

Runt the Brave

by

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TaMir's Prophecy

Chitter, chatter, teeth a-clatter,
Up above, an evil patter.
Tell me, Mouse, What's the matter?
"We grow thin as Wroth gets fatter."

Inside, creeping, all unsleeping,
Outside, nervous vigils keeping.
Why must sorrow come a-leaping?
"Hate is deaf to children weeping."

Broken in a bloody maw,
Burns like fire, cuts like saw.
Turns the world on fang and claw?
"Pity those who have no law."

Close the gates and bar the door,
Cling to lamp-lit, earthen floor.
Some will see the sky no more.
"Rats have come to Tira-Nor!"



ONE

The Coming of Rats

At the edge of the Dark Forest, JaRed the field mouse waited for the face of death to reveal itself. An enemy lurked there under the vast canopy of oaks and maples. He felt its presence as a cold shiver along his spine.

He stood unmoving, his body stiff. A hot breeze rustled the tall prairie grass, and all around him the drought-burned stalks rattled like swords. Dust rose in gentle swirls, choked the air and coated the leaves of weeds.

Only JaRed's nose twitched.

He tried to blink back the sweat that trickled down his brow, and felt the sting of it in his eyes.

Though still young, JaRed had learned to trust the whisper of instinct. Its voice screamed at him now, raising the sweat-matted fur on the back of his neck.

He stood very still for a long time.

The mice of Tira-Nor sometimes said that Death wore a different face each morning. One day it wore the face of the weasel, or of the cat. The next day it put on the face of the serpent. Another day it wore the pale shriveled mask of old age. But the mice only spoke this way in macabre jest.

They knew what Death really looked like.

Death came from the sky. Its hands were talons, and it wore a face with a small hooked beak.

In truth, JaRed should not have been scavenging near the Dark Forest in the first place. But the old familiar restlessness had overtaken him, and he had made for the shadowy black trails and shifting gloom as though drawn by the magic of its vastness. One could get lost in the Dark Forest, and sometimes “lost” appealed to him.

But now he saw something odd at the forest’s edge—something unnatural. And he felt that it might be important to know just what the odd-thing was. For whatever enemy waited in the dry brush of the Dark Forest, it was trying hard not to be seen.

JaRed excelled at making himself disappear. This talent came easily to him, for he was smaller than the other mice. So much smaller that he had been called *Runt* his whole life: *Runt the Flea-scratcher*. *Runt the Sickly*. *Runt the Waste-of-Air*. He had always hated these names, but what could he do? Even the older mice called him *Little Runt*.

Adults thought of him as a child simply because of his size.

At some point--he could not remember when--he had discovered that being small could be useful. He had noticed that when someone did not *respect* you, they tended not to *see* you. And this had given him an idea.

JaRed had taught himself how to move silently, how to blend into his surroundings, how to disappear virtually at will. He had been a good teacher, and a very good student.

After a while, he could make himself almost invisible.

Perhaps this explained his overconfidence now.

The thing in the brush is not a skilled predator, he told himself. *Or it would not fidget while stalking us.*

This puzzled him.

He stepped forward lightly, closer to the odd-enemy, the death-thing. He moved like a ghost among the thistles, the weeds, the long stalks of sunflowers, and stopped just inside the shadow of the Forest.

"Would you look at that," a great fist of a voice said from the gloom. "GoRec is right. A whole village of the little devils. And ripe for the plucking, to boot."

"Shaddap," said a second voice. "I need to think."

JaRed froze. He stood close now, though he still could not see the enemy through the dense undergrowth. He willed his body to relax. The voices had a familiar tone, something he could not quite place. But they *did* give Death a shape and a size, if not a face, and this blunted the edge of his fear. The most terrifying enemies had no shape or size, because one never saw them. They struck before you knew they were there.

At least JaRed knew that this enemy was not the black

corn snake the Kingsguard had sighted a few days ago.

A single shock of white fur drooped just above JaRed's left eye, and he brushed it back with one paw.

Then he nudged aside the dry yellow grass and stepped forward into the deeper cover of the Dark Forest, under grass, between fallen twigs, around stones, careful not to make a sound. He would not *confront* the voices. He would go *around* them. He would watch them from the thicket to the north, and find out what sort of threat these intruders represented. But he would not be seen or heard—of this he was certain.

"What was it Master GoRec wanted from us?" the first voice asked.

