

THE TWINS VOYAGE

THE LEGEND OF THE
DURDARAI

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B.P. BRUIN

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For my grandmother.
Who supported me in everything I did.

Gerda Meulmeester - van der Wende
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CELNION CONTINENT





PROLOGUE

It had been a rough few days as Damien and his crew set down on the small open field. His men lay around a campfire, laughing amongst themselves. Their mission had been nothing short of successful, except for the lack of sleep they suffered.

Over the course of the week, they had stabilised the situation in the north of the country, which had been plagued by raid parties from the east. Together with his men, they had secured the border by hunting down the groups who were responsible for the disruption of peace.

Damien looked up from his sword which he was sharpening with great care. The sound he heard had been as quiet as a whisper in the wind. Still, his ears picked up the noise, making him instantly alert. He looked at his crew sitting around the campfire. They hadn't seemed to notice a thing as they spoke amongst themselves.

The noise died down, leaving only the sounds of nature and his crew. After a few seconds, he heard it again. The noise seemed to come from behind a rock formation fifty yards away. Inconspicuously, Damien looked in its direction. A slight shimmer of light was reflected from the campfire as it hit something metallic behind the rock.

"Prepare for an attack, men," he said in such a casual tone that some hesitated for a moment to understand what he meant. Instantly he lifted his sword up, with his crew following his actions.

They understood that once their commander readied his weapon, immediate action had to be taken.

At that same moment, a group of men came running from behind the rocks, seeing that their surprise attack had failed. They were yelling loudly, coming straight at them.

Damien quickly made a headcount, "Thirty men against ten of us. Sounds like fair odds," he said with a small grin.

"Kill them all," Damien heard the presumed leader of the group yell, highlighting to him who he had to target. Without giving a signal, his men stood in formation, keeping their shields high to defend themselves. Damien stood in the very centre of the row, preparing for their attackers to come at them. He focused his thoughts, breathing in and out, drawing strength from his surroundings and making the necessary calculations before making his move. Without hesitation, Damien pointed his sword at the group of men, releasing a deadly bolt of lightning. They collapsed to the ground, making other members of the group stop as to not trip over them.

"Durdarai!" screamed one of the attackers in cold fear. Instantly, their pace faltered, seeing how five of their men died with ease. Nobody seemed all too willing to go first anymore.

"We outnumber them three to one, kill them now! The first one to kill the durdarai gets a hundred gold pieces!" raged the same voice of the leader again. This seemed to give the group confidence again, and they resumed their attack, slowly at first, but then running fully towards them.

Damien and his men still stood in formation waiting for them to arrive, swords in hand and ready for anything. By now, they were used to fighting opponents who came at them in larger numbers. The more men, the more challenging it was, but after a week of fighting, his men were weary.

Three large attackers arrived at their group ready to attack them, but Damien was quicker. His sword flashed rapidly through the air with speed his opponents couldn't follow. He made quick work of the first two, slashing them across the chest and arms, piercing the third one straight through his armour.

Now everyone in his crew was caught in a fight across the field. Damien turned around, seeing five men coming straight at him. Once more he focused his thoughts, this time on the campfire,

using sahar to bundle it together. A fireball as big as a wagon's wheel shot at his opponents, who screamed in pain and fear as they dropped on the ground. Two managed to evade the fireball, looking frightened before Damien took them out as well with a fierce slash of his sword.

Now there were eight more advancing on him. Focusing again, now on the roots underneath the surface, which shot out of the ground in deadly spikes a second later, taking out half the group in one move. Still, four remained, moving in on him like vultures, attacking at the same time. It proved futile as Damien blocked their swords as well, taking them out one by one as his sword seemed to flow through the air. Moving faster than would be humanly possible.

The fighting continued until Damien came to face the leader of the group. He stared at a mean-looking mug with a chunk missing from his ear and a crooked nose. The man waved his mace in front of Damien, personally challenging him.

"Let's see what you're made of, durdarai. No tricks this time," disdain dripping from his voice. The man attacked with a downward strike meant to crush his head. He moved surprisingly fast for his size, which made Damien move backward as he parried the mace with his own sword. The heavy blow echoed through the field. Again, the mace came at him fast, this time for his stomach, but again he parried. His opponent started attacking him faster and faster, meeting Damien's sword each time.

Damien noticed that his attacker's confidence grew as he was driven back, his own pace looking slow by comparison. The man kept up his flurry of movements, coming from every side. Still, he could not seem to penetrate Damien's iron defence. Suddenly the attacker turned to look around him.

All twenty-nine of his men had either been killed or taken out. He looked back at Damien, who let out a small grin. The man looked in fearful surprise at the Durdarai, who had misled him, only tiring him out. Damien's feigned tiredness had been but an act, and his sword hit true. The last thing he would have seen was the tip of Damien's sword coming for his neck before darkness enveloped him.

