

Pennybrite Moonsparrow

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The story based on my characters. More chapters coming shortly.

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1 - Prologue

Smoke rose from the small campfire, which was slowly being extinguished by the drizzling rain. Three rats and a stoat huddled around it, wrapped in their tattered cloaks. The smallest rat, Radjak, shivered and shook rain water from his whiskers.

"Some day this `as been," he muttered, "Rain yesterday, rain today, and doncha know it, rain tomorrow."

"Awww, shudup Radjak!" The stoat snarled. The stoat, Facdol, felt a sense of authority, being left in charge of the guards of Fort Spar and did not hesitate to boss the others around. Normally he and the others would be severely punished for simply hanging around. But not tonight.

Tonight was a slave gathering night. Lord Kreinak would soon return with an important job for them: branding slaves and breaking their spirits.

Suddenly the doors of Fort Spar swung open. The slave catchers had returned, and Lord Kreinak was leading them. He was unusually large for a fox, thick limbed and sinewy. His fur was pitch black from head to tail; the slaves said that his fur was as black as his heart. He had sharp yellow eyes and a deep commanding voice.

"Facdol!" he yelled, "Take these slaves to the firing room!"

"Yes ma' Lord!" Facdol and two rats led the slaves to a small hut to the right of the main fortress. The room was dark, only lit by a small fire in a large crevice in the wall. "Listen you scum!" Facdol screamed, "Your property of Lord Kreinak now." He grinned wickedly "And I'm gonna make sure you never forget it!" He grabbed the slave closest to him, a pretty young hare maid.

"Well well, what have we here? What might your name be pretty miss?"

"None of your business stoat" she said defiantly.

"Oh, so we got us a cocky one here, eh? We'll soon fix that!" he slipped on a pair of thick leather gloves and took what appeared to be a small marble from the fire. He grabbed the hare's hand and forced the glowing object into her palm. She gasped as pain shot through her hand. She tried to let go, but he wrapped his hand around hers, forcing her to make a fist. Finally he took the stone from her hand. She dropped to the floor, her teeth clenched in pain, staring in horror at her badly burned hand. Facdol continued around the room, branding the slaves hands.

Suddenly the hare maid realized that he had only branded some of the slaves. The youngest and oldest creatures were still unbranded. "Radjak, you know what to do with the ones unfit to work." Said Facdol.

"You bet I do," said the rat, smiling wickedly at the remaining slaves as he led them outside.

The hare never saw the old ones or babes again.

2 - Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Elmjak sat stooped under the archway at the entrance to Salamandastron. Rain dripped of his cloak hood. Although a feast was being held inside the mountain fortress, he didn't care. The gatekeeper sucked happily on a wineskin full of ale that he had managed to pinch from the cellars. He grinned drunkenly, peering out into the dark, starless night. Beyond the mountain fortress was the edge of Mossflower woods; the tree tops tossed and swayed, whipped by the wind. Elmjak squinted through the rain. "Could `ave sworn I -". He stopped short, seeing movement again. A figure stumbled out onto the path. Beneath a tattered black cloak, it seemed a terrible, shadowy creature.

"Vermin..." whispered the squirrel gatekeeper and ran to the door, swinging it wide open. He ran down the torch-lit corridor. In his frenzy, he ran straight into his sister, Fuin, who had been brining a plate of food to his post. Plates, cups, food, and drink crashed to the floor. "Vermin at the gate!" yelled Elmjak, continuing sprinting down the hall.

"Drunken fool," muttered Fuin, scooping up the broken dishes. "That's the third time this week that he's spoke of enemies at the gate, and each time there's no -". She stopped suddenly, seeing that the door was still open. As she got up to close it, something outside caught her eye. She wrapped her shawl closer around her and stepped out into the rain. There's something lying out on the path. She runs out to it, and stooping down, she turns it over and gasps. It is a haremaid, but not from Salamandastron. She's very thin and badly injured. Fuin scoops up the helpless creature, who is surprisingly light. "I only hope I've found her in time..." The hare moans softly.

"Help...me..." she says, and goes limp.

"Don't worry. You're among friends now. . I only hope I've found her in time..."

3 - Chapter 2

The young haremaid lay in the infirmary. The healer, an older graying hare, was walking around, tidying the room, sorting herbs, and stacking paperwork. She was distressed that the haremaid hadn't wakened yet, and was trying to keep herself occupied. Presently, a young hare named Birchthorn (or Birch, as he was more commonly known) stepped into the room. Although he was a fearsome fighter, he was also skilled in healing, and for this reason he had become somewhat of an assistant healer. He turned to the old harenurse, Orcus. "How is she?"

"Not too well I'm afraid. I've dressed her wounds, including that strange burn on her hand. She's still unconscious, and she tosses and turns fitfully, like she's in a bad dream." Presently, she picked up a piece of parchment from the desk and handed it to Birch. "She talks sometimes in her sleep. I've been writing down what she says..."

Birch took the paper and began to read it.

A record of a dream spoken by a young haremaid brought to Salamandastron, As recorded by Orcus Morningflower.

We must get out...can't take this any longer. Pain from the whip bruises and cuts me, we have to leave this place, friends...Running through the forest...Abrial is close behind me. Darkness, branches whip my face...They are after us. "No beast escapes," the guards say, "They will not get away."...So tired...must rest ...I hide in the ferns. Abrial? Where are you?

Note - at this point the haremaid starts to cry softly. Suddenly she stops and continues.

Daybreak. My hand is throbbing; the burn has not yet healed. Abrial is gone. I don't know where...they must have found her...no escapes...I must move on...

Running through the forest, faster, faster...they are after me...they're almost on me...someone is beside me now, I run faster. I look back...not one of them...a squirrel...he leases three arrows, and they fly true...he swings up into the trees and is gone...alone again...

Rain...cold, wet, and tired...the end of the forest is ahead...I can go no further...but I must move on...I stumble from weariness, fall to the ground...who's there? Please...please help me...

Birch shook his head. "Poor thing. Sounds as though she was a slave at one time. I wonder what happened to her friend."

"I'm not sure I want to know. Those vermin obviously found her, that's all I want to know." Orcus rubbed her eyes and yawned sleepily. Birch raised an eyebrow.

"You've been up all night worrying, haven't you? Why don't you go get some sleep? I can take it from here." The harenurse nodded appreciatively and left the room. Birch sat on the bed, picking up the haremaid's old cloak. It was black, tattered, and stained with mud and what seemed to be blood on the shoulder. "This definitely belongs in the trash." As he went to throw it away, he noticed a small bulge in what seemed to be a pocket. He let the cloak fall to the floor as he pulled out the object. It was a bronze medallion on a light blue ribbon. The design on the medallion was two crescent moons, one overlapping the other, and a bird, wings outstretched, beside them.

