

The sun broke the horizon east of the road, filling the valley for miles with soft golden rays, illuminating the landscape that ran down mountains looming to the north. It was a warm summer sunrise, with no wind to remove the foul stench of decay.

Marthius Devar, Knight Ranger of the Gray, looked grimly at the scene in front of him. He had stopped his horse at the mouth of the valley to get his bearings. For days he had been following a rogue band of thieves had pillaged and killed, taking slaves of women and children, moving them in large slow carts that Marthius could easily follow.

He had found the thieves and a small caravan they had plundered. Nothing moved in the soft breeze except the small black clouds of carrion flies. There had been a lot of fighting, and the caravan guards had put up a good fight, but he couldn't figure out why all the thieves were dead. They had outnumbered the guards three to one, and all his reasoning borne of his years in battle and combat training suggested that the murderous bastards should have won the day and been long gone.

But no... here they all were, dead as rocks, all seemingly fallen from their horses or slumped over the dead guards they had killed. He looked around to see where the horses were, and he spotted them grazing a few miles down the valley, still saddled and packed with bags.

Marthius, was not a man easily spooked, but there was something very disturbing about the whole scene. He dismounted and began to track the traces of the battle.

It had happened a little over three days before. The caravan had rested here for the night. The blackened embers of fire places remained, and he could see the pot of stew that still rested next to the fire pit. Most had been asleep, except three—no, four—sentries. And of those four guards, two had slept—they hadn't moved from their posts at all. Arrows protruded from their skulls and torsos.

Now the attackers had charged into the two remaining guards and quickly struck them down. Marthius moved around the camp as he saw the battle in his

mind, the tracks sometimes substantiating and sometimes revising the pictures of the fight he saw in his mind.

While the guards screamed, and the horses whined, the rest of the camp had awoken in panic and terror. The sweaty scent of fear must have hung heavily in the air. Some opened their eyes to find swords pointing at them; others tried to hide or cover their families.

The small battle had happened as it should have according to logic of the situation. Although the rank sight and smell of the dead might have overwhelmed another man, Marthius had seen many battlefields before, and the more analytical part of his mind had set in.

The guards had been cut down where they stood, but then, strangely enough, the attackers had die there as well. Marthius prodded the corpse of a man who had impaled a guard with a Barrowi war spear and died. There were no wounds on the dead attacker; he was simply slumped over the dead guard. Marthius turned over the dead attacker and saw a look of horror engraved on his face.

Marthius searched on, going over each body of the attackers and not finding a single wound. All had died with a look of total surprise in their faces—death had come before they had even registered it completely. Marthius found tracks leading to and from the camp.

Now Marthius was in a dilemma. He had two options. First, he could follow the path of the raiders, and if he did that, he would most likely find the slaves that the band had taken from the inns and farmsteads. He would also be able to capture whatever guards they had left behind to guard the hostages.

On the other hand, he could follow the tracks that had fled the camp, tracks that looked like those of children, and perhaps find out what had killed the thieves. His curiosity grew as he looked at the corpses around him. The mystery was almost like a drug; once he got the scent of something like this, he had a hard time letting it go, and something in the air, or the way the sun fell on the whole scene, it was like the path of the Children was brighter than the other. Gesturing to Alfred, his horse, Marthius chose the tracks leading out of the camp, heading into the hills to the east. Alfred followed behind him in a steady pace,

always keeping himself within reach if his master had to mount in a hurry. Marthius needed to find out what had happened here, and if he took the other path, he would never know. He would be too busy with all the slaves to be able to follow the mystery and find the missing children.

The tracks led off toward the hilly side of the valley to the east. After a few hundred paces, he found bloody rags tossed to the side and the broken shaft of an arrow, also bloodied. There was a small trail of blood now to follow besides the light prints in the grass. From the splotches of blood, he deduced that one adult and three younger children had come this way, the adult limping and bleeding profusely.

The trail led him around the base of a hill and there he found the man, dead in a pool of blood. Evidently, he had bled out; there was a broken arrow embedded in his thigh. Marthius said a small prayer to Sartius, the god of rebirth, guiding the soul to the next life. That done, he got up and followed the tracks of the remaining three youngsters, who had run deeper into the hills, the knot in his stomach growing harder. These children had hardly begun life and would not have much experience surviving in the wild, and now they were all alone, probably scared and tired. He hurried as fast as he could.