The fate of many who overestimate themselves against a durdarai...

CHAPTER ONE

“Again!” The loud voice of the sword teacher, Layla Hevastus, echoed across the training field. The sound of metal hitting metal reverberated as the swords of the twelve students clashed against each other. They were engaged in exercise training, a monotonous drill they had been practising repeatedly for the past week.

Mrs. Hevastus paced around critically, observing each student’s form. Occasionally, she halted to correct a student’s technique, noting every failure, no matter how minor.

“Raise your sword, Lucas! Or are you trying to cut the grass? George, have you eaten snails for breakfast? You certainly move like one today,” she admonished her students, who were now breaking out in sweat. Eventually, she focused on the last two – young William and Elena Huran, the twins.

“You are slower than a snail, sister of mine. Did you have the same breakfast as George did?” he said with a sly smile on his face, using the same remark their teacher had made earlier, knowing she was observing him.

Elena retorted, “If I am so slow, why can’t you get through my defence?” a smile crept up on her lips.

Will looked angrily at his sister. Since childhood, they had maintained a sibling rivalry, always striving to outperform each other in everything they did. While he excelled in all things physical, she consistently outperformed him in academics. Mrs. Hevastus often compared them, describing Elena as steady and levelheaded, though on occasion doubtful in decision-making.

Will, on the other hand, was well aware of what Mrs. Hevastus thought of *him*.

He attempted another set of movements, trying to breach his sister's defences, occasionally incorporating extra moves he had learned from their father. He hoped Mrs. Hevastus wouldn't notice, but if she did, she chose not to comment. He parried his sister's attack at the last possible moment, thrusting his sword forward, knocking her off balance and striking her with the flat side of the sword on her ribs.

"Ouch!" she exclaimed loudly as his sword hit her in the side. "I'll get you back for that."

William just shrugged, seeing her eyes shoot daggers at him. After all, he had hit her harder than necessary.

"Switch!" yelled their teacher.

This meant that attackers were now to defend. Now it was Elena's turn to attack Will. She assumed the proper form and adjusted her body sideways, balancing on the front of her feet. Her sword pointed forwards, hilt to the side as she relaxed her breathing. Elena looked at Will, who also assumed his own position. She waited a bit longer than usual, dragging out her attack because she knew Will would get irritated and impatient, in order to distract him.

"Are you going to attack, or what? You just take forever to get—" Will started saying as Elena took the opportunity to strike him while he was finishing his sentence. Will, who didn't expect this, could barely avoid her attack, parrying her sword to the left at the last second.

"I wasn't ready yet!" he wanted to say, but before he could open his mouth, Elena slashed from the left, wanting to hit his side. With a startled yell, he barely managed to parry the blow at the last second, but in doing so, lost his balance on a knoll of grass which had been pulled up earlier that day. With a loud thud, he landed on his back, the air leaving his lungs as he did. When he opened his eyes again, he saw the point of Elena's sword hanging above his nose.

"Got you!" she said with a smile.

Will got angry at this, something else he inherited from their father. "You just got lucky because you cheated," he barely managed to say, as the air was still returning to his lungs.

"In battle, everything is allowed, young William; you cannot expect the enemy to fight fair against you," said the voice of Mrs. Hevastus as she stood to the left of them, "When you fight an opponent of equal skill or one who is better than you, one must sometimes be creative in order to defeat them."

She offered him a hand to get him back on his feet. Even though their teacher was fierce and strict, she still treated them fairly. Most of the time.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said as he stood on his feet again.

"Don't make that mistake twice," she said with a stricter tone.

Will gulped from the way his teacher looked at him, duly noting what she said in his mind.

"Again," their teacher yelled; the sound of swords continued across the training field.

This time Will was prepared. Elena tried attacking without delay, lurching forward to strike him on the chest. He parried her sword easily to the right. Another strike came, with him prepared. This went on for minutes until he fell into a nice rhythm. He saw that she was getting tired trying to breach his defences.

"All right, that's it for today. Great work everybody. I'll be seeing you all tomorrow," Mrs. Hevastus called to the class.

They gratefully lowered their swords, sweat dripping from their faces.

"I almost had you, you know," Elena said exasperated, wiping her forehead.

"You did not. I easily defended against you this time, without you tricking me," Will said. Elena let out a breezy sound, dismissing his comment. He stripped out of his protective gear, placing it on the racks which were taken away to the small training building further on the grounds. He looked up at the sun, which was already getting low; luckily, the spring evening already brought forth a pleasant temperature.