Birch was quite familiar with the symbol. "This is a medallion like the ones worn by warriors of the Moonsparrow tribe. But that's impossible! Surely they're simply just the stuff of legends?" He rubbed his thumb over the picture engraved on the medallion. He flipped it over in his hand. On the back, it thin, scrolling letters, read the words Pennybrite Moonsparrow, also engraved into the medallion. It was at that exact moment that the haremaid awoke. He turned to her, an expression of wonder and amazement

on his face. "Who are you?" he whispered to her.

4 - Ch 3 - about Moon sparrows

Long ago, beyond Mossflower, there was a valley known as The Valley of Ciran. After a great war, many creatures united against the evil that was trying to consume the land. Mice, squirrels, otters, and hares united against the vermin forces. They were all known for their skills as fighters, and together they freed the land from slavery and war. After the battle, they remained a fighting force, using birds to scout out forces that would try to rise against them. These birds became known to enemies as moon sparrows because they flew by night, and the name stuck, until gradually the warriors became known as Moon sparrows as well.

But all their skills as warriors could not prepare them for a fight amongst themselves. The council argued over who the true leader was, and in the end, each leader went their separate way, taking their kind with them. The mice traveled south, and built an abbey known as Loamhedge; but rumors spread of death and disease in the abbey, and so they passed out of knowledge. The squirrels, known for their skills as archers, built a hidden kingdom, and no one heard from them again since they kept to themselves. Otters, known for their ability to move in the shadows and water unseen, became travelers after their home, Holt Sparrow, was destroyed. The only one who was the voice of reason in all this was the leader of the hares, Graybreeze. Feeling grief for the loss of friends and a union of warriors, he and his kind fell into despair, and no one to this day knows exactly where they went. And so it was that stories of such brave warriors passed from history to legend, and to myth, until the Moon sparrow clan was nothing more than a story for children who were in want of a good story.

5 - Chapter 4

The haremaid blinked at Birch. "Wha - what?"

"What's your name?" questioned Birch. The haremaid was obviously confused and frightened. She looked around the room before returning her gaze to Birch.

"Pe - Pe - Pennybrite." she said. "But who are you? Where am I?"

Birch sat back down on the bed. Penny was about his age, and he could only imagine what she was feeling. He knew he would be scared too. "I'm sorry," he said smiling, "You must be very confused. My name is Birch. This is the infirmary of Salamandastron, the great mountain fortress of our current badger ruler, Lady Daerose." Somebody knocked at the door. Birch got up and opened it and bowed lowly. "Ah, Lady Daerose, welcome! I was just talking about you." A squirrelmaid, who was carrying a bundle of laundry, peeped out from behind the badger. Birch looked at her nonchalantly. "Hey Fuin." he said. Fuin put her hand on her hip.

"Aren't ya gonna bow to me to?" she said, and slapped him playfully with one of the folded sheets. Lady Daerose stepped into the room. She was not as large as most badgers, but was still a powerful figure. Her eyes were an unusual violet gray, like the calm after a storm. She turned to address Pennybrite.

"Good morning! I'm glad to see you well."

"Thank you," said Penny. "I can't thank you enough for your kindness."

"Well, the credit should really go to young Fuin here." She motioned to the young squirrelmaid. Fuin was a pretty squirrel, with unusual golden-brown fur and green eyes. "She's the one that found you out on the path the other night. 'Twas her who carried you here."

Birch pulled Lady Daerose aside. "Come, I must speak to you outside." he said, and they went out into the hall.

Fuin kneeled beside the bed. Penny turned to her. "Thank you. I would have died if it weren't for you," she said softly. "I owe you my life."

Fuin smiled and hugged the haremaid. "You're a good creature, Penn. I know you would have done the same for me." She handed a bundle of clothes to Pennybrite. "These are some of my clothes, but you can have them. They might be a little too small for you, your so thin. When's the last time you had a good hot meal?"

Penny patted her stomach "Huh, much too long my friend." She said, smiling thinly.

“Well then, let's get you out of those rags and into some fresh clothes. Then I'll take you down to the main hall for dinner. Salamandastron is well known for it's good food.”

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Lady Daerose turned the medallion over in her hand, reading the inscription on the back. She could hardly believe it. “So she's really one of them...I thought the Moon sparrows died out long ago. No one's seen or heard from them for so long.” She shook her head in amazement.

“I didn't even know they were real.” Birch said to her. “But If they are real, than perhaps she's really the last...” The door beside them opened, and out stepped Penny, freshly clad in a sky blue tunic and a flowing dark blue skirt, secured around the middle with a black sash. Birch thought she was the most beautiful haremaid he had ever seen, and blushed when she smiled at him. Lady Daerose placed the medallion back around the haremaid's neck and put her huge paws on Penny's shoulders.

“Welcome to Salamandastron, Pennybrite Moon sparrow!”

6 - Chapter 5

The dinner that night was held in Pennybrite's honor, and there was feasting and storytelling. News of a creature from the Moonsparrow clan in Salamandastron had spread throughout the mountain. Hares who had been brought up on tales of such creatures were excited that such a creature was among them. Penny, however, was not fond of attention and preferred the company of Birch and Fuin rather than a thousand curious hares.

Pennybrite sat at the table alongside her new friends, who were both spooning heaps of different foods onto her plate.

"Mmmm, you've got to try this one Penn, leek and mushroom turnover, my favorite!" Fuin said, plopping an enormous serving on her plate.

Birch handed her a bowl. "Try some of this! My mum's apple and hazelnut fruit salad. Particularly good with a nice bit of meadow cream..."

"Huh, not sure what this is, but it looks good. Here's some for you Penny."

Penny laughed at her friends. "You realize I'll never be able to finish all this food, don't you?" Presently, a haremaid who was about three years older than Penny sat down across from Birch. She grabbed a scone from his plate, shoving half of it in her mouth. Fuin scolded her.

"Torrileep, chew your food! That's disgusting."

Birch rolled his eyes. "That's my sister for you." Torrileep swallowed, glaring at Birch. She reached across the table and grabbed a beaker of cordial, sipping from it pensively. She nodded to Penny.

"Who's your friend, Birch?"

"This, Torri, is Pennybrite Moonsparrow, and that's her cup you're drinking from!"