"Numbers, you dolt," replied the second. "How many mice actually live in Tira-Nor." There was a pause, and then, "Anyway, must be over two thousand."

JaRed slipped forward soundlessly. He moved among the shadows, through dead grass and limp twigs and empty husks of leaves, his ears alert for every word. There were at least two of them, he knew now. But there could be more. And the others might be cleverer at concealing themselves.

Then suddenly he understood who and what they were.

No wonder they could not stand still. No wonder they betrayed their secrecy by impatience. They did not possess the ability to wait quietly for something they wanted.

They weren't predators; they were something worse.

JaRed inched forward, sure of himself now that he knew what he faced. Even so, his heart thudded in his chest. But he moved forward again, equally slowly. And

then again, his body trembling.

And suddenly he could see them perfectly.

There; just ahead. Beneath the wide tapered leaves of sunflowers that stretched their necks to drink the heat of the sky, two long hairless tails jutted from the foliage like worms. One of the tails twisted slowly, coiling under a decaying leaf.

JaRed stood behind them, close enough to make out the brown and white splotches of oily fur on their backs.

He had been right.

Rats! Here, outside Tira-Nor!

"Can you smell them?" the rat who had wanted to think asked. Its voice sounded like a hacksaw cutting rusty tin.

"Smell them?" the other mocked. This one's voice was lower, more cumbersome, like a squash bursting under the blow of a hammer. "*Smell* them? The stink of mice is all about this place. We shall have to do something about that when we take over. Maybe we can coax a skunk into spraying Tira-Nor down for us. Har-har-HARRRR!" The second rat seemed to think its joke enormously funny, but the other turned on it, as rats are known to do, and clapped it across the nose with one paw.

"Quiet, you idiot! Do you want to bring their sentries?"

The other only sneered, and continued to laugh humorlessly. "Har-har-har-har-harrrr! 'Idiot' is it? And what are *you* so afraid of, Scritch?"

But now Scritch turned and looked back north along the edge of the Dark Forest. His eyes narrowed into little black slits as he scanned the greenery around where JaRed stood motionless. "Do you not smell *that*, Klogg?"

Klogg, the bigger of the two, turned also, and JaRed saw

that his face was scarred along the nose in two long bare streaks. Klogg's nose twitched. "Mouse."

"Ye-e-e-esss," Scritch drawled.

"So what?" Klogg retorted. "The whole area reeks of them. Weren't we just talking about—"

"No, no, no! Didn't you mark the direction of the wind?"

Klogg paused a moment, blinking. "That way," he said at last. He raised one grimy paw and pointed north. In the direction JaRed stood hidden.

How could I have been so stupid? JaRed thought. But there wasn't time to berate himself further. For suddenly Scritch's eyes opened wide and his mouth curled back in a sly and wicked grin. His hacksaw voice scratched the air like a claw. "Yeesss! There. The stink of--of a *mouse!*"

JaRed did not wait any longer. He turned and ran. And even as he did so he heard the desperate crashing of dry grass and fallen leaves that meant the two rats were giving chase.

When threatened, a mouse of Tira-Nor will bolt for the cover of the closest city-hole. Mice are fast, and most of their enemies will not risk the booby traps of the city's gates. It is common knowledge that the gate-holes of Tira-Nor are well secured.

But JaRed was not close to a gate. He had been scavenging at the far eastern border of the underground city's territory, which ran from the Houses of Men, past the hill the mice called Round Top, and all the way to the Winding Cliffs of the Dark Forest. The closest gate lay well beyond his reach now.

The Coming of Rats

There was, to be sure, one city-hole not far from here. And though not all the mice knew of it, JaRed did. Its tunnel ran in a line all the way from the Commons of Tira-Nor to the edge of the Dark Forest near where JaRed had first spotted the rats.

But JaRed could not use it, for that hole was one of the ancient defenses of Tira-Nor, to be used only as an escape route in the event of dire need. It was an escape route *from* the city, not *into* it. JaRed would rather have died than reveal that secret to the rats. Tira-Nor had its faults, but it was still home, even if he did dream of a new life somewhere beyond the known world.

So he ignored the half-buried crevice in the bottle-shaped limestone that marked the hole, and instead ran through the Dark Forest, farther from safety--farther from home.