Some students were already walking towards the dorms of the academy, which lay within the castle walls. They walked with a heavy tread as they felt their muscles ache. Will noted the number of first years who had been watching the final years with great interest. He remembered when he was in their place and looked in awe at the skill his upperclassmen had displayed.

Turning back to the group, he glanced at his classmates. Some

had travelled all the way to the Durdarai Academy, hoping to succeed. Most children came from upper-class families, who wanted to have the title of master durdarai linked to their family. While others came from the middle class, lucky enough to have the wealth to pay for their education. Only rarely did a durdarai come from the lower class.

While the training was long and tough, becoming a master durdarai came with great powers that brought a lot of prestige within the kingdom. And for that, they needed to show they were ready to learn under a master durdarai as their apprentice. For the greater houses, it meant the preservation of their might. For poorer families, it was a way to ascend to higher social ranks. It made it so that every year, tested students who possessed durdarai genetics, came from all over the country hoping to be accepted as a student. And like every year, there were students who fell out during training. This made the pressure of succeeding enormous on the students, as they would be looked upon with shame from their families if they were to fail. For now, however, the only thing the students were thinking about was a warm meal and a drink.

Will and Elena walked along the winding path up to Castle Aedir, noting the grounds were magnificent this time of year. Will looked up; the last remains of the sun shone upon the seemingly impossible tall towers and its great spires. Built so long ago by the first king, the castle truly withstood the test of time.

As they walked further, they crossed the guards on the outer wall. They recognised them, giving a nod as they walked past. Soon, the academy came in sight with everybody pouring in at once. Most students lived there during their four years of training, except for a few. In total, there were four students who weren't currently housed in the Academy; a high-born noble's son, who Will had forgotten the name of, the king's nephew Theodore, and themselves.

They were born and raised in the castle since their father, Damien, became the head of the Order of the Durdarai. A hero of their country and known throughout the seven kingdoms of the west. Their mother, Deborah, a high-ranking diplomat for the country and a talented aensahrina in her own right. Her negotiation skills and art of persuading helped their country achieve a strong position within the continent.

Ever since they were young, people expected great things from both of them, being the son and daughter of such prominent people. Which also meant dealing with living up to certain expectations that put a lot of pressure on them.

"You'd think we get more than basic form training during our last year," Will complained, breaking the silence for the first time that walk.

"It's normal, Will. Like father says; a student with perfect knowledge of the basics can always fall back upon it," Elena said sarcastically, imitating the deep voice of their father to the best of her ability.

Will smiled wryly, "I know what he said, but it feels like a waste of time. I know I am ready for something new," he sighed.

"I agree. But once we train under a master Durdarai, we'll get all the advanced techniques we need to learn," Elena said, trying to brighten his spirit. She knew that Will always wanted to be the best and she shared his mentality. Only her brother could show too much of his impatience sometimes, wanting to do everything at once.

They were silent again as they arrived at the side entrance. Passing the guards of the inner wall and going into one of the smaller courtyards, when a man of the castle staff came up to them, walking with visible haste.

"Young masters," he began and gave a small bow. Will found this gesture always uncomfortable even though he should have been used to it.

"Your presence has been requested in your father's office."

"What for?" Elena asked. Their father rarely called them into his castle office like this, and certainly not at the end of the day, since they would be seeing each other at dinner regardless.

"He didn't say," the messenger said apologetically, seemingly afraid.

Will noted this, another thing he hated about his status: people of the castle staff looking up to them to the point of being afraid. He knew that some abused their status, but this man looked plainly afraid, as if it were his fault that he did not know why their father had called for them.

"Thank you very much. May I ask your name?" Will asked kindly. "I have never seen you around the castle before?"

The man, clearly not expecting such a response, stammered, "He, He Hershel, sir. I was transferred from Gralbres palace not long ago."

"That explains a lot," thought Will. He once met Lord Gralbres after one of the King's formal balls. He and his sons were more pompous and hateful than anyone he'd ever met. Luckily, none of them were durdarai.

"Thank you, Hershel; you may go," Will said to the timid man.

After he left, Elena looked at Will. "He looked awfully scared, didn't he?"

"I think he just got used to how Lord Gralbres treated him," Will said with disdain.

Elena looked saddened as she glanced to where the man had just rounded the corner. "Poor man," she said sympathetically. "But let's not keep father waiting for much longer."

They quickened their pace upon entering the castle, walking along the hallways with their high ornate ceilings. On the way, they passed many people who knew the twins and gave a quick greeting. Eventually, they arrived at their father's office in the back of the castle, close to other state officials. A heavy wooden door stood in their way. Elena knocked on with a certain cadence as she always did,

"Come in," came their father's voice. They entered the room with its heavy wooden accents, filled with many fascinating things and trinkets acquired from years of travel. Some were clearly enchanted, others just very strange to the eye. Will remembered the sheer joy every time his father allowed him into his office, spending all his time looking at the mysterious objects, and his father telling him not to touch anything. Even now, he admired it all.