Torrileep coughed, sputtering cordial everywhere. "Oh, corks! I'm so sorry miss! Sooo sorry..." She wiped cordial up off the table.

Penny smiled at Torri. "No, really, 's alright. Please to meet you. You're Birch's sister?"

Torri nodded. "I've heard so much about you, but I never thought I'd get to meet you. It's a pleasure."

Pennybrite, Birch, Fuin, and Torrileep laughed and talked the night away, and Penny shared with them her story of how she had come to Salamandastron.

7 - Chapter 6

Pennybrite sat on the bed in Birch's room. "You sure you don't mind sleeping in that armchair?" she called over to Birch. He was curled up in a big, overstuffed, moss green armchair in front of the fireplace. He pulled himself up, looking over the back of the chair.

"It's no problem. Torri usually takes the bed anyway, but she fell asleep downstairs and I didn't have the heart to wake her."

"You're right," Penny said, suppressing a laugh. "She looked so peaceful laying in that raspberry pudding." Penny and Birch both burst out laughing.

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Birch woke in the middle of the night to the sounds of soft crying.

"Penny?" he whispered into the darkness. No answer. He got up and stumbled sleepily over to the bedside. Penny was whimpering and shaking. Birch shook her lightly. "Penny. Come on now Penn, wake up..."

Penny sat straight up in bed, slightly out of breath. She held her bandaged hand close to her; it was throbbing and hurt badly. Birch looked worried. "Here, let me see that." Birch took her hand and unwrapped it gently. The burn looked raw and sore. He selected a few supplies from a drawer on the bedside table and began rewrapping her paw. "Penny," he said as he worked, "can I ask you something?" She nodded. "How did this happen to you?"

The haremmaid's face darkened. "I was a slave at Fort Spar, the stone fortress of Lord Krienach, a black-hearted fox if I ever saw one. He killed my brother, you know; when we tried to resist being captured. Our parents left us with my grandfather when e were very young and were never seen again. We lived on our own after he died. Then one day, I was taken captive." She held out her injured paw. "They would brand us to make sure we never forgot who we belonged to."

Birch put his arm around her, wiping a tear from her face. "Shhh, it's alright now. You can forget about those days. This is your home now..."

Pennybrite grew solemn. She turned slowly, looking Birch straight in the eye. "No," she said flatly, "No, I can't do that." She got up, walking over to the open window, fingering the medallion around her neck.

“What kind of Moonsparrow would I be if I left the other creatures in bondage?”

“Penny, please, you can't leave. Forget about them, they're just - ”

“Just what? Just strangers? Just slaves? Well, I'll tell you something Birch,” she turned to him, her voice growing angry. “I've known them. I've worked beside them. I've stood up for them, even if it meant a whip across my back, and they've done the same for me. And I tell you now, every one of them is a Moonsparrow!”

“What?” Birch stared in disbelief. Penny shook her head.

“Lord Krienach already has 300 Moonsparrow slaves within his walls. If you thought I was the last, you were mistaken. There are still more of us in the lands beyond Mossflower. Lord Krienach will not rest until we are all slaves to him.” She sat down on the bed, resting her head on her hand. She looked up to Birch. “And that's the truth of it. Now get some sleep. I'll tell you more in the morning...”

8 - Chapter 7

Birch -

Even now, far from that accursed place of slavery, I am still not truly free. I cannot rest until I have freed those still under the power of Lord Krienach. This is something I must do. Do not bother coming after me, I will be long gone by the time you are reading this. Please, don't worry. There are more of us out there. I will find help.

- Pennybrite Moonsparrow

P.S. Enclosed is my medallion. Think of it as a promise that I will return someday.

Penny closed up the envelope with the letter and medallion inside and set it on Birch's lap. He slept on peacefully. "Farewell my friend, I will not forget you." she whispered, and leaned down and kissed him softly. Then she left the room, closing the door carefully behind her.

As Pennybrite passed through the dim corridors to the main door, she was surprised to find a haversack full of supplies, a cloak, and a walking stick in front of the big, wooden door. A note was pinned to the haversack. She pulled it off, holding it up to a wall torch so she could read it better.

Penny -

I was told in a dream that you would be leaving. I know of your quest, and I wish you luck. Until we meet again...

- *Lady Daerose*

Penny smiled. She put on the cloak, shouldered the haversack, and picked up the walking stick.

A cool breeze blew in Penny's face as she stepped outside. She pulled up the hood of her cloak and looked up to the sky. The moon shone unusually bright, and the sky was pricked with stars. As the haremmaid walked down the path to Mossflower woods, she recalled an old traveling song and began singing softly to herself.

“None have traveled this road before,

I see no tracks in the dirt,

So who knows,

Where this road will lead me?

The stars and sky and trees,

Are my only companions.

It's quiet here,

I wander alone...”

9 - Chapter 8

Sunlight glinted through the dense foliage, dappling the forest floor with light. Pennybrite walked through Mossflower wood. She had been glad to find a small dagger inside the haversack, and had strode off the path, feeling well protected. She soon realized what a foolish mistake it had been. She was completely lost.

Suddenly she tripped; her footpaw had become caught up in a tree root. Penny fell flat on her face with a thud. Like lightning, someone jumped out of the tree behind her. She couldn't see who it was, because her hood had fallen over her face. She felt the prick of an arrow on the back of her neck and cursed inwardly at her foolishness. Why had she ever left the path?

"Who are you, and what do you want?" a voice behind her said.

"My name is Pennybrite Moonsparrow. I mean you no harm. I'm stuck in this stupid tree root..." She felt someone grab her footpaw, easing it out carefully from beneath the root. She stood up slowly, testing her footpaw before turning to the creature behind her.

It was a squirrel, about 25 seasons old. His face was stern and commanding, yet still friendly. He wore a green tunic, and carried a bow and a quiver of arrow. Around his neck was a gold medallion on a moss green ribbon, with two crescent moons and a small bird engraved into it. He was a Moonsparrow, and Pennybrite recognized him almost immediately.

"You - you saved my life!"

"I doubt you would have died stuck under a tree root." he said smirkily.

"No, about three days ago. I was running through the woods, pursued by three vermin. You killed them and saved me..."

The squirrel looked thoughtful. "Oh, right, right. Think nothing of it. Pleased to meet you. Again. Name's Jhekel."