After what seemed a long time, he stopped, exhausted, and pushed himself under the cover of a fallen log. The bottom of the log lay just above the earth and formed a narrow cavelike crevice backed by dirt. He knew he could not have asked for a better hiding place, because the opening was much too small for a rat to shove through. He curled his tail around his heaving body, his chest pressed low to the damp ground, and sniffed at the pungent odor of rotting tree bark. He did not suppose he would have to remain hidden for long. He expected the rats had given up by now and would leave him alone.

He was wrong.

Rats have an excellent sense of smell. Scritch and Klogg followed JaRed's trail all the way to the fallen log, and

soon afterwards deduced that JaRed had hidden himself underneath.

Had they been in a hurry, they might have left him alone. But rats, as a general rule, cannot resist chasing and hurting something that has turned its back and run from them.

JaRed, from his position underneath the log, at first saw only the fat legs and dirty paws of both rats. Then Scritch lowered his head to the ground and peered into the darkness with one eye.

“What have we here, then?” Scritch asked scornfully.

“It’s a mouse,” Klogg said.

“Of *course* it’s a mouse. But what was it doing spying on us, anyway? Well?” Scritch spat his voice into the dark hole. “What were you doing, *mouse*?”

I’m afraid that the way Scritch pronounced the word “mouse” was dreadfully rude. Had JaRed known Scritch better (and he most certainly didn’t want to) he would have realized that this was nothing personal. Scritch spoke rudely to everyone, even to his own mother.

“Yes,” Klogg bumbled. “What were you doing? Spying on us?”

“It was you who were spying,” JaRed answered calmly. “Now please go away.”

“Go away, is it?” Klogg said. His bulbous and scarred nose appeared at the opening. “Not us. *We* live here now. This is *our* part of the forest and *you’re* trespassing. I’ve a mind to give you a good beating, I do.”

“Get up on the log,” Scritch commanded.

Klogg’s eyes narrowed to half-moons. “What?”

“Get up on the log, you walking garbage heap, and

jump up and down.”

Klogg rose up on his hind legs, then peered questioningly underneath the log. He didn't understand at first. Then he rose up again and lowered himself once more. A slow happy smile worked itself across his snout. “Ohhhhh. I see.”

Then he leaped up on the log, and his voice came woodenly from above. “Well? Whaddaya think, mouse?” He began to jump with all his thundering weight: up and down, up and down. And JaRed realized that they were going to try to squash him in the small crevice. “How does THIS feel, MOUSE? Or THIS? Or THIS? Or THIS?” There came a pause, and JaRed heard panting from above.

Scritch looked in. “Give him another go. Flatten him.”

“Or THIS?” Klogg said, now sounding decidedly more tired. “Or THIS? Or THIS? Or this? Or this? Or...or...or that?”

But the log wasn't moving, for it was still connected to the trunk of the tree by a thick section of folded wood fiber. And though JaRed could feel the vibrations of the wood through the fur of his back, he still had room enough to breathe. Klogg's jumping had not hurt him at all.

Scritch frowned deeply. “Well, mouse? Let that be a lesson. No spying on us. And if I ever catch you again near Tira-Nor, I'll feed you to Klogg one whisker at a time. That is, if you're lucky. If I'm especially angry I might just introduce you to the *Master*.”

“Har-har-har-har-harrrr!” Klogg said. “Can we go now? All this talk of eating has made me hungry.”



The oldest story anyone could remember told of a Great Owl--as white as the moon and as silent as a shadow--that swooped for its prey from a hole in the sky. The hole was made by ElShua's finger on the day He pushed the world deep into the soil of heaven, for the hole was both window and doorway into that other world.

According to the story, the Owl circled the skies of ElShua's garden. It carried in its beak that trouble-making rodent, Wroth. The Owl had carried the critter for a long time, and this was why: ElShua had grown tired of Wroth causing mischief for the other animals. So ElShua sentenced it to banishment. And He gave the job of enforcing that banishment to the Owl. "Take him to the White Desert and leave him beyond the furthest dune," ElShua commanded. "There he will find no creature to torment save himself. Perhaps the loneliness of that place can remake his soul. For even Wroth must eventually tire of his own voice."

And so the Owl flew and flew. Away from ElShua's palace, over mountains, beyond rivers and valleys and plains, until he came to the edge of the great garden, the velvet fields bursting with the green hope of new worlds and new life. And all the while Wroth protested and screamed and cursed the same thing over and over again: "You'll regret this!"