When they stood in front of his desk, Damien regarded them. "I called you in here to talk about a few things," he began, his face looking very serious, "I've been very busy of late and have not been around very much to guide you during the last few months of training. As I hope you understand."

Damien Huran was a man people looked up to. Broad-shouldered with a well-built physique, like most Durdarai. He wore a well-kept beard, which, like his hair, was a lighter shade of brown. His piercing blue eyes were always focused beneath heavy eyebrows, commanding respect with just a glance. "And since I'm

going away away for about a month, I won't be here to give you more advice during this time," Damien announced.

Will and Elena looked surprised at this news. Father rarely travelled for more than a week at a time since becoming the head of the Order.

"Where are you going, father?" Will asked curiously.

Damien pondered answering the question but felt he owed them an explanation. "I will tell you, but it must be kept a secret. I trust you both to keep this information to yourselves," he said with a serious expression.

Will and Elena looked at each other and quickly nodded. "Yes, father," they said at the same time.

Damien stood up and looked out of the window. "Very well. Our scouts have just returned from their travels. News has arrived that they discovered new land in the west," he told them. "The King wants me to go there and oversee the establishment of the first settlement personally, making sure everything goes without trouble." He walked back to desk.

Will and Elena couldn't hide the excitement on their faces.

"Unbelievable!" Elena said with astonishment.

"How far away is this new land?" Will asked immediately.

Damien smiled at this question. "That's just it. The new land is not even that far, with our modern ships we can get there within ten days."

Will was startled. "They've finally found a solution to cross the vortexes—how?"

"That is something I cannot reveal to you, unfortunately. It's a secret that must be kept that way," Damien replied solemnly.

The twins looked disappointed for a moment before he turned and walked to the cabinet on the left wall. "However, I can show you this," Damien said as he opened the door. In his hands, he held an object wrapped in thick grey cloth. Their father put the object on his desk and unwrapped it. When the last of the cloth was pulled away, a small statue appeared. Will and Elena regarded the statue with great interest.

"What is that?" asked Will.

"This is a statue of a kerkyne," their father said. Will noticed the small green stones that served as its eyes. He felt anger rise in him for some inexplicable reason. Damien continued, "A dark creature

believed extinct after the age of Cairfar. Our historians tell us that these creatures were relentless warriors, corrupted in serving An-Beithíokhin in his conquest. One of the explorers brought it back after finding it in the ruins.”

As their father spoke, Will began to feel more anxious as he looked at the statue.

“Of course, An-Beithíokhin and his corrupted creatures perished long ago after Cairfar bested them,” he said, wrapping the statue back up before storing it in its original place.

“What happened to all those who served him?” Will asked, feeling instantly better after his father put the cloth back on.

“Legend has it that all corruption was taken along with him. Some creatures who were turned against their will went back to normal. Men who willingly followed him were sentenced and locked up. Of course, all this happened more than two thousand years ago. Much knowledge of that age has been lost,” he told them.

There was a momentary silence, until Elena spoke, “When will you be leaving, father?” She held her head a little sideways, her blond hair moving as she did.

“I am going to leave in one month. First preparations must be made before we set sail.” Damien replied.

Will wanted to ask more questions, but before he did, a knock came at the door and he turned around to see who it was.

“Come in,” their father said. A man came through the door and gave an official greeting to them all. He wore a dark captain’s uniform. Their father greeted the man in a similar way before he regarded them once more.

“Children, I must have this meeting. I will see you during dinner.” Damien waved his hand to the door, indicating it was time for them to go. After the twins said their goodbyes, their father spoke once more, “And remember what I’ve said,” holding his index finger to his lips.

The twins closed the door behind them as they left for their living room. Since their father became the head of the Order fifteen years ago, their family had moved to the castle, permanently living there. They were housed on the second floor on the west side of the castle, enjoying all the perks of living there.

Although Will hated all the annoyances that came with living

at a royal court, he still loved living in the magnificent castle. Even after fifteen years, he felt like he had not discovered everything, many secrets left undiscovered. While he loved the castle, the people in it always expected them to look their best and required them to live up to etiquette. He'd rather be on a grand adventure out in nature, where people didn't expect so much of him. He knew Elena shared many of his ideas; the difference between them is that she didn't always outwardly show those desires.

They walked past the long hallways of the castle, talking about what their father had said until they arrived at the door that led them to their own part of the castle. As they entered their living room, they relaxed their static postures. A large room with a marble floor, a fireplace at the end, and high windows that let in natural sunlight. This time of year they opened up so that a breeze moved the curtains on this spring evening.