Penny couldn't help but stare at the medallion around Jhekel's neck. He nodded. "Yep, I'm a Moonsparrow too." Penny told Jhekel about how she was a slave, how she escaped to Salamandastron, and her plan to somehow free the slaves of Fort Spar. She noticed that at the mention of Lord Kreinach, Jhekel grew solumn, almost angry, and he furrowed his brow. "That scum and his crew murdered my family when I was no more then seven seasons old. I had to fend for myself, in the dead of winter, deep in this unfamiliar country of Mossflower." He seemed to tighten his grip on his bow.

"Oh, Jhekel, I'm so sorry..."

He cut her short, offering his paw to her. "Here's my hand and here's my heart, mate. I'm with you."

Penny smiled and shook his paw. "Thank you, but I don't see what the two of us are going to do against a thousand soldiers."

"There is a large group of otters that patrol the areas northeast of here. They may be able to help us. I last saw one of them, a big burly fellow named Quake, about ten days ago."

"How far?"

"`bout a good six days march from here."

Penny sighed. "Then we best be moving on..."

10 - Chapter 9

Jhekel and Penny sat in a clearing around a small fire. Darkness had already fallen on Mossflower. Jhekel rested against an old rowan tree. He had pulled the hood of his cloak up and tucked his arms behind his head, nodding off slightly. Penny sat close to the fire, poking it with a stick, watching the sparks fly up into the air and disappear into the dark treetops above.

The sound of music is heard, a thin, reeling melody. It was beautiful, but full of grief and sadness. Suddenly, it faded. Jhekel allowed a thin smile to pass over his face under the darkness of his hood. “`Tis a nice song, Penn. Play it again will you?”

“It wasn't me! I thought it was you!”

Jhekel pulled back his hood, peering intently into the darkness. His ears perked up as the music started up again. He stood to his feet, bow in hand, and motioned Pennybrite to follow him. He notched an arrow to the bow and crept out of the clearing into the darkness of Mossflower woods, Penny coming silently behind him.

The two creatures followed the sound of the sad song. Suddenly it stopped, only to be followed by the sound of singing close by. The singer had a wonderful voice, and Penny enjoyed listening to their song.

By the storm torn shoreline

A woman is standing,

The spray strung like jewels in her hair.

And the sea tore the rocks

Near that desolate landing,

As though it had known she stood there.

For she has come down

To condemn that wild ocean

For the murderous loss of her man.

His boat sailed out on Wednesday morning,
And it's feared she's gone down
With all hands.

Oh and white were the wave caps
And wild was their parting.
So fierce is the warring of love.
But she prayed to the gods,
Both of men and of sailors,
Not to cast their cruel nets
o'er her love.

For she has come down
To condemn that wild ocean
For the murderous loss of her man.

His boat sailed out on Wednesday morning,
And it's feared she's gone down
With all hands.

There's a school on the hilltop
Where the sons of dead fathers
Are led toward tempests and gales.
Where their God-given wings
Are clipped close to their bodies,

And their eyes are bound round

With ship's sails.

What force leads a man

To a life filled with danger

High on seas or a mile underground?

It's when need is his master

And poverty's no stranger,

And there's no other work to be found.

For she has come down

To condemn that wild ocean

For the murderous loss of her man.

His boat sailed out on Wednesday morning,

And it's feared she's gone down

With all hands.

As the song drew to a close, Jhekel and Penny stumbled upon the singer. A voice called out from the darkness. "Hoy, who's there?" A small light appeared as the speaker lit a small lantern. It was a female otter, cloaked and hooded. She sat on a large rock, holding out a long gnarled walking stick, with a lantern intertwined in a knot at the end. Something else hung from the end of the stick as well. It twinkled and glittered in the flickering candle light; a silver medallion on a purple ribbon.

Jhekel held out his hand as a sign of peace. "We mean you no harm. We heard your music and wondered who it was. I'm glad to see you're a friend, and by your medallion, I can see that you're one of the Moonsparrow clan as well." He held out his own medallion. Penny reached for hers only to remember she had given it to Birch, and quickly put her hand down again. "How is it that I've not seen another Moonsparrow these past ten years, yet two stand before me now?"

The otter smiled. "I may be able to answer that, but first let me introduce myself. My name is Morgan the Traveler. And as for how I got here, well, I have business to attend to. The Council is summoning all creatures of Moonsparrow blood back to the homeland, to the Valley of Ciran."

Jhekel's normally calm face looked surprised at this news. "The Council? Nonsense, they disappeared after the corruption of the Moonsparrow clan."

The smile faded from Morgan's face. "They have been forced to regroup. These are evil times, mate. Lord Kreinach has expanded his army, and they now are patrolling as far as Mossflower and beyond Salamandastron. He is determined to wipe us out, we have stood against him for too long. Luckily, he has not found the passage into the Valley, yet. It is the one place we are safe. That is where I am bound"

Penny explained their mission to Morgan. The otter shook her head. "You can't do that alone. You'll need the advice of the Council. I can lead you to them."

Pennybrite smiled and shook hands with the otter. "It looks like our twosome has become a threesome. Welcome! But it's late, we should get some sleep." Morgan followed them back to camp, warming herself by the slowly dying fire. She leaned back against a tree and took out a small reed flute from a pouch at her waist and began playing softly. Penny listened to the music. She felt her eyelids beginning to droop, and she soon fell asleep.

11 - Chapter 10

Pennybrite stretched and yawned sleepily. Morning sun lit the forest, creating odd shadows in the cold mist that hung in the air. She looked over to Morgan, who was lying next to her; in the light, Penny could get a better look at her new companion. Morgan was much older than Penny or Jhekel, about 35 seasons. She was small for an otter, and her fur was an unusual reddish brown, lightening to a creamy white along her muzzle and throat. Her face was careworn, and slightly sad, as though she had been through much in her life.

As Morgan moved in her sleep, Penny noticed a long scar running across the back of her head, which was usually covered by the hood of her oversized cloak. Suddenly, the otter blinked and opened her eyes, jumping slightly at the site of Penny staring at her. "How did you come by that scar?" Penny questioned. Morgan quickly pulled the hood up over her head. The haremaid looked worried; had she offended her? "I'm sorry...I didn't mean to pry..."

Morgan tucked her knees up to her chin, resting her head on them. "I don't usually like to talk about it."

"Oh...sorry..."

Morgan seemed distant and sad for a moment. Penny decided to leave her alone and started to walk away. As she did so, Morgan began singing softly to herself in a language that the haremaid didn't understand.

"Etch un la meñiayé?

In un mé tallulié.

Andoné lambra tú?

Amendía, en dal le manohán." *

*Translation: "Why must you leave, love?"