Just that, and nothing more. "You'll regret this!"

The Owl grew so weary of hearing it that he felt he could bear it no longer. In despair, he began to make excuses. He began to look for some way to rid himself of his burden. After all, it would be many weeks before he arrived at the White Desert, and he didn't think he could

stand Wroth that long.

An idea occurred to him. The Owl saw that he flew now directly over the freshly turned, black-and-green fields. He saw the crisp rows, the infinitely perforated furrows like great lumps of dark bread studded with seeds. And he thought that in all this vastness surely one rodent would not make any difference. For the rows were endless, and once Wroth had been planted he would never get out.

Down the Owl flew--faster than the wind--into a hole he chose at random, a hole made by ElShua's finger, a hole smaller than a pine needle and wider than the sun.

Inside the hole he found the newly made Earth. Newly made skies opened up around him, and below him a new sea crashed against new rocks.

Wroth shrieked again, "You'll regret this!"

But the Owl opened his beak and said, "Who?"

Wroth fell for three days and three nights before he hit the waves, which is why rats fear both heights and water to this very day.

When the Owl returned through the hole into the air of heaven he found ElShua waiting for him. And ElShua's face blazed with anger, for He did not intend for His new world to suffer the presence of such evil.

"Do you know what you have done?" ElShua asked.

"Who?" said the Owl. The Owl had never been one to accept responsibility for his deeds.

"You," said ElShua. "You have brought evil into my new world. Therefore, you will be the one to take it out. Here is your punishment: every day, for as long as the Earth blooms in my garden, you will bear its sorrow to my side."

Then they both wept, and ElShua stopped planting new worlds.

That is how the Great Owl came to be the bearer of souls.



This was the oldest story JaRed knew, and he believed it. He believed in ElShua. He believed in the Great Owl, though he never said so out loud. His brothers would mock him endlessly if they ever found out. Especially HaRed--whom everyone called *Horrid*.

Not that Horrid needed the excuse.

Horrid always said that it didn't really matter what you believed about life, about death.

Dead is dead, Horrid always said.

JaRed waited for hours before he dared leave the safety of the log and begin the long journey back to the city of Tira-Nor. By then the sun had set, and the cloudless void was empty of everything but pinprick stars and the barest sliver of a moon bleeding light into the world.

People sometimes suppose that field mice live in a world of open spaces and sunshine, of wide horizons and blue sky, but this is not so. The world of mice is one of darkness and shadows. A field of tall prairie grass--to the mouse--is a jungle of grass blades and prickly weeds. Life is secured by scurrying from safety to safety, from bush to rock to tree. The sun and the moon are uncertain allies, for a mouse's eyesight during the day is inferior to that of the hawk, the badger and the weasel, and during the night it

is no match for the owl's.

No, mice much prefer their underground cities, secured by a myriad of booby traps and mazelike passages, guards, roundabouts and double-backs, as well as the comfort of darkness. Where sometimes a phosphorescent rock, called a *glowstone*, may give enough light underground to see by.

JaRed loved Tira-Nor.

He also hated it.

On one hand, its network of tunnels and burrows and great-chambers were *safe*: warm in winter, cool in summer. Its passages welcomed JaRed with arms of earth and clay. Its history embraced him--even him--with precepts grounded in the character of the Maker. Tira-Nor was, in more than name only, "a city of promise," of destiny. It was huge and familiar and comforting. It was *home*.

But to JaRed it was also suffocatingly small. For what part of the Commons hadn't JaRed explored a thousand times? Indeed, what part of the halls of the Families--which were forbidden to mice of the Commons--had he not slipped quietly into for the sheer thrill of defiance? For sometimes the city *needed* to be defied. And sometimes a mouse *needed* to feel that he was more than the least, more than--as Horrid had dubbed him--"half a Commoner."

And yet he often wondered: did the promises of ElShua really apply even to him? Did they apply to anyone? Really and Truly? He did not know, and not knowing troubled him.

Tira-Nor protected the *bodies* of its lesser citizens, but what of their souls?

JaRed arrived above the northeastern corner of the city

too late to use the Mud Gate. Only two entrances to the city would be open at this hour. The gate called *Open*, (true to its name) was almost always available, except when heavy rains made its steep initial plunge treacherous. The Common Gate lay protected by a lump of overhanging rock that jutted from the earth just above it. Both holes stood well to the south and east and were considerably larger, having been built by the original architects of Tira-Nor, the prairie dogs who were driven out ages ago by TyMin and the Ancients.