"Children, how was training?" The voice of their mother called from the balcony. Will suppressed the urge to yell back, saying he found it rather monotonous. Instead, he answered with, "It was very educative," in a flat tone.

Their mother walked into the living room. Deborah Huran was always the epitome of grace. She wore a white, elegant dress accentuated by her tall stature, her blond hair fixed in a neat bun on her head. Kind brown eyes always looked at you like she cared for you. Will knew her kind demeanour was sometimes deceiving, for she could be fierce when the need arose. It made her very good at her job and hard to win any argument against her.

"I know you both find training tedious," she looked at her children, "You are both too much like your father in that manner."

"Mother, we are still doing basic training exercises. We already learned those with father years back! Instead of giving us more difficult forms, we're just getting bored to death!" Will confessed, while he couldn't help raising his voice a little.

"Will is right, Mother," Elena called out, "Even I agree that this is getting ridiculous. Maybe other students are not willing to learn as fast because they are preoccupied with other things! But we are."

Their mother sighed and looked them in the eyes. "I know you are ready for more, but be patient. You'll soon get to learn more than anything you have before. What's a few more months after

all?” She said. “Now go enjoy your free evening.”

“Yes, Mother,” Will and Elena said diligently before proceeding to go to their own rooms.

Later that evening, Will left his room in the middle of the night, climbing out from his balcony. During dinner with his family, he and his sister had tried, without result, to question their father about the new land. However, their father was not willing to share anything more with them. Will became frustrated, got angry, and it turned into an argument.

So on nights like these, he liked to climb, forgetting his frustration. He tested his grip on one of the walls outside on the balcony. First one hand, then the other, and lastly his feet, until he was like a spider against the wall. As he climbed, his balcony got further below him, and he knew that he could not afford any mistakes.

The only mistake he ever made was getting caught by one of the chambermaids who decided to dust off the blankets out of the window one evening, just as he was looking inside the room. She had screamed, and Will almost lost his grip, his foot slipping away. Luckily, he caught hold of a metal pin sticking out close to the window, only to be lifted up by the castle guard moments later. They recognised him, of course, and they took him to his father, who got very angry at him for being so irresponsible. So the next time he went to climb again, he made sure to avoid windows and to double-check if there was no other choice but to pass them.

As he went on climbing, he noticed movement a couple of meters to his right above him. A window opened up, and he heard a man coughing. He stopped climbing and held himself very still, barely breathing. He knew that any movement would surely give him away. People rarely expected anyone to climb a wall, so even if they looked down, Will hoped he would not be noticed in the darkness. He focused his ears to hear if the person was still there. Minutes went by before he dared looking up, noticing that the person had left.

Unfortunately, his hands began to cramp up, so quickly he climbed further to his destination. He climbed with a firm pace and didn't get stopped by distractions along the way again. Finally, he reached the open spot underneath one of the great arches, which connected waterways all along the castle. What made these

waterways special was that the stream could also go upwards due to manipulation made by the kings aensahr, thus providing the whole castle with fresh running water.

He stretched his arms and sat down underneath the arch, shielding him from any onlookers so that he had his private viewpoint of the west side of the castle. From here, he could see for miles over the capital city of Aedir down the hill below. He observed the numerous lights emanating from distant buildings, discerning vague shapes of people moving in front of windows. Even farther away, he gazed at the harbour and the Erocin river alongside it, with the many ships dancing on the water, and the gentle swaying of the masts. On the south side, nestled against the very edge of the city, the ever-growing number of the newly termed factories were visible. While many people were profiting from it, either the factory owners or the jobs that came with it, Will and Elena both found it to be an eyesore on the view.

Will sat there contemplating various thoughts, but the most prominent on his mind was the discovery of new land. With all his heart, he longed to embark on a grand adventure, escaping the monotony of training and his education. He suddenly found himself conceiving an idea—an idea he could only share with his twin sister, but he knew he would have to wait until morning to express his thoughts.

After a while, he leaned back to gaze at the stars, pondering what his future might hold. With that idea fresh in mind, Will wrapped his cloak around him and began counting the stars. Growing very tired, he allowed his eyes to close for a while, feeling the warmth of the spring evening, only disrupted by a gentle breeze.

He awoke the next morning to the sound of a rooster crowing far below him. For a moment, he was disoriented, then remembered he had climbed two floors higher the previous evening. He had not intended to fall asleep, especially not here. Looking at the sky above, where he could still vaguely see the stars, he sighed with relief that he had not overslept and still had time to climb back. Today was their free day, and they planned to go to the fair

in the city.