Everything has slipped away.

Why must you go where I can't follow?

Alone, hope has gone.”

Morgan looked up at the haremaid. “A long time ago, the otters formed a holt after the Moonsparrows went their separate ways. It was a happy, peaceful place, and it was the one place I called home. But 16 years ago, that all changed...”

12 - Chapter 11

Morgan carried a large basket out to the orchard on the outskirts of Holt Sparrow. The sun beat down without a cloud in the sky. Crickets buzzed in the fields, and the sound of rushing water could be heard from a nearby river.

She looked behind her to see her son, Shiron, toddling after her. Shiron was about two season's old, and still babbled as most babies do. Morgan kneeled down in the strawberry patch, picking the newly ripened berries and putting them in her basket. She watched Shiron as he plopped down beside her and picked up a rotten strawberry, squeezing it in his tiny paws. He gurgled happily as the juice ran between his fingers and began sucking on his paw. Morgan laughed. Wiping juice from his paws, she gave the otterpup a fresh berry. "You silly little babe." She went back to picking fruit.

Suddenly she noticed that Shiron had moved further down the field. She got up to bring him back and stopped dead in her tracks. A large band of foxes stood at the forest edge, armed to the teeth. Scooping up Shiron, she ran back to the camp, stumbling slightly on the abandoned basket. She regained her balance and took off again, calling for her husband. "Graylin! Graylin!"

.....

The leader of the foxes was a tall, lanky fox known as Kartaliss. His sharp yellow sharp yellow eyes glinted evilly at the sight of the small village. He turned to the fox beside him. "They'll make excellent servants to Lord Krienach, won't they, Blackfoot?" Blackfoot, a shorter grayfox, and Kartaliss' second in command, drew his scimitar. He turned to the rest of the foxes, raising his blade and calling aloud.

"They'll be slaves aplenty tonight! Any that resist, kill. Take as many as you can alive!"

Kartaliss drew his sword. "Let's move out!"

.....

Graylin, Skipper of otters, was taking his mid-day nap in his favorite chair. Leaning the old wooden chair back on two legs, he put his arms behind his head, sucking thoughtfully on his favorite old pipe.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Graylin was startled by the pounding at the door and nearly fell out of his chair! He quickly regained his composure. "Now who could that be?"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

He heard a voice outside. "Graylin, Graylin, open up!" He ran to the door, opening it wide. Morgan practically flung herself inside. She was panting, holding Shiron, who was now screaming and crying at the top of his lungs. She held the babe tight, trying to comfort him as she told Graylin what has happened. "Foxes...at the outskirts...of the woods...beyond the villiage...least five score, maybe more..."

Graylin rushed to the other room grabbing his schiavona, a pike, and a horn. He tossed the pike to Morgan. Morgan put Shiron in his cradle; he whimpered softly. Morgan kissed him, Graylin did likewise before running outside. Morgan covered the crib with a blanket, hoping her son would be safe. "Don't worry...mommy will be back..." She ran outside to join Graylin.

Graylin gave three long blasts on the horn. Otters began coming out of the huts, armed with various weapons. Skill couldn't make up for the fact that they were outnumbered three to one, but they still joined their Skipper, ready to fight to the bitter end. Graylin turned to Morgan. "Morgan, you should take Shiron and leave while there's still time."

"Not a chance. I'll stay here and fight like the rest."

"Morgan, listen to me! **Leave Now!** That's an order."

"No!" She embraced Graylin and kissed him. Looking straight into his bright blue eyes, she whispered. "I'm not leaving you."

.....

Kartaliss strode to the village and called out to Graylin. "Listen up! I'm about to make you a very generous offer! You can surrender now, or you can die trying to defeat us! It's your choice streamdog; what say you?"

"I say you will die like the scum you are, fox!"

Kartaliss gritted his teeth at the insult. "Take them!" he yelled to his soldiers.

The battle had begun.

.....

Graylin and Morgan fought back to back, whirling and stabbing with their weapons. A fox cut Graylin across the face. Graylin tripped the fox, killing him with a single downward thrust. He called back to Morgan. "How ya doin' back there matey?"

Morgan dealt a fox a blow with the blunt end of her pike, knocking him flat. "Could be better..."

Graylin smiled thinly. "Aye, me too." He wiped blood from his eye and continued fighting. They had been going on like this for an hour now. They were both tired and wounded, but they fought on, knowing that their lives depended on it.

As a big gray fox charged at Morgan, she took a step back, expecting to feel Graylin's back against her own. To her horror, she did not. She turned around, and time seemed to stand still as she took in the scene before her.

Graylin had fallen to his knees, a javelin through his chest. He was breathing hard. Morgan cried out to him as she saw Kartaliss closing in to finish him off. Oblivious to anything else, Morgan raised her pike, aiming it at the tall, lanky fox. But before she could throw it, the fox behind her cut her a blow across the back of her head. She fell and remembered no more.

.....

Morgan slowly came to wakefulness. Why was everything so dark? Her head was pounding. She reached up to touch it, and her hand came away wet with what she knew to be her blood. Morgan could just make out the sounds of ragged breathing nearby. She rolled over, reaching out into the darkness until she felt Graylin's paw in her own. Even as his strength failed him, he squeezed Morgan's paw tightly, pulling her close.

She wasn't sure how long she lay there, listening to Graylin breathing, expecting each breath to be his last. Eventually, overcome with pain and weariness, she drifted into unconsciousness, still holding his paw.

.....

“Over here, I think this one's still alive!”

Morgan's eyes opened slowly, immediately shocked by what she saw.

The village was burning.

Morgan's first thought was of Shiron, still in his cradle. She screamed his name, trying to get up. But it was no use; she couldn't even sit up, let alone stand.

She felt a pair of huge strong paws hold her down. “No, no...be still.” a deep voice whispered. She heard another voice beside her.

“It's too late for this one, m'Lord. He's already passed through the gates of dark forest.” She felt Graylin's paw being pulled from her own. Strong arms lifted her up, carrying her away from the burning inferno that had once been her home. Weak and helpless, she could do nothing but cry.

“Shiron...Graylin...Graylin, I can't loose you too...Please, don't go where I can't follow...” The beast that was carrying her held her close and whispered softly to her.

“Shhhh, hush now, it's going to be alright...”

.....

Morgan felt warm sunlight on her face and blinked, slowly coming to. She felt her head; it was bandaged. She looked around her. She was in a tent, lying on a blanket, freshly clad in a new white tunic. A bluish colored cloak lay folded beside her. She put it on, pulling the hood up over her bandaged head and stepped out of the tent.