JaRed chose the Common Gate. He scampered inside after whistling his approach for the guard. Its familiar smooth walls glimmered white in the milk-light of the moon, which stood now balanced above the Dark Forest on one brilliant point.

To his surprise, Captain Blang of the Kingsguard met him in the checkpoint.

"Who is it?" Blang asked warily, sniffing at JaRed's coat.

"JaRed, son of ReDemec the Red, of the Commons."

"ReDemec? A son named JaRed?"

"Yes, sir." JaRed blushed. Rarely did anyone use his real name. "I am also known as--Runt."

"Ahh, yes! Yes, indeed. Now I remember. *Runt*, son of ReDemec the Red."

The words stung. JaRed supposed he should not have expected someone of Captain Blang's rank to recognize him. But carrying the name *Runt* grew tiresome, like lugging an extra tail in from the field after a long day.

Anyway, come to think of it, JaRed wondered why someone of Blang's rank should be standing gate-duty in

the first place.

“And how is your father?” Blang asked without much interest.

“Very well, sir. I will give him your compliments.”

“Do that, yes. What are you doing out so late? You’ve brought nothing back.”

It was true. As a member of the Commons, his life and his labor belonged to the king. He was not a member of the Families, and it was his duty as a scavenger to bring back food for the storerooms.

In fact, JaRed had been storing in his cheek a single ripe mulberry when he first saw Klogg and Scritch from a distance. But then, clumsily, he had swallowed it. And he had been too startled to notice whether it even tasted good.

“Wait a minute! Runt. Yes. Of course. Someone has been looking for you. Asked me to keep a whisker out. Let me see. What was her name? Short and quiet, rather cute, with a white patch on her left forepaw--”

“KahEesha?” JaRed asked. His voice rose in surprise. “My sister?”

“Yes. KahEesha. Lovely thing. Asked if I would tell you to come home immediately. Something about a visitor. I can’t remember the rest. Say--is she married?”

“No, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Ahem. Runt. You still haven’t answered my question. What were you doing?”

JaRed frowned. He did not want to tell Captain Blang about the rats. Not yet, anyway. For JaRed knew that the story would just condemn him to more questions and more attention. This would make his brothers angry--especially Horrid. And afterwards they would make his life

more miserable than it already was.

Still, he must not think of himself. It was no trivial threat he had stumbled upon. Tira-Nor must be warned.

He felt, like a cold stirring in his bones, that news of the spies must reach the king. A sense of looming danger hung over him, and he could not be rid of it.

“Captain Blang, if I tell you what happened to me, will you promise not to tell anyone but the king?”

Blang scowled. “I will make no such promise. But you *will* tell me what happened.”

JaRed sighed. “I suppose I must.”

Blang stared at him in a suffocating silence. When he finally spoke his voice sounded like water trickling from a drain. “I am the Captain of the Kingsguard, boy. I am not going to wait forever.”

JaRed realized that he must seem petulant. As though he, a mere Commoner, could dictate terms to the Captain of the Kingsguard. Blang would not understand. Blang did not have JaRed’s brothers for family.

“I was foraging near the Dark Forest. And--and I came across rats. Two of them. They were spying on us, and they talked of someone they called the *Master*.” JaRed looked down. “I believe Tira-Nor may be in great danger.”

“Did they hurt you?”

“No.”

Blang flicked his tail and sniffed. JaRed could not tell whether Blang believed him.

JaRed said, “May I go now?”

“One more question,” Captain Blang insisted. “Why don’t you want anyone else to know what happened to you?”

“Well,” JaRed said after a pause. “It wouldn’t make sense to frighten everyone unnecessarily.” Which was true enough.

“Somehow I don’t think that’s the reason you demanded a promise from an officer in the Kingsguard.”

JaRed hesitated, felt his face blush. “My brothers,” he said finally. “They--they wouldn’t like me getting a lot of attention.”

Blang stared at him for another long moment, then said gently, “I see.” And JaRed felt ashamed, though he did not know why.

“You won’t tell them, will you?”

Blang shook his head. “No. But they may find out anyway. I believe the king will want to see you.”

