

Chapter I

There are those who will say that the story I am about to tell you may not be true. After all, it is not verifiable—at least, much of it is not. But I tell it to you as my father told it to me, and I trust my father. And he in turn trusted the man who told him so much of this account. Whether you trust me or not, there are no alternative records. Unless you count the whispers.

My tale begins in the land of Adamah, during the reign of Tsedec the First, seventh in the line of Qccesed, when Mordecani the Wise was Guardian of the Throne. That much, you can look up, if you have a good library.

The kidnapping of Prince Korbin took place two weeks ahead of his thirteenth birthday.

There was nothing particularly unusual about that late summer evening. The rich navy sky was perturbed only by a few clouds as the darkness advanced, and the fragrant spring air was calm and pleasant. The duties of the day discharged, and his good friend Benani having retreated to his own dwelling, Prince Korbin resorted to his chamber balcony to enjoy the evening breezes, as was his custom.

Spying a familiar face down below, the Prince called a friendly greeting. Menador, the youngest of the Chancellors of the King's Peace (as the assembly of the inner royal council was then known), was strolling the grounds.

"Good evening, my good Prince," came the courteous reply. "I am so pleased to see your royal countenance before I go. As you know, sire, my quarterly term ends on the morrow, and I must return to the north without being privileged with attendance upon your birthday celebration."

Prince Korbin nodded. "I understand your duties, Chancellor. Perhaps you will be given leave to be in attendance for my next birthday."

"Many thanks, good Prince. It would truly be an honor. May you have a hundred more. But in view of the importance of this particular birthday, according to the custom of Adamah, I do hope you will indulge your servant."

"My indulgence is scarcely necessary for a trusted Chancellor," came the young man's reply.

"If it please you, I would be honored to present to you my gift tonight, since I will not be present for the ceremonies."

Prince Korbin laughed. "And you call this indulgence on *my* part, Chancellor? I should rather say that the indulgence is yours toward me!"

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“So then—you consent?”

“Consent! I should say so!” The boy paused. “Your gift is below?”

“As you say, sire, and it is not fitting that I should cast it up to you.”

“Then it is my part to come down.” And quick as an eastern quarle, the young Prince acrobatically swung himself over the balcony and clambered down with such speed that his voice had scarcely ceased to echo in the yard before his foot touched down on the soft green grass below. He was tall and slender, but his legs were powerful and quick.

“My good Prince should be careful,” smiled Menador. “But your enthusiasm is an honor which both exalts and humbles your servant.”

“I must be careful all day,” came the cavalier response. “Mordecani still insists on treating me as a child. Now, where, pray you, is your gift? I see nothing in your hand.”

The Chancellor bowed. “I do not give such a gift as will fit within my hand, my good Prince.”

“Ah!”

“Indeed, Your Highness, if you look closely, you may perhaps spy my gift beyond that grove of trees.”

Prince Korbin looked into the gathering dusk and turned back to Menador in amazement. “Truly, Chancellor?”

Menador bowed again. “Truly, my Prince.”

The descending darkness could not disguise the silhouette of a grand horse, great in stature. “May I see him?”

“See him, Your Highness? Certainly you shall, and ride him, if it is your desire.”

The mere shape that the lad had discerned from afar resolved into astonishing beauty as he approached. Glistening white, the

steed stood tall and noble, with eyes of fire, sinews of steel, and a bearing of careless grace. No finer horse could be conceived; no, not even the preferred riding mount of Prince Korbin's father himself.

Menador had already bedecked the creature with an ornate bridle and a saddle that beckoned.

The Chancellor guided the prince's hand to the grand head. The horse looked at his royal master with intelligent eyes.

"What is his name?" asked the excited boy breathlessly.

"Avire," Menador replied. "It means *trusted friend*."

The corners of Prince Korbin's mouth played into a smile, and he turned back to his gift. "Hello, my trusted friend. You are certainly the most welcome present I ever have had." Nearly forgetting his dignity, he buried his face into the rich mane.

"Do ride him, my good Prince," urged his benefactor. "He was born to bear a man destined to be King."

Prince Korbin required no coaxing to mount Avire. He was not an experienced rider, but horsemanship had become part of his training just a month earlier. From the time he was a small boy, he had pleaded to learn the equestrian arts, but his father and Mordecani were insistent that he follow custom. If he were among royalty or nobility, a boy began riding in preparation for his thirteenth birthday. Riding the birthday procession was an important symbolic measure by which he would demonstrate his progress toward manhood.

"Avire is a horse well-trained, sire," advised Menador, "but he is also a horse of extraordinary power and accustomed to a sure hand. I would suggest that you follow along the hedgerow once or twice to get a good sense of him before you venture into the open field."

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The Prince was not overly headstrong, and anyway, he had a favorite spot near the end of the hedgerow, through which he liked to slip and wander into the carpeted thicket beyond. He would be more than happy to introduce his new steed to his secret. Perhaps he may duck through it more frequently, with a speedy horse on hand to get him there and back without being missed.

The Chancellor cupped his hands low to the earth and the Prince placed a foot into them. In a flash, he was looking over the great horse's head. The muscles in his thighs sensed the horse's massive girth, but the new towering perspective struck Korbin more sharply. Avire was perhaps three hands taller than the creatures upon which he had been training. It seemed to the young man that he was viewing the world from great new heights.

The ride started off at a moderate trot, but such sedate style could not content this rider for long. Respectfully, perhaps, but firmly, the Prince dug his heels into Avire's sides, and the animal rocketed along the edge of the field. Despite his inexperience, Prince Korbin's heart leapt into his mouth, not with fear but with exultation. The rider envisioned himself as one with his horse, a lightning pair piercing the advancing evening. In the descending darkness, the hedgerow became an irregular blackness blurring by to his left, and the boy fancied the hedges as enemy warriors, through whom he was crashing with daring, warlike skill.

The end of the field approached with amazing speed. As he neared his secret spot, Prince Korbin began to slow his steed. He was still at a gallop, however, when out of the blackness, something angular and unforgiving came swinging for his head. He had scarcely seen it coming before all went black.

