

Prologue

The Escape

Brigham peered into the moonlit clearing from the lowest branch of a large, leafy oak. He had never liked the exposure of this small gap in the forest, but tonight he could feel a familiar disquiet in his stomach. Not real danger, but something about this scheduled meeting was amiss. His contact, a young Abencian called Nall, was usually in the opening before the moon reached its highpoint, but tonight he was late.

A half-moon along with hundreds of stars illuminated the cloudless heavens. The darker shadows of the trees that surrounded the clearing merged with the black sky as a mild breeze rustled their boughs. Brigham slightly shook and clasped his hands together, then blew into the pocket created by his palms. For a moment he sat, listening to the sounds of the night and questing the darkness with his feelings. Suddenly, he leaned forward and looked to the left. Something on the other side of the clearing was crashing through the dead leaves that lined the forest floor.

The calm unease in his stomach quickly turned into a gnawing sensation that had saved his life more times than he could count. He drew the broadsword strapped to his back and laid it against the tree branch so a reflection from the blade would not give him away to an unseen enemy. The crashing of dried leaves ceased as a sprinting man in a cape and cowl tore through the underbrush and fell. However, the figure quickly rose to his feet.

From the shape of the silhouette, it was clear that the figure was Nall. He was hunkered half over and covering his abdomen with his left arm, while clutching a long dagger in the other. Brigham looked closer, it was not a dagger at all; it was a broadsword that had been broken just below the middle. Nall had time for two whiffs of breath before he looked behind himself. Grunting with pain, he moved farther into the clearing and turned just as another figure riding on horseback appeared. The hooves pounded as they moved through the leaves, and four more riders broke through the intertwined branches.

Brigham gritted his teeth and sheathed his sword. Two of the riders circled around Nall while the other three spread out to block his path back into the forest. Brigham shook his head, knowing that his latest report would never reach King Lanier now. His instinctive gnawing did not keep him from easing down the tree; he knew he could defeat the men surrounding Nall if he took them by surprise. But he stayed the urge to help his companion when he heard another set of footfalls come from the far side of the clearing.

Although his fellow spy hunkered over and gritted his teeth, he bared the broken blade in front of himself and looked from rider to rider. A sixth horseman appeared and, even in the darkness, Brigham could see the moon glistening on his bald head. Both his clothes and horse were darker than the sky and he reined his mount just a few steps from the wounded man. The first five riders were deferring to this man's presence, allowing him to decide the fate of their captured prey. Brigham gulped, it wasn't the actions of the deferring riders that told him how dangerous this sixth man was, so much as the aching in his stomach. He knew he was no match for this man.

The vapor from the breaths of the horses and warriors slowly faded in and out for a few heartbeats. The encircling five all had their swords drawn, but those blades were held loosely and rested against their shoulders. The last rider sat on his mount with his arms crossed, just staring at the wounded spy. Finally, the sixth man made a questioning gesture and said

something, but the distance and wind-fluttered leaves kept Brigham from understanding the words.

“He’s too smart to still be here,” Nall shouted.

Brigham squinted against the darkness as the lead warrior shook his head. The man was not a Darminian, he was an Ebonian. *We are not at war with Ebonia, why is this man fighting against us*—Brigham wondered. But the sight of this new warrior sparked a memory in Brigham. After the Battle of the Oil Reserve two winters before, many of his fellow Abencians had claimed that a masked man with dark skin had single-handedly turned the tide of that strategic battle. Some of the superstitious soldiers had even believed him to have been a demon made flesh. The commander of that battle had confirmed sighting an Ebonian and King Lanier had even dispatched several ambassadors to Ebonia to investigate their possible involvement with the Darminians. Brigham had heard that none of those emissaries ever returned to Abencia. *But even if this man is an Ebonian, he is the only one who has ever fought against Abencia. He must be a mercenary.* It was the only scenario that made sense to Brigham.

Returning from those thoughts, Brigham held his breath in an attempt to increase his hearing.

“Tell me where the other spy is,” the Ebonian said, “or die a most painful death, because you have already seen that you have no hope of defeating me or any one of them,” he gestured to the men around him.

“Yes,” Nall said and took three deep breaths, “that is true, but I will go to The Pit before you learn anything from me. May The Maker forgive me.”

Nall raised his weapon, uttered a battle cry, and plunged the broken broadsword into his own throat. Brigham could hardly believe his eyes as the Ebonian sprang to the dying man even before his limp body fell to the ground. *No human can move like that*—Brigham thought.

“Where is he?” the Ebonian shouted, holding up the dying man with one arm and shaking him violently.

Brigham heard Nall strangle a laugh.

“Answer me!”

The strange warrior held him high for a few more moments and then casually tossed aside the dead weight.

“Spread out! Find him!”

But Brigham had already gone, using the noise of his enemies’ shouts to mask his own retreat.