JaRed’s stomach heaved, and he felt the blood drain from his face. He could not think of anything he wanted less than to stand in front of King SoSheth and describe his headlong flight from the two rats.

Captain Blang continued, “We have been aware of the rats for some time now. That is why I am standing gate-watch for the first time in six seasons. In the next day or two a runner from the Kingsguard will come for you. Don’t be frightened. Just tell your story as clearly as you can. Perhaps your brothers will not find out. In the meantime--give my regards to your sister, will you?”



Captain Blang stood alone just inside the gate-hole and stared blankly into the night. The air tasted of dust and heat. He listened intently, but the only sounds he heard

came from memories a lifetime past and a universe distant.

Against the black moon-washed curtain of stars a nightmare returned. Screams of mice. Cursing. Someone shrieking as though in intense pain.

That, too, had been a dry summer, had it not?

And then the familiar, lost smell, something from ages ago: the one who loved him. A gentle touch. A calm voice speaking comfort. *Shush. Be still. Father will protect us, but we must do as he says, must go quickly and quietly. Can you do that? Of course you can. And Mother will come behind. The noise? It's nothing, little one. Nothing at all. Nothing to concern you. Come now and be strong.*

Blang turned in the opening, wondering at his own foolishness. No use thinking this way. No use going back. Why go back? And yet the brain wouldn't stop, wouldn't turn to more practical matters.

He shook his head, as though shaking off water after a cold swim.

Why, he wondered, were torments always born in litters? Earlier this summer the Kingsguard had been decimated by an attack from two foxes--something unheard of in the history of the city. Then the drought had blown in like a hot wind from across the prairie, scorching the earth, destroying the grain and shriveling the wild berries of the Dark Forest upon which Tira-Nor depended for water. Then, just a few days ago, a huge corn snake had been seen hunting above the eastern border of the city. And now, the most menacing news of all: Blang's past returned. Its black hollow mouth opened like the jaws of the grave. Daily now his scouts returned with grim faces

and words to make even the fiercest lose heart.

The rat army gathering to the west grew bold. They now sent spies to the very borders of Tira-Nor, where any scavenging Commoner could not fail to see them. Clearly the rat *Master*--the one Blang's scouts referred to as *IT*--meant for his rat spies to be seen. *It* wanted the people of Tira-Nor to know that rats were coming. *It* wanted them to be afraid. Truly, war could not be far off.

And when war came, how would the city survive? Tira-Nor had been savaged by enemies, drought and sickness. Its Kingsguard warriors numbered less than two hundred. Its militia boasted barely twice that. And its stores of food were already insufficient for a mild winter, let alone an outright siege.

What would the king do?

Blang thought of the rat *Master*, the one called *GoRec*, and shuddered. Blang's scouts told of a monster too terrible for the imagination. Larger and quicker than any rat they had ever seen.

And Blang knew that they were not exaggerating. Such things were possible. He had seen. He had heard. Once, long ago.

The memories piled in, unwelcomed. Blang was powerless to stop them.

Mother hiding him under a shiny silver rock with a hollow place, a perfect circle. And Father standing up to first one, then two, then *four* rats...

...and then the Monster appearing out of shadow and fire, its eyes like empty black pits. And Mother, her back to a wall of cinder, pleading....

He heard a low moaning sound, like a child wailing,

and he realized that the sound came from himself. Hot tears streaked down his cheeks. He stood alone in the night, ashamed of this terrible weakness.

Captain Blang, weeping! What would his lieutenants think?

So. But then, he could not stop. Could not push the rage and helplessness beyond reach, could not crush it or whisk it away.

He knew why, just as he knew that the dread he felt was not unfounded. A thought came, exploding into the present for the zillionth time: *They are not two evils, but one. The monster of my memory and the rat Master GoRec are the same rat!*

But how? That was so long ago, in a place so remote that even LaRish had never heard of it.

He felt a stab of nausea rising in his belly, and was forced to lean against the wall for support. His legs felt suddenly and preposterously weak.

Still he wept.

In that moment he knew. *It cannot be, and yet it is. The memory I hid from has found me at last.*

It is not rats we fight, but Lord Wroth himself. And in all of Tira-Nor, only I know what that means.

Captain Blang stood there for some time, not moving, simply staring into the looming darkness as the night air whispered across the prairie; as a moth fluttered briefly into view and then disappeared; as, overhead, the night stars shivered like candles sputtering in a vast black wind.