In record time, he descended the castle wall, encountering no disturbances, as around this hour the staff was still asleep or just beginning to wake. He reached his own balcony after a swift climb, where the door to his room remained as he had left it, slightly ajar, and silently entered. He closed the door behind him and began to get dressed as he prepared for a new day.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning, Will and Elena walked toward the city. Their mother had insisted they take a carriage, but the twins dismissed this idea, saying it would draw too much unwanted attention to themselves. Their father had agreed, stating it was best if they remained incognito to enjoy the fair. This also resulted in their choice of clothing, looking more like lower class citizens than anything else. Will despised the idea of being on display while in a carriage as they went to the spring festival. The way people looked up at them made his skin crawl. He just wanted a carefree day without adhering to proper etiquette, which the upper class seemed to delight in.

As the sun rose, its first rays illuminated the spaces between city buildings, casting a warm glow on the streets below. A subtle smell of flowers and fresh bread lingered in the air, a result of the Aensahr's ingenious use of sahar to enhance the city's appeal. Without it, the city might have carried the scent of smoke and manure.

Observing the diverse array of people on the bustling streets, Will couldn't help but be fascinated. Strange-looking beggars, foreigners in unique attire, government officials, and merchants—all contributing to the vibrant tapestry of Aedir's daily life. Although the twins were born and raised in Aedir, they maintained a peculiar duality, never fully immersing themselves in the hustle and bustle of the city. Nevertheless, Will cherished

the sense of adventure that every trip outside the castle brought. A rarity, since their fourth year was busy with classes and training, despite their complaints on how slow things went.

With his ideas from previous night fresh in his mind, Will wanted to have a private conversation with Elena. Unfortunately, their father had assigned a member of the Order as their personal guard for the day. The man, though maintaining a neutral expression, appeared displeased at being tasked watching them for the day, while also having to navigate the busy streets on foot. Will needed to find a way to distract their guard from overhearing his plans if he wanted to keep them a secret.

Their journey proceeded smoothly until they reached a small street where two men with broken carts stood, engaged in a heated argument. They made furious gestures to each other. "You pig-headed moron! Can't you see I had the right of way?" a heavy-set merchant yelled.

"The only right you have, is to kiss my behind! You must be blind, thinking you could move your wagon through here!" the other, a rough-looking fellow, said with an equally angered voice.

Their guard, Callum, approached the two men to clear their path. Sensing an opportunity, Will turned to Elena.

"I've been thinking," Will began, only to be interrupted by his sister's sarcastic remark.

"A miracle has happened; my brother thinks for once," she said, raising her hands in the air along with a sly grin.

Ignoring her playful jab, Will continued with excitement, "What if we could join father's expedition to the new land? Our exams are in months away, and we've already mastered basic training. Let's ask father if we can accompany him!"

Elena hesitated, her thoughts also drifting toward the news of the new land. Although she didn't want to admit it to Will, she too felt ready for something more than basic training. And the longing for travel was all too strong.

"I don't know, Will. It doesn't sound like a very good plan. Father wasn't very open about it last night," she replied cautiously.

"We can be more persuasive. It's not like he hasn't taken us along before," Will argued. "Besides, how many times have we aced our tests? We could miss a month of academy training, and it still wouldn't hurt our final exams."

Elena, still unsure, considered his points. While it was true they had joined their father on short trips within the kingdom, and a few times over the border to Cuerlas, this was an entirely different idea.

“Elena, please!” Will urged.

“Alright, maybe we can try,” Elena said, not fully convinced yet.

“Then stop being so hesitant for once and let’s think of something!” Will said, hopeful. Will sensed that in the back of Elena’s mind, something had stirred—an excitement for adventure. It was almost as if he could read his sisters thoughts. Will wanted to discuss his plans further, but Callum had already resolved the situation and was now returning.

“We’ll discuss more about this tonight,” Will whispered.

Elena nodded, and they continued onward to the fair.

The grand fair of Aedir was an annual celebration hosted by the King to express gratitude to the people and give back to them. People from all corners of the country flocked to attend this grand event. Streets were lined with diverse stands offering exotic foods and beverages—enchanted wine from the far west, unfamiliar fruits, and other marvels. Animal shows exhibited strange beasts and monstrous beings, captivating the attention of children and occasionally startling curious adults who stepped too close. Aensahr showcased their talents, manipulating elements or illuminating the very air with a variety of colours.

All these festivities took place in and around the expansive oval park at the city’s centre. Inns were fully booked, and restaurants were bustling every night. While the city came alive with people seeking enjoyment, the week also brought chaos, attracting individuals hoping to profit from pick-pocketing, stealing, and scamming unsuspecting victims.

This was one reason why Damien and Deborah had sent a guard to watch over their children. Despite the twins’ ability to defend themselves, they lacked the experience of handling threats during such chaotic events.