After about two miles, he came upon a small pond pooled between two hills. From the crushed grass and tracks, and a few splinters of chicken bones, he could tell that they had rested and eaten a bit before continuing east. Marthius tried to recall his maps. To the north was the Black Wall Mountains, and to the east... he paled. To the east was the Forbidden Valley, an old and accursed place. Rumors abounded, and the stories were always bad.

The children had a head start of three days, maybe more, but he was on a horse and they were on foot. He would catch up with them within a day or two at the most.

He began to follow the tracks from horseback. That was difficult to do in the hilly terrain, but Marthius excelled at it. Some might even go so far to say that he was touched by magic. It seemed to him that once he had the *scent* of a track, as one might call it, the tracks seemed to take on a different color from the

surrounding area. They looked just a touch darker than the grass or a bit brighter than the rocks. But the longer it had been since the tracks were made, the more they faded and fell from his sensing.

These tracks were clear to him. They were relatively fresh and since there were three sets, he might as well have been following a herd of cattle. He rode at a trot to keep up the pace urgency guiding him. He feared for the children. Whatever was with them, or following them, could kill without leaving a mark. He had a feeling that the children were moving as fast as they could, fear guiding them.

As he rode, Marthius thought back to the events that had brought him there.

Six years before, the heavens had broken, and all hell had been unleashed upon the world, stars had faded, leaving several gaps in the heavens where the zodiacs of the gods had been.

During the nights of Darkness, a large earthquake shook the regions north of the Black Wall Mountains. Large flocks of birds had been reported dropping from the skies in the capital of Altion to the south. Ancient ships washed up on the beaches near Halfmoon City, and rumors spread about dead sailors walking.

After the Nights of Darkness, Marthius had pleaded with the council of his order, for them to help the survivors and to fight against the evil that plagued the world, they refused, claiming that secrecy was the best weapon until they knew who was behind it all. Marthius had left the Citadel of the Grey. His closest companions had followed him, and they made a new home for themselves just south of the Black Wall Mountains in an abandoned keep.

After they left the monastery, Sister Mal jokingly named their band of knights Marthius's Hands. They even wore tunics embroidered with a golden hand on their chests. After a while, the name became a badge of honor, and their numbers swelled. More and more of the Knights of the Gray grew displeased with Orders rules and left the monastery to join their band rather than form an open rebellion. Now the Golden Hands numbered over a hundred knights, and they all deferred to Marthius, even though he didn't want that responsibility.

There were so many stories about strange happenings coming in from all corners of the world that Marthius and his fellow knights of the Gray knew that the balance had shifted and Evil now outweighed the Good. They spent the next five years trying to set things right, and that included hunting bandits and raiders. Every little bit of good to counter the greater evil helped.

Marthius had been following a particularly nasty band of raiders for a while now. They had become bolder and bolder, raiding farther into the more patrolled areas and becoming more vicious.

And yesterday he had finally found the last of them. But his charge was not complete. Now he had to save the children and to find a way to save the slaves. He was still in doubt. He had chosen to pursue the children, but had he made the correct choice?

Alfred crested a hilltop and spotted distant carrion birds circling in a waiting pattern. The children's tracks led that way.

A feeling of unease grew in his stomach, fear. He urged Alfred on, and soon he came around a bend in the hills. On the shore of a small lake lay the bodies of three huge water trolls being picked apart by a flock of vultures and crows.

Water trolls were not something that one easily killed. They were the size of a large man but with long, ape-like arms. They were covered in a thick, grayish pelt and had small red eyes full of malice. A few years before, he had encountered one such troll. It had taken two skilled fighters to take him down. Trolls had the ability to regenerate from almost any wound inflicted on them unless it were of fire or magic. That three of them had died here spoke of formidable skill.

Marthius could see the children's tracks leading toward the trolls. He dismounted and put his hand on Alfred's face, a sign to the horse to be quiet. Alfred nodded once with his big head, his response to his master.