The otter looked around her. Several other tents had been set up in the makeshift camp. A large campfire blazed in the center of the camp, and several hares sat around the fire, chatting and eating breakfast. Morgan hesitated before taking a few steps forward. One of the hares turned and greeted her. “Ah, good morning to you miss, wot! Come, come, sit down and have some breakis'.”

Morgan smiled thinly and walked over, sitting on the log beside him. “Thank you, but I'm not very hungry.”

“Oh nonsense, come on now, it'll make you feel better.” He handed her a bowl of hot oatmeal with honey. Morgan poked at it with a wooden spoon, not in the mood for food. She looked up and noticed

that quite a few hares had moved over to make room for someone. A huge badger sat down across the fire from Morgan. The ottermaid's eye's bulged at the site him; she had never seen a badger before. The badger was well built, strong but gentle. He had deep brown eyes and unusual dark brown stripes rather than black ones. The badger was well built, strong but gentle. He smiled at Morgan.

"I'm glad to see you are well." he said to her. "My name is Lord Oakstripe, formally of Salamandastron."

The ottermaid looked up to him. "My name is Morgan. I'm guessing it was you that helped me last night, and for that I am eternally grateful."

One of the hares piped up. "Last night? That was bally well three days ago miss! You've been layin' unconscious in yon tent, doncha know."

The badger lord silenced him with a stare. He stood up and began to walk away, motioning for Morgan to follow him. She got up from the circle, set down her untouched breakfast, and followed Oakstripe. He led her to a large tent. "Wait here." He went inside the tent, arriving back outside a few moments later, carrying a medallion and something else tucked under his arm. "I believe this belongs to you. You were wearing it when we found you." Morgan placed it back around her neck.

"Thank you. This medallion is a mark of my family, and the clan of the Moon sparrows."

The badger nodded. "So I see. The foxes that attacked your home were not just a random group of slavers. They attacked your holt because you and the rest are Moon sparrows, and they serve Krienach, that black hearted scum that dares to call himself Lord of the Northlands. He plans to wipe you out." Lord Oakstripe placed a huge paw on Morgan's shoulder and looked straight into her eyes. "But you mustn't give up hope. Even a few creatures can make a difference, and there are many more of your kind out there."

Morgan wiped a tear from her face. "Yes. Yes, I can't give up hope. Graylin would want me to move on..."

Oakstripe handed her the thing that was tucked under his arm. It was Graylin's sword. Morgan unsheathed it, looking up and down its blade. "A fearsome warrior was Graylin Maelstrom. He will not be forgotten..."

13 - Chapter 12

By the time that Morgan had finished her story, Penny was sitting around her, her arm around the otter's shoulder. A tear trickled down the haremaid's face. "I think that going through all that would have killed a lesser beast, Morgan. I can't possibly imagine..."

Morgan sighed, putting her arm around Penny. "It feels good to get it out Penn. I've never told another creature before." She looked at her. "I still have the schiavona ya know."

"The what?"

"The sword, Graylin's sword." Morgan reached under her cloak, unbuckling the sword from her belt. She unsheathed it. It was a beautiful sword, perfectly balanced from its shining silver blade to its decorative silver handle. She handed it to Pennybrite, who held it up, letting the sunlight hit it. She looked closely at the handle.

"What's this?" She ran her finger over an engraving along the scrolling handle guard, where words were engraved. "There's something written here, but I can't read it." She handed the sword to Morgan who looked closely at it.

"This is the language of the Moon sparrows. It's called Etheniel, which means 'the tongue of the shining star'. The inscription reads:

If this sword should fail me,

May my spirit lead me,

To the one place I belong,

The Valley of Ciran."

Penny smiled. "That's beautiful. I wonder why I've never heard of that language before."

Morgan sheathed the sword, strapping it back to her belt. "My da taught it to me when I was young. Fascinated with the old lore, he was. He used to tell me stories about the valley, of far off times when warriors of the North united under the Mossflower name."

Penny looked thoughtful. "The Valley of Ciran. You ever been there Morgan?"

The ottermaid shook her head. “`Fraid not, though I've dreamt of the homeland all my life. I was born and raised in Holt Sparrow, lived there all my life until...you know...”

Penny nodded. “Perhaps we'll see it for ourselves someday, hmm?”

.....

It was nearly noon by the time Jhekel arrived back to where they were camped. He was soaking wet, angry, and doing his best to hold on to a large perch he had caught. The fish still wriggled violently in his arms. Morgan and Penny tried their best not to burst out laughing. Morgan composed herself and strode up to him. “Ah, Jhekel matey! Nice to see you back. Caught us lunch `ave you?” She suppressed a laugh and relieved him of the fish, whacking it hard against a rock until it went still. “I'll take it from here. You get yourself warmed up by the fire.”

Jhekel muttered something under his breath and sat down by the fire, trying to dry off. “Took me for a ride that one did. Nearly pulled me downstream! Huh, to Dark Forest with fish, that's what I say...”

Morgan soon had the fish cooked and served. The three companions sat around the fire, enjoying the meal. When they had finished, Penny turned to Jhekel. “We were just talking about the Valley of Ciran before you arrived. Have you ever been there?”

Jhekel smiled and his face softened. “Aye, I have. `Tis a beautiful place, surrounded by high snow-capped mountains. Trees grow taller there, and the moss grows thick, carpeting the ground. A clear river, the river Lennah, runs from the highest peak straight through the heart of the valley, winding through its dense pine forests. I've sat on its bank many a time, pondering the world outside. Now I wish I'd never left.” He looked into the fire, recalling a song his mother used to sing to him when he was little. Jhekel began to sing softly. Surprisingly, he had a very good voice, that didn't seem to match his serious features.

“Through the mountains,

In the deep have I wandered,

With a heart that is lighter,

Then the dew of the morn.

Her heather-clad mountains,

And clear crystal fountains,
Delightful to view,
By the light of the dawn.

I see her green hills,
And swift running stream lands,
Eternally flowing, right on to the sea.
By her side I lie down on a bank of blue violets,
And its murmuring and gurgling,
Are music to me.

In far foreign lands,
Off do her sons wander,
By the coasts of the ocean,
Or Mossflower woods.
Where nature is seen,
Both majestic and savage,
But their hearts are at home,
In their dear native land.

They long to return to the banks of the Lennah,
The valley and it's mountains on every side,
And it's there I'll find peace,
In times of danger,

When evil will rise up,
To make me its slave.

