leather. A narrow knife rested on the table beside her hand, not hidden, not displayed. Her hair was black and tied back with a strip of red cloth. Her eyes were lowered to a small map weighted flat with three river stones.

She had not looked at him when he entered.

That made Atser trust her slightly more than the others.

"Serra Laneshra," Chel said.

Atser had heard the name before, though never from the same mouth in the same way. Some called her a scout. Some called her a road-thief who had developed preferences. One man from the reed docks had sworn she could find dry ground in a drowned field by scent alone. Another said she had once guided six pilgrims through the eastern mire and returned with five, which in certain parts of Velmora was considered better than luck.

"What does she cost?" Atser asked.

Chel wiped the counter with a rag that seemed older than the tavern itself.

"That depends what you're asking her to risk."

Atser took his cup, though he did not drink from it, and crossed the room.

The conversations around him thinned, not stopping entirely, but loosening around the edges. Serra Laneshra did not raise her head until his shadow touched the map.

"You stand like someone who has already made up half his mind," she said.

Atser looked at the empty bench across from her. "May I sit?"

"You may. Whether you should depends on the other half."

He sat.

Only then did Serra look at him fully. Her face was younger than the stories had made it and older than youth should have allowed. There was a thin scar crossing one eyebrow, pale as a strand of thread. Her gaze moved from his mace to the shield, then to the tied bundle of hides.

"New gear," she said.

"Chosen gear."

"That is not always better."

"No."

Her fingers rested beside the knife, not touching it. "Where are you going?"

"Out of Velmora."

"That is a direction children give when running from chores."

Atser held her gaze. "West first. Then south along the ashen wall through the low marsh, if the road permits. If not, through it. I am headed for Algarath, the City of Gold."

At that, something changed in her expression. Not surprise. Assessment.

"The low marsh permits nothing," Serra said. "It tolerates. Briefly."

"I need someone who knows where it is least offended."

A faint smile touched her mouth and disappeared.

Behind them, someone laughed too loudly. Atser did not turn. Serra did not either.

"And why me?" she asked.

"Because you did not call me over."

"That may only mean I dislike company."

"I do as well."

"Poor foundation for travel."

"Quiet foundation."

Serra leaned back, considering him. "What are you carrying besides iron, hide, and a serious face?"

Atser looked down at his untouched cup, then back at her.

"A duty," he said.

The word settled between them with more weight than coin.

Serra studied him for another long moment. Then she folded the map with careful hands and slipped it into the inner pocket of her coat.

"Duties get people killed," she said.

"Yes."

"They also make people stubborn."

"Yes."

"And stubborn people rarely turn back when the mud starts speaking."

Atser did not ask what she meant by that. He suspected he would learn soon enough.

Serra picked up her knife and slid it into her belt. Then she reached for the cup she had not touched and pushed it toward him.

"Drink that," she said. "You look like you're about to leave town on an empty stomach and a full conscience. Both are dangerous."

Atser glanced at the cup.

"Does this mean you'll come?"

"It means I'll hear the shape of your duty before I decide whether to attach my life to it."

"That seems fair."

"No," Serra Laneshra said, rising from the bench. "Fair is what people ask for when they have no leverage. This is careful."

Atser stood with her.

Across the tavern, Chel watched from behind the counter, pretending not to. The room returned to its noise, but Atser could feel the difference now. Before, he had entered alone with new gear and an uncertain road ahead of him.

Now there was a woman beside him who knew the marsh, carried a knife openly, and spoke as though death were inconvenient rather than frightening.

It was not comfort.

But it was, perhaps, a beginning.