Upon reaching the main street, the twins were overwhelmed by the spectacle. Will and Elena had attended the fair for as long as they could remember.

“It seems to get more spectacular every year!” Will exclaimed with a broad smile.

“Well, they certainly went all out with the food court,” Elena observed, eyeing numerous food stands displaying an array of treats. She stopped at a vendor selling shepherd pies, purchasing one for herself, one for Will, and one for Callum.

The guard appeared genuinely surprised by her gesture. Accustomed to dealing with haughty upper-class behaviour, he, the daughter of the famous durdarai, buying him a pie, was unexpected.

“Thank you, miss Huran,” he said and smiled.

“You’re welcome,” she replied cheerfully.

Silently, they enjoyed the delicious, warm pie. Will briefly considered getting another but decided against it for he knew the second one never tasted as good as the first.

So, continuing along the court, they visited more stalls, bought non-alcoholic enchanted wine, and indulged in the sweet, warming sensation it provided. Suddenly, the twins found themselves floating above the ground, the feeling of weightlessness oddly pleasant.

“We’re floating, Will!” Elena exclaimed in amusement. Will laughed, spinning around in a circle. Even Callum couldn’t help but crack a smile. The effect lasted only ten seconds before they slowly descended to the ground.

After finishing their drinks, they continued strolling along the fair, stopping to explore whatever caught their attention. They bought heavenly tasting chocolate from Mr. Write’s chocolate stand, enjoyed cotton candy from The Mad Spinner, and treated themselves to ice cream so cold that both their brains felt frozen by the time they finished it.

After enjoying so much food that left their stomachs aching, they ventured into the park, where an array of games awaited. Will’s attention was caught by one particular attraction.

“Step right up, young man, step right up!” cried the game’s host. He wore a red overcoat with a bow tie and a straw hat. On his face sat a moustache so large, that it almost concealed his whole mouth. The man continued, “You look strong enough for the challenge. Why not give it a try?”

“Are there any rules?” Will asked, examining the contraption—a setup of two standing wooden beams with a central metal rod.

“Double your money by hanging on as long as possible!” the

man cried out, flashing a smile at Will.

"What's the catch?" Will asked with curiosity, well aware that many games were rigged.

"The only catch is that the bar is not fixed. It can spin freely, but only if you move your hands too much!"

He thought for a moment. As a climber he was accustomed to holding his body weight for extended period. This would be no different and accepted the challenge with a confident smile.

"I'll do it!" he declared to the moustached man, exchanging five bronze galdens to enter. Though not the cheapest game, Will believed he could effortlessly double his money.

The man turned to the crowd with his arms wide, "Watch the young man take on the challenge! Will he hold on, or will he fail?" he cried out with a theatrical flourish.

Will assumed his position, grasping the metal bar, feeling its initial spin. After a moment's adjustment, he mused, "*I could do this in my sleep,*" glancing at the hourglass the man turned around.

As the seconds ticked away, the man's enthusiasm waned.

"*Ten more seconds before I start to earn my money back,*" Will thought, smiling as he easily held himself up. Suddenly, he felt the bar beginning to spin ever so slightly beneath his hands. Surprised, he attempted to hold on, but it kept going as the one-minute mark approached. Desperately adjusting his grip, Will struggled against the increasing speed of the spinning bar. When finally he couldn't hold on any longer, Will reluctantly let go just before the last grains of sand fell in the hourglass.

"Ohhh, looks like the young man wasn't strong enough to complete the challenge after all. Who else wants to try and double their money!"

"Will, are you all right?" Elena asked him as she saw his face turn red.

"No," Will said. "He cheated!" Looking at the man accusingly, "The bar started spinning on its own before I reached sixty seconds!"

People around them started looking with suspicion at the contraption, searching for signs of foul play.

"Young boy, the bar is supposed to be spinning. Maybe you are not as good as you thought!" The man said to him, trying to dismiss his claim.

"The bar was spinning with force; I know what I felt!" Will started to get angry and was prepared to do something he might regret. But before he could do anything, a muscular bald man came from the crowd.

"Let me try, see if this thing is truly rigged," he volunteered as he took position underneath the contraption and gripped the bar. The man with the moustache nodded and turned the hourglass.

Will watched with patience as the sand slowly trickled away. "*Ten seconds before the sand fully reaches the bottom,*" Will counted in his head, expecting the bar to turn any moment. But the sand ran out, and the moustached man turned the hourglass again. The bald man let go, making the crowd cheer loudly. The people now standing eagerly in line, waiting for their turn now that they saw it was, in fact, possible.

"Congratulations, we have a winner!" The moustached man said, giving the bald man a handshake.

"H—How!" Will exclaimed.