Marthius began slowly to approach the trolls' area, looking for signs that might tell what had happened. No one had been there besides the children. *The three children had approached the waterfront at night, and as they had drawn water from the lake, the trolls had jumped them... and died?* Marthius thought, bewildered. Something capable of killing bandits and trolls had followed or was

with these children, but he couldn't see any signs of it or them. The only tracks he saw were those of the children, and none of these kids could kill a troll. But somehow they had, and that scared him more than anything. He was used to dealing with a lot of unknowns, but an unknown that could kill like that was something altogether new to him. He couldn't tell from the bodies of the trolls what kinds of injuries they had sustained; the carrions birds had been too busy at work.

Marthius could see that the trolls attacking the children had resulted in some wounds. Red blood spatter mixed in with the greenish troll blood, and the children had fled the scene, leaving behind their water skin. He whistled a short tone, and Alfred came trotting to him, following behind him a few paces while Marthius continued along the children's tracks. He could clearly see that the eldest of the three children had been hurt; he was limping and there was blood in the prints. After a few hundred yards, they had stopped, and he found shreds from an old tunic that had been torn. They must have bound the wounds and continued eastward. The limp continued, but at least it seemed they had gotten the bleeding under control. Marthius mounted and rode after the children. They would not be far off. They moved much slower now, and he hoped that he would reach them the next day.

As dusk began, Marthius settled down beside a fallen log to eat some dried meat and watch the sunset. The skies were covered in deep orange and red colors as the twin moons of Selendor appeared. The moons had many names, different in every nation across the lands. He couldn't recall all their names; some called the large moons the Eyes of the Gods, Twins of the Molopah, and the Desert's Blessings, to name a few.

According to the priests at the Citadel of the Gray, the moons were manifestations of dead gods, remnants of their power left behind after an old war in the heavens. But he believed differently. He knew in his bones that the gods were there and not dead, that the moons were in fact the physical presence of the gods looking down on mortals, just like the Zodiacs where. Only the ignorant claimed that the gods were long dead.

Why else would the world have gone into chaos six years before, when the some of the gods had died, explaining the absence of four of the Zodiacs in the nights sky. The Zodiacs where the manifestation onto the realm of the mortals that the gods where there. Besides, Marthius had always felt that Shinaria, the goddess of nature, represented by the Zodiac of the Hunter, was with him. She had always guided him in subtle ways. Sparkles in the water to catch his needed attention, ants moving to guide his trails, bats winging by him at night to guard his sleep. Or the way his arrows always hit their mark. So, he knew for a fact that there was more in the heavens than dead stars and moons.

Whenever the moons arose, he was comforted that the gods were still there and still watching. He prayed to the gods to keep the children safe and to watch over them as they slept.

This night, the twin moons of Selendor were blood-red moons. Somewhere a large battle had happened. Blood moons meant death. He shivered. Not a good omen. He was contemplating that this might be fatal for him, this hunt. Whatever had been able to kill both the bandits and the trolls was something powerful, and if he should die, what then would happen to the slaves? Who would guide his knights? The night filled him with unease, and he had a hard time finding any rest.

The next morning came none too soon. He had hardly closed an eye and was no closer to a solution about the slaves and their situation. He broke camp just after sunrise and had a short breakfast. He gathered his belongings and rode from the clearing, his bow unstrung but his strings ready in the oil pouch. The hair on the back of his neck rose at every sound, but he ignored his fear and urged Alfred forward.

Around noon, he crested a hilltop and spotted a small cave in a hillside. The glimmering tracks lead to the entrance, and on closer inspection, he found the remains of a small camp. There were some bloody rags and bread crumbs, and tracks led from the cave, heading east.

A few hours later, Marthius rounded a hill and saw the entrance to a small valley. The hills loomed larger around him, and down in the middle of this small

valley was the remnants of an ancient road. Cold sweat ran down Marthius's back; he feared where that road would lead.

The road was old. It was cracked and barren of vegetation, as if nature didn't want to touch it, but the tracks followed the road. Beside the road stood a large stone marker—a triangle with an orb at the summit, representing a moon. It was a symbol of the Ancients that the Citadels of the Old were nearby. There were few places on Kelmia that Marthius didn't want to visit, and the Citadel of the Moon in the Forbidden Valley was one of them.