Her daughters are fierce,
And her sons they are warriors,
They scorn the tyrant,
And free the slave.
Their freedom they kept,
In the battle of Ciran,
With an arm that was strong,
And a heart that is brave.

In a valley not far from the woodlands of Mossflower,
Their spirit hovers over that once much loved soil,
And it's there I'll find peace,
In times of danger,
When evil would rise up to make me its slave.

Long may she prosper,
`Neath her sheltering mountains,
Elúlien andar y le luné mendié.
From calamity and famine,
May she be defended,

And grant us contentment,

In the Valley of Ciran.”

The last note of his song hung in the air as he looked back down to the fire, not saying anything. He thought of his family, his father who had taught him to use a bow, his mother who had cared for him. His face grew hard as he thought of how his family had left the valley to visit Redwall, and how vermin killed them before they had even come close to reaching the abbey. In the dead of winter, even his father had been too weak to fight back. He shook his head. “We best be moving on if we're gonna make any progress today.”

Morgan and Penny looked at one another. “What was that all about?” Morgan asked her.

Pennybrite shrugged. “Who knows?”

14 - Chapter 13

As the threesome traveled on, Penny and Morgan talked together quietly. Jhekel brought up the rear, alert and ready for anything. Suddenly, Penny noticed that they had left the thick foliage of Mossflower wood and were now traveling through a less densely forested area, dotted with ferns, spruce and pine trees. It was a beautiful place, but eerily quiet. Penny looked behind her. "Where's Jhekel gotten to?"

Morgan looked behind her, taking a few steps back. She called out into the woodlands. "Jhekel? Jhe-"

Jhekel came down the tree in front of them like lightning, clapping a paw over Morgan's mouth. "Don't say another word." he whispered harshly. Morgan pulled his hand from her mouth and whispered to him.

"What's going on? What's wrong?"

"Black smoke rises to the North. I could see a camp, about two score of soldiers." He shook his head, looking behind him as if he expected them to come after them any moment. "They bore the flag of the Army of Almiruin. And they're coming this way..."

Morgan's eyes widened, grasping her walking stick with both hands. "Lord Kreinach's army? They never patrolled this far south before!"

Pennybrite looked worriedly to Jhekel. "Should we turn back?"

"No. We move forward. Chances are they're already on our trail." He notched an arrow to the bow and took off at a run, Penny and Morgan following after them.

.....

Penny's keen ears heard the sound of footfalls behind them. She and her friends had been running for a while now, and she could feel the vermin getting closer. She heard their pursuers give a yell, and turned around just in time to see them coming into view. An evil flag flew above them; it was black, with a red and orange flame centered in the middle and a black bird, wings outstretched, seemingly engulfed in the flame.

Morgan saw them too. She yelled to Jhekel. "They'll be on us in a minute!"

Jhekel yelled back to her. "Keep running! As long as we stay ahead, we'll be ok!" He grunted painfully as an arrow buried itself deep in his shoulder. "Or not..." Penny caught him as he stumbled back. He

yelled above the roar of the army. "Keep going!"

They took off again. Jhekel's ears perked up. "I could have sworn I heard rushing water ahead."

Morgan looked in front of them. "That's the river Moss, and it's not as far away as you think. Look!" She pulled her friends back, preventing them from falling over the cliff they had come to. Penny looked down. The river churned and foamed, rushing forward 50 feet below the cliffs. She looked to Morgan.

"Now what?"

"We jump!"

"Are you crazy? We'll be killed!"

Jhekel looked back to the vermin who coming closer by the second, gripping his shoulder. "Something tells me that we'll be killed if we don't!"

Penny nodded. "Fine, we jump on three. Ready? One...two..."

Morgan locked arms with Jhekel and Penny. "Three!" she yelled, and jumped over the edge, pulling her friends with her. A shower of arrows hit the ground where they had been standing a moment earlier.

As Penny hit the water, she thought of Birch. Would she ever see him again? Her world became an underwater nightmare; dark swirling water overwhelmed her...

15 - Chapter 13

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16 - Chapter 14

Penny felt someone gently slapping her face, speaking to her. "Come on now Penn, wake up now, that's it..." Morgan was leaning over her, a worried expression on her face. The haremaid choked, coughing up water. Morgan sighed, a relieved look on her face. "Thank goodness. I thought I'd lost you." Penny, who was cold, wet, and all around uncomfortable, managed a thin smile. Morgan grinned at her, shaking water from her whiskers.

"Oh, come on now Penn, a little water never hurt anybeast."

"Speak for yourself, ya great stream walloper!" Jhekel yelled to her. He sat further down the bank, dripping wet, his few remaining arrows and his bow, broken, beside him. He was working on trying to get the arrow out of his shoulder; he breathed in sharply through gritted teeth, slowly and painfully trying to pull it out. It was in deep.

Morgan watched him for a while and then whispered something in Penny's ear. The haremaid nodded in agreement as Morgan got up and walked over to him. "Oh Jhekel..." Penny called to the squirrel. He stopped what he was doing and looked over to her.

"What?"

Morgan saw her chance and went for it. She reached down and yanked the arrow from Jhekel's shoulder. He yelled aloud in pain and whirled on the ottermaid. "You tryin' to pull my arm off? What did you do that for?!?!"

Morgan shrugged. "At least I got the arrow out. Let me go find some herbs and I dress that wound for you..." She walked off into the woodlands.

A few moments later, Morgan appeared back by the river. She looked behind her before turning and kneeling next to Jhekel. She selected a few of the herbs she had gathered and began working, talking to him as she did so. "There's somebeast out there, though I didn't actually see them." She tied the dressing tightly with a bit of tough dry grass. "How's that feelin' matey?"

Jhekel moved his arm around. "Feels alright, thanks. Now about this - "

Penny interrupted him, calling out to her companions in a hushed tone. "We've got company! I can hear them comin' down the riverbank..."

As the creature came into view, they could see it was a young squirrel, carrying two large buckets down to the river. He leaned down by the water, filling the buckets with water. As he stood up again, he saw the three wet, bruised creatures further down the bank. He dropped the bucket in surprise, splattering water everywhere. "Oh my!" he ran up to them. "Are you alright? What happened?"