"It looks like you were just not capable enough, young man," the moustached man said, giving a pouch of coins to the bald man. "Now move along, boy, I've no time for your accusations."

Will got even more angry and advanced toward the man, but Elena stepped in. "Let's just go, Will," she said, calming him down. They walked away, leaving the man and his attraction behind.

"I keep telling you, he cheated - I felt the bar spinning with force!" Will exclaimed to Elena as they sat in the rolling Mosswheel, a restaurant catering to upper-class citizens. Initially, the man at the front door had refused to admit them, judging them by their attire. Clad in old black trousers and worn overcoats, topped with vests, they didn't fit the typical appearance of the upper class. Elena, with her blond hair concealed beneath a flat cap, even looked like a boy. Though they undeniably resembled twins, they lacked the air of the upper class.

It was only when Callum intervened as their guard, presenting a piece of identification, that they were allowed entry. The waiter turned pale upon recognising them. "I apologise. Please, sir, ma'am, come inside," he said with a bow, gesturing toward the door.

Will scoffed as they passed him, not due to the mistake, but rather the fact that they wouldn't serve those perceived as low-

er class. Will hadn't realised before, but as he observed the surroundings, he concluded that it was indeed an establishment exclusively serving the wealthy. However, he wasn't about to leave, particularly as he had a fondness for the roast beef with bread. They soon found a table by the window, affording them a view of the fair outside. Callum excused himself for a moment.

"Maybe you just slipped, Will?" Elena asked. "The man after you managed to hold on for the full length."

"I don't know how, but something wasn't right. I know that much."

"Please just let it go, Will. Be sensible," Elena said, opening the menu.

Will relented, glancing at the menu as well, though he already knew what he would order. At that moment, Callum returned and rejoined them, followed by a waiter who took their order: two servings of roast beef and a fresh salmon dish. Soon, they all ate in silence, enjoying the delicious food. The roast was perfectly cooked, and as they scooped up the last bits with some bread, they sighed with contentment.

Will was at ease until he looked outside. Where he spotted two familiar faces passing by the window—the moustached man from earlier, accompanied by the bald one. Without a second thought, Will hurried outside the restaurant, followed by the confused exclamations of his sister and Callum. He couldn't afford to lose the men. In the street, he halted, scanning both sides for any sign of the two.

"Will!" came Elena's voice from behind him as she rushed out of the restaurant. "What has gotten into you?"

"I saw them together outside the restaurant."

"Who did you see?" Elena asked, still visibly confused about her brother's actions.

"The moustached man and the bald one!" He replied. "THERE!" He sprang forward as he caught sight of the man's straw hat sticking above the crowd, running after them and navigating through the bustling crowd. Elena tried calling him back but to no avail.

When he came to the point of their last location, he couldn't see either of them anymore. Afraid they might have gotten away, he searched frantically. Until eventually, he glimpsed another sight of the two. It sent him running and he went as fast as he could in

between the crowd of people, many of them startled as he almost bumped into them. Cursing and shouting profanities, Will didn't give them a single glance as he kept his eye on the target, not willing to lose them out of sight. The duo eventually turned down the main street to one of the smaller alleyways.

Will walked up to the junction, slowly peering around the corner. He could see that they were standing behind a bunch of wooden crates. Will crept closer as he hugged the wall, managing to stay out of sight, only stopping when he reached the crates. There he listened to their conversation.

"...but that street-boy almost exposed us! The people were starting to get suspicious and some even turned away!" said the voice of the moustached man.

"Relax, Jarad. They haven't noticed anything; I proved them otherwise. Nobody would believe the kid after that anyway," said the voice of the bald man.

"I am not relaxed! Your trick worked, but that's not the point I'm making. Normally, the spinning would remain unnoticed by normal people and they simply don't question it! We could be jailed if this was reported to the city guard! Unlicensed practice of sahar is extremely forbidden!"

"So how did the boy notice then?" The bald man asked.

"That's the point I'm trying to make!" Jarad said, raising his voice.

So he is an aensahr, Will thought with surprise. That explains how he could move the bar without people being aware of the fact. He must have fallen deeply after losing his license. After all, being a student at the institute takes a long time, and the tuition was nothing to scoff at. But that all paid after you graduated.

At that very moment, a window loudly opened somewhere behind him, which caught the attention of Jarad, who leaned to look behind the crates to see what the noise was about. There, he locked eyes with Will, who was crouched behind the crates.

"THE BOY!" Jarad yelled in anger. "Get him!"

Jarad and the bald man sprang into action, but Will reacted fast and drew his long hidden knife instantly, taking on a defensive position. The men in front of him stopped.

"So I was right, you cheated the game," Will called out towards the two men.

Jarad seemed surprised by his quick reaction, but the man soon