No one could tell what was in the Forbidden Valley. There were legends of an old grand city now in ruins, rumors of unopened treasure halls. Tomb robbers had snuck in, but none ever returned. That had a dampening effect on people's enthusiasm. Even if the largest pile of gold might be waiting there, what good did it do you if getting it got you killed?

Marthius didn't believe all the stories. He knew that the Valley of Suffocations was guarded by a branch of his old brothers, the Arms of the Gray. Three large keeps connected by a huge wall blocked the entrance to the valleys. More than six hundred men patrolled the walls and manned the keeps. None of the other nations helped. Secretly, Marthius thought that the kingdoms of Altion, Manalur, and the Desert of Kaliman had forgotten all about the Order of the Gray. But the Order was not without its resources. They had agents everywhere, and almost every orphanage in Kelmia was connected to the Order, so they got a steady stream of fresh men, women, and children. They were the guardians in the shadows.

But he still didn't want to go to the Citadel. This old road was not known to him, and it was unlikely that it was guarded by the Gray. He couldn't even tell if this road did indeed lead into the valley. Yet this was the route the children had taken, and if so, they could be in serious trouble. Marthius knew he had to follow the road, no matter where it led.

Marthius trotted down the road. It wound its way around a small hill and past clusters of dead trees. The entire valley began to look more and more devoid of life the farther into it he went. No birds twittered, no rabbits poked around, no

animals appeared at all. The vegetation thinned, starting with the trees whose skeletons clawed the sky. Then the grass turned brown. A few miles down the road, all signs of a living nature disappeared until only its dry husks remained. But the tracks followed the road, and he followed the tracks.

He arrived at the end of the road. A vast pile of rocks blocked his path. There must have been an avalanche at some point in the past, something that had crumpled a mountain into the valley. The road looked impassable, but the children's tracks led into the rubble, going up. So Marthius untacked his horse and gave him the free and guard command. Alfred was a well-trained warhorse and he would roam here until Marthius returned.

The tracks led Marthius up and deep into the large boulders. Eventually he came upon a passageway. It was not big, but it looked well-travelled. Different kinds of tracks marked the ground, three sets of small human feet and many prints of something larger with ponderous feet. Some had claws; Marthius hoped those belonged to a mountain lion. But those tracks were older, and nothing had passed through there, other than the children, for the last few weeks.

Marthius stood still, conflicted. While he felt duty-bound to help the children, he had to report this passageway to the Gray and get men here to guard it. The slaves also had to be rescued. *Well, nothing to do about that now*, he decided. He had chosen his road and he had to follow it to the end. No matter what happened, he would see the children safe.

But how in all the heavens had the children known about this path? Grim-faced, he walked and crawled through the tunnel. In many places, he could see that someone had used hammer and chisel to carve out the way.

Then he pushed into the sunlight on the other side, and a vision that he had never expected assaulted his senses. In front of him, an ancient forest rose. The trees were gigantic, looming so large and dense that they nearly blocked out the sun, making it look dusky and dark on the forest floor, and he could see that it got darker the farther in he looked. He had expected to see a valley of death—a desert, perhaps skeletons or demons—but not this.

The trees themselves were older than any he had ever seen or heard about, and he was surprised to hear noises on the breeze—birds singing, animals making mating calls, the wind moving the branches far above him.

Sending up a quick prayer to Shinaria, and with an odd feeling of calm, Marthius followed the track into the dark of the woods.

After he had vanished into the dark of the undergrowth, four figures moved from the nearby trees, seemingly coming out of the trunks, their garb camouflaging them perfectly. They moved with the grace of cats, utterly silent and agile, their forms covered in color-shifting cloaks. Large bows and quivers hung on their backs. Soon they too vanished into the forest where Marthius had been only a few minutes before. In the sky over the forest, a large golden griffin blocked out the sun, casting a huge shadow on the place where Marthius had entered the forest. When the shadow passed, the trail was gone.

Four weeks later, a lone horse trotted into the courtyards of the old keep, its hooves echoing hollowly over the cobblestones.