* * * * *

The next morning . . .

Brigham stuffed more wood into the hearth then began warming his hands. His lips curled in disgust. The more he stayed in Darminia the more he loathed the place. The very land itself was as cold as most of its people. While he drove the cold from his bones, he thought about the past two seasons behind enemy lines. His opportunity to infiltrate Castle Darminia had come when bandits from the Kovian Mountains had attacked a small village and stole their supplies. Brigham had slipped in with the fifty refugees and copied their hard-luck story. A few days after entering the Darminian city, he had opened the shop and had become one of King Rothar’s many blacksmiths. Brigham often created broadswords that would break in the heat of battle and he smiled when he thought about how many Abencian lives had been saved because of his faulty workmanship. Since the opening of the shop, he had been gathering information about troop movements and had been meeting with Nall every two weeks. Brigham knew that when

Nall did not give his report to King Lanier another scout would be dispatched to make contact with him.

The events of the previous night weighed heavily on the hardened spy for three reasons. The first was that his enemies knew of his and Nall's meeting place, the second was the fact that Nall was a member of the Crimson Guard and a superb fighter, a match for all but the best warriors of Abencia. That last reason was the sense of danger he had felt. He had come to trust that unusual gnawing in his twenty-four winters of life. The peril that the Ebonian exuded had been more powerful than any he had ever experienced.

Brigham then shook his head and concentrated on making a brittle sword.

The morning went on as normal, Brigham subtly paying attention to the number of soldiers moving in and out, while constructing pathetic weapons. However, about mid-morning a group of twelve Ebonians came through the gates. Although Darminia and Abencia had known about one another for five decades, Ebonia was unknown to both and the three kingdoms had only become aware of each other in the past four winters.

Brigham had only seen a few of the darker-complexioned Ebonians in his life and he still wondered why their skin was different from Abencian's and Darminian's. As he studied the dozen warriors more closely, he noticed that they all wore purple tunics trimmed with gold. Some of these men carried large, heavy broadswords, while others donned thin bladed weapons, and one man even bore two small hatchets. The twelve looked to be hearty warriors, broad-shouldered, narrowed-hipped, and muscular. Brigham did not like what looked like a dawning alliance between the Darminians and these new people. *If an alliance is formed, Abencia will surely fall.*

By midday, the activity of the castle was settled somewhat and most of the occupants were enjoying a lunch consisting of bread and some type of meat or cheese. Just after most of those had finished eating, the entourage of twelve Ebonians exited the castle; however, they now had an additional member. The newcomer's hands were bound behind his back and his feet had been shackled. Twenty Darminians escorted the group and both sides had their respective weapons drawn, each group keeping a wary eye on the other. Brigham smiled, *apparently the Ebonians don't like the Darminians anymore than we do.*

Brigham felt his stomach gnaw as he gazed upon the dark garments and bald head of the smiling prisoner. As they passed by him, the bald one glanced at Brigham and nodded his head. *They know*—Brigham thought as his stomach warned him. He watched as the group of Ebonians exited the gates and placed their prisoner on an extra horse. Before they could even rear their horses around, Brigham was approached by a member of King Rothar's personal guard.

"Come with me, blacksmith," the large man said. "The king requires your expertise on a project of his."

Brigham nodded and fell in behind the guard and soon they entered the gray walls of the castle.

The interior of this castle reminded him of his homeland's fortress. Stone pillars carried the weight of the hall and mismatched granite stones with unsmoothed faces seemed to mesh with the ceiling high above him. On both sides of the passageway, many rounded arches had been cut out of the walls and allowed the faint bustle of horses, soldiers, and working people to drift into the numerous halls.

Those noises did not concern him, but the echo of his escort's footsteps irritated Brigham for some reason. He could not tell if it was because of the familiar feeling kin to hunger that resided in his stomach, or if he just did not like this arrogant Darminian.

As the two men passed through a beam of sunlight, Brigham glanced out of the window and into the breeze. He saw patrolling archers idly pacing the far ramparts. On the ground below those high walls, a young boy was tending to several dozen horses reined outside the main barracks.

As he followed the guard up a flight of stairs, he realized that they were not heading towards the throne room and he began making a mental map for the best method of escape. His desire to assassinate the Darminian king under the cover of night would have to wait if his own life was at risk. The gnawing in his stomach was growing.

Brigham rubbed his left forearm, feeling the metal plate protecting it. The chain mail underneath his robe was cold against his body, and the shin guards inside his boots chafed against his skin, but the extra protection would be worth the discomfort if he had to fight. His hooded merchant cape hid a small arsenal of throwing knives as well as his lanky, muscular frame.