Morgan had found her walking stick washed up on shore. She reached out with it into the deep rushing water, trying to pull something in. She explained what had happened to the newcomer. "We were pursued by a vermin patrol...oh come on now..." She reached out further, trying to hook the object onto her walking stick. "Came to the edge of that cliff down there..." She nodded upstream. "...and it was either jump or be killed...ah, there, got it!" She tossed the object to the squirrel before pulling something else in. It was her lantern, or at least what was left of it. Cracked and broken, it hardly resembled the beautiful globe-shaped lantern it had once been. "Would ya look at that? Ruined, and it was a gift too..."

The young squirrel stared at the object Morgan had tossed to him. It was her medallion. He looked up to Morgan, then to Penny and Jhekel. "Are you...one of **them**?"

Penny smiled. "If you mean Moonsparrows, then yes." Morgan took the medallion from the squirrel, wrapping it back around her walking stick.

"What's your name matey?"

"My name's Trek, pleased to meet you. I have a home close by. You're welcome to stay there for a while. You all look like you've been through a lot, a good long rest will do ya good."

Penny offered a paw to Trek, smiling. "My name's Pennybrite. This is Morgan..." she motioned to the ottermaid, who shook hands with Trek. "And that grumpy wet beast over there is Jhekel." She pointed over her shoulder.

Jhekel's ears lay flat against his head as her rung water from his tail. He gathered his belongings, muttering angrily under his breath as he noticed his bow was braken in half. As he rejoined the others, Trek threw his arm around Jhekel's shoulders. "Come on now matey. You're welcome at my place." He walked off into the woodlands, looking behind to see that the others were following.

17 - Chapter 15

Kartaliss, captain of the guard, strode nervously to the main chamber of Fort Spar. His fiery red fur was now flecked white with age. Straightening his uniform, he knocked three times on the tall wooden door.

A small mouse opened the door, bowing his head, as was customary for slaves. Kartaliss pushed him aside and strode down hall-like room to where Lord Krienach sat on his rock throne. He was a truly fearsome sight, still large and sinewy. His black fur had not even grayed over the years, and his frightening yellow-green eyes missed nothing. He wore a black tunic, marked with the symbol of his army. His red cloak was clipped at the neck by a red stone set in silver. At the top of his throne perched his most loyal subject, a huge black vulture.

Kartaliss bowed on one knee and placed his shamshir, a long wickedly curved blade, in front of him. "My Lord..."

Lord Krienach stared coolly at the fox. "Ah, Kartaliss, my loyal captain, what news do you bring to the northlands?" His deep voice boomed out, echoing around the stone room. Kartaliss remained bowed low to the ground as he answered.

"Patrols spotted three creatures southwest of your lands."

"And?"

"Sire, our patrols believe them to be Moon sparrows."

Krienach gripped the arm rests of his throne, growling. "You had them destroyed of course?"

Kartaliss bit his lip nervously. "My Lord, they escaped!"

Krienach's voice was flat and angry, laden with disgust. "How could you let them get away? I sent you enough soldiers for two patrols!"

"They jumped from a cliff, into the River Moss."

The vulture perched above the black fox let out a thin, grating noise that only slightly resembled a laugh. The mouse by the door winced. He hated that sound, evil and unearthly. The bird looked down to his master. "Lord Krienach, surely they would have perished from such a fall?"

He nodded slowly and then looked to Kartaliss. "Tell the patrols to search both sides of the river. If they are still alive..." He pulled a knife from his belt, tossing it to the captain. It thudded point down in the dirt floor, quivering. Kartaliss tucked it in his belt before retrieving his own sword.

"It will be done."

The mouse bowed his head as the captain of the guard left the chamber. A single tear trickled down the slave's cheek.

Lord Krienach looked to the vulture. "Follow him. Take half a sky patrol with you. Make sure he does the job properly..."

The vulture crawled down, perching on the arm rest of the throne. "My Lord, they are only three creatures. Why do you take such extreme measures? Surely they can do nothing against a force as impenetrable as the Army of Almiruin?"

The fox lord was no fool. "A single misplaced stone can cause a fortress to fall. I take no chances. I will show those lowly creatures who the true Lord of the Northlands is. We will wipe out the Moonsparrow race once and for all!

18 - Chapter 16

Trek's house was little more than a simple one room hut, seemingly woven throughout the branches of a large rowan tree. A fireplace, bed, chair, and a small kitchen area filled his home.

Morgan and Jhekel sat on the edge of the bed. Jhekel pulled the blanket Trek had given him closer around him, looking over Morgan's shoulder at a map she was holding. She looked up, calling across the room to Trek. "You made this map?"

He nodded. "Yep. `S been a while since I traveled that far north, but that's the quickest route to the Valley, I assure you."

Morgan took a charcoal stick from her bag, darkening the line Trek had drawn. Penny sat by the fireplace, sipping a cup of hot tea Trek had served her. She looked to Morgan. "So, when do we leave again?"

Jhekel shrugged. "As soon as possible I guess. They've probably found our trail by now. The last thing we want is lead those patrols here, right Trek." He looked up from the map. "Trek?"

The squirrel put a finger to his lips, signaling him to be silent. He whispered to Penny. "See that rope by the fireplace? It shuts the vent that lets the smoke out the chimney. Pull it, and then put out the fire..." He went back to looking out the window. Morgan joined him.

"Is that smoke?" she said, looking out the window. He shook his head, a worried look on his face.

"It's moving fast, and there's not even a breeze." Suddenly, he ducked down and turned to the others. "Lord Krienach's sky patrol!"

A huge flock of red-winged blackbirds flew overhead, filling the air with the deafening noise of wings flapping, cawing, and the unearthly scream of a vulture. Morgan looked to the others, a panicked look on her face. "They're headed for the river. He knows we're here!"

Penny grabbed the haversack and map. "Looks like we'll have to cut our visit short, before they find us, or Trek too for that matter."

Trek opened the door, looking down to the forest floor before lowering the rope ladder. The threesome climbed down, followed by Trek, who was carrying an unstrung bow. He handed it to Jhekel. "You're gonna need this more than I do."

Jhekel restrung it with his old cord, pulling it back and testing it's strength. "`Tis a good solid longbow. Thank ye matey." He strapped it over his shoulder.

Penny smiled at Trek. "Thank you for your kindness. You're a loyal friend Trek." He blushed and

ushered them forward.

“Come on now, you should get goin'. Go northeast, you'll find a small outlet that flows from the River Moss northward. Keep to the stream and you'll find the otter holt that patrols that area. Tell `em Trek sent ya. Now go!”

He motioned them to move forward, further into the woodlands. Morgan took off, calling behind her. “Thanks matey! We won't soon forget you!” Jhekel and Pennybrite followed close behind.