Finally, he and the escort came to a room guarded by two armed soldiers. This definitely was not the throne room and Brigham began to get suspicious, especially since his stomach was now nearly hurting. Upon entering the room, the door slammed behind him and the Abencian spy ground his teeth together, but he kept the act of a timid shopkeeper.

“Come here, blacksmith,” Rothar said, motioning with his right hand.

The king was flanked by two armed soldiers who had their swords drawn and at the ready.

“Blacksmith,” the king said and leaned back. “If that is truly what you are . . . I will not tolerate the way you disregarded the general’s authority the other day!” Rothar said as he slammed his fist down on the stone desk. “Beggars like you are to do what they are told by any man in my army.”

Brigham continued the charade, “Your majesty the gen-”

“Silence!” Rothar said with a violent sweep of his hand. “You answer only when you are given permission!”

The soldier who had escorted Brigham snickered softly. The nigh silent laughter added fuel to the inferno building inside Brigham.

“I take you and your people into my kingdom and this is how you repay me? By striking one of my generals!”

The general had lied. Brigham had never struck him, just snatched the horseshoe away, and the man had fallen, but that did not matter now.

“What have you got to say for yourself?” Rothar shouted. “Answer me, you miserable little beggar!”

Brigham heard the door open behind him and the footsteps of two armored soldiers. *It’s a trap!*

“Shackle this spy.”

With his identity now uncovered, this would be the last chance he would have to complete his mission. Brigham’s beady, brown eyes looked directly into Rothar’s eyes for the first time. As the spy concentrated his ability to sense danger to aid and speed his reactions, he stroked his hands through his sandy-blond hair and pushed his hood back. His hand stopped at the base of his skull.

“I have but one thing to say for myself.” His hand tightened around the throwing knife concealed in the back of his collar. “Long live Abencia!” The knife careened through the air and struck Rothar in the throat.

The pompous young escort reacted far too slowly and Brigham's left foot shattered his nose. The soldier to the king's right sprang at Brigham and viciously swung his sword. The spy stepped into the attack and blocked with his forearm plate and smashed the man's jaw with his right fist. Brigham continued the motion, ducking and spinning to whip his heel into the side of the other charging soldier's leg, dislocating the man's knee. Brigham turned to the oncoming soldiers while jerking out his right boot knife. The blade hurtled through the air and a crimson spray erupted as the knife lodged itself into the left eye of one of the soldiers.

Brigham grabbed a sword from one of the fallen guards and charged the only remaining Darminian who could fight. The man swung high, Brigham easily ducked, and without breaking stride he sliced open the man's stomach, and ran for the door. One of the injured soldiers behind him shouted "Assassin!" "Assassin!" "Assassin!"

Brigham heard reinforcements clamoring up the stairs. He quickly hid behind one of the pillars. Five armed men whistled by with their armor clanking. Brigham turned the corner and ran down the stairs two at a time. Halfway down, two more guards appeared from the archway at the bottom of the stairwell.

Swapping his sword to his left hand, he snatched a throwing knife from the underside of his left forearm. Now, he was bounding down stairs three at a time and his usually impeccable aim had been affected. He had aimed for a guard's face, but the man went down clutching one of his legs. The other soldier waited at the bottom, and just when Brigham got within striking distance he flipped over the Darminian's steel, barely saving his own legs. Brigham landed his somersault, spun and severed the soldier's spine.

The soldiers who had by-passed him earlier charged back down the stairs. Brigham darted through the archway into a large dining room, and he sprinted through it with a speed that few men could match, as shouts of "Assassin!" echoed behind him.

He saw only two ways out of the room, a door to his left and a window at the far end. Brigham raced for the door which suddenly burst open and a surprised archer let an arrow fly. To Brigham's benefit, the shaft flew high and to the left. The archer did not get another chance as Brigham ran his sword through the man's chest. The assassin then sprang through the door into a T-shaped hallway; however, he hastily retreated as a handful of sprinting archers turned the far right corner. The Abencian spy slammed the door and three arrow tips split the wood, nearly cutting his hand.

The five pursuing Darminian soldiers surged into the room through the archway. With no other way out, Brigham dashed for the window. *The gnawing!* Brigham ducked and a sword missed his head by a hair's breadth while two more blades clattered against the floor behind him. The assassin leapt through the window and fell nearly three times his own height, before absorbing the landing with deeply flexed knees.

Brigham's head darted from side to side as he tried to find the horses. None of the patrolling archers had noticed him yet as their attention was focused on the outside of the castle. Brigham saw about a dozen horses on a hitching post a few strides to his left and he sprinted to them. He slashed the largest horse's reins off the post and jumped into the saddle. He reared it around, struck the animal on the backside and it set off in a fierce gallop.

Shouts of "Assassin" rang from the window, and several of the elevated archers turned their interest to the sprinting horse. A few moments later they loosed arrows at Brigham, who hunkered down in the saddle.

"Close the gates! Close the gates! Men to arms, an assassin is among us!" A voice reverberated.

Several soldiers walking between the multiple barracks spotted the fleeing man, drew their swords and charged. Another knife streaked from Brigham and a Darminian went down screaming. It was meant for his heart, but from horseback Brigham considered a hit in the loins a good throw. A soldier swung ferociously at the passing assassin, but Brigham's forearm plate intercepted the blow and the man's hand, still holding the sword, landed on the ground. A heartbeat later Brigham's foot broke a nose, and his own sword clanged off yet another death stroke. Scores of half-clothed Darminians began pouring out of the living quarters encompassing the courtyard and Brigham knew he would be surrounded in moments.

Brigham looked ahead and saw the gatekeeper turning the crank, steadily lowering the gate. He was so close, only thirty paces . . . twenty paces. He drew his last throwing knife. The knife fluttered towards the gatekeeper who saw it coming and ducked. The dagger would have missed him even if he had not sidestepped, but the attack had served its purpose, because the Darminian had stopped lowering the gate in order to save himself. The horse's strides managed to put Brigham several yards ahead of the pack of pursuers.

Once Brigham was outside the gate, he reared the horse around and saw at least a hundred armed men racing towards him, several of whom were atop horses. Brigham knew he had to slow them down somehow. Taking a chance, he threw his stolen sword. It crashed into the gearing of the portcullis's counterweights and the metallic lattice crashed down. The archers, now not afraid of hitting their own men, held nothing back as more than a dozen arrows split the air. The assassin snatched the reins, turning the horse toward the village, and forced the animal to sprint as arrows whistled within fingertips of him. The shafts came so close that one even grazed his left arm.

Brigham crossed the drawbridge over the moat, *the gnawing*, he thought and leapt from the saddle, rolling to avoid serious injury. His horse also rolled and Brigham fluidly came out of the fall onto his feet. He risked a quick glance at his mount as he sprinted for the village. An arrow was lodged in the horse's neck, and in that moment he realized that if he had stayed on the beast an instant longer he would have been hit in the back by that arrow.

Running at top speed for three hundred strides would have tired him six moons ago but even more so now. In his disguise as a blacksmith, he had been forced to keep his abilities a secret and had not been able to maintain his peak physical condition for the period of his spying. Even though he was still well above a normal man's endurance, he was still gasping for breath.

He reached the village and scurried unseen by anyone into an alley and for several moments all he could do was drag in breath after breath, oblivious to anything around him. Brigham found it strange how the body was capable of becoming so racked in its own pain that it could block out everything else. Far too soon, the sounds of running and shouting men ripped him back to awareness. Reinvigorated by the new stress, he headed south and stealthily darted through several more alleys.

Groups of paired soldiers swarmed over the village and began combing the town.

The village was enclosed on three sides by a large wooden barricade about four times Brigham's height. *At least*, Brigham thought, *there are not any ramparts, so archers will not be able to snipe me*. It would be impossible to circumnavigate the wall now as guards would be posted. Even if he made it over the wall he would have to swim the moat, and only The Maker knew what kind of creatures Rothar had put in it.

After accomplishing three silent neckbreakings and more than a half-turn of the glass later, Brigham watched the southern gate from a well-concealed place. *One thing is for sure*, he thought, *I will not get out that way*.

Two score of men guarded the gate and several mounted officers gave a thorough search of any person leaving, especially the women. So Brigham dismissed the idea of posing as an officer or a hooded woman. His enemies knew he was somewhere in the village, and they also knew that the gate was the only way out. Brigham clicked his thumbnail against the hilt of his last victim's sword while devising another plan. It did not take his battle-hardened mind long. Though the thought of it repulsed him, his only way out was through the sewers. Still, he needed to divert his pursuers.

After another turn of the glass, his careful creeping led him to the perfect spot. The wooden barricade had a space of rotten wood and a sewer entrance was no more than fifty paces away. A merchant's cart was also just down the street. The streets were deserted, as all citizens had been ordered to stay inside on his account and most of the soldiers were now scouring the inside of the dwellings.

Brigham paused, looked around, and could not see any soldiers at the moment. He rushed into the open and quickly pushed the fruit-loaded cart towards the rotted part of the wall. The cart slammed home, splintering the wood and making much more noise than Brigham had anticipated. Soldiers came running from every direction, and rushed through the opening chasing after an unseen enemy. However, Brigham watched from inside a half-opened the sewer hatch as many of them had taken the bait.

After a short time trudging through the sewers, he departed the village, put distance between himself and danger, and settled down for the night.

Early the next morning Brigham found a lone traveler, knocked him unconscious, but left him alive. Then, wasting only enough time to lay the merchant's purse beside him, Brigham vaulted into the saddle and steered the stolen horse toward the snow-capped mountains on the southern horizon.