

The Road Taken

by

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The length of round oak in his hands was smooth and dark from long use. Dirt and grass clotted the blade of the hoe, but underneath it was sharp and new—new for the spring's planting, for the year's harvest. The red of rust had never touched it, though he'd sanctified it with the red of a richer hue. His own, for he'd never seen the point in baptizing a blade, be it a hoe or a sword, in anything less precious. It was a sign of strength and respect. In all his years, he'd never had either let him down in a moment of crisis.

He straightened, the graceful bronze arc of his back unfurling until he stood tall in the sun. The skin of his body was hairless—smooth but for the numerous white hashes of old scars, indicating where, during the winter, he suffered the aches of the cold. Sweat dampened his scalp, trickling down his forehead, neck and arms, and making a dark arrow over his groin and buttocks. His shirt lay wrapped around his waterbag in the shade, keeping it cool. It didn't matter though. He was long inured to the sun, even after the long winter spent bundled in felt and fur, even after nearly a decade in the mountains. He flicked the shaggy, still-brown lengths of his hair from his eyes, smoothing it back

over his skull, using his salty sweat to slick it into place. His face was turned up to the sun, his many times broken nose jutting like a mountain's edge, his lips thin and unsmiling above his narrow chin. Though his eyes were closed and his arms slack, he listened intently.

The birds gossiped and argued without variation, the jays squawking as they went after a slinking coyote. Or perhaps they were merely bored and jeered at their neighbors. He heard the cautious scrape of freshly clothed twigs on the thinning hide of a doe, her stomach quite likely heavy and pendulous above her narrow hooves, seeking a safe haven to bear her fawn. Or perhaps she was old and barren, left to forage alone in the forest—either way she was alone. He listened to the west wind scouring the early blades of the sawgrass on the ridge below, heard it as it whispered through the long needles of the great pines which grew tall in the lee of the mountain. He heard a thousand little sounds—like well-hung mill wheels, they went around and around, touching together, then rolling apart and then coming together again, a perfect harmony of sound and movement.

With a sigh he opened his eyes and squatted on the black, fresh-turned earth, scanning the valley below him. It was narrow, just big enough for him and no more. That was the way he liked it. That was the way it needed to be. The thatched roof of his cabin was out of sight, but then it would have been out of sight from anywhere above. He'd hidden it in a cave of sorts—in the center of a thicket of thorns and dead, moss-covered snags, with vines trained over the top. The wood he burned in his fireplace was two years old, well cured hardwood, and made little smoke for anyone to see, if anyone looked. This patch he made now was the only evidence of his presence, and even it was well hidden from the either side and below by thrusts of stone and a carefully

planted screen of brush and fir. It was a still a risk, he knew this. But the valley was too narrow to allow much light, and the growing season was too short to stock his winter larder without this garden patch. It was enough that at summer's end he made his way down to the harvest fair in distant Lintern, buying salt pork, flour, beans, lengths of cloth and horseshoes—whatever staples he needed and couldn't grow or make himself. Even that one trip, a morning spent in trade before he was back on the road home, even that was a risk.

His gaze left the valley and he scanned the horizon above the dark fringe of trees that blurred the jagged edges of the mountain's spine. That was it. Downwind, or he'd have smelled it before. Fire, and a big one. No mere funeral pyre. He picked his hoe up and then his water bag and shirt, skimming the latter over his head. He made little sound and the birds made little acknowledgment of his passage as he slipped between the trunks, carrying the hoe in a loose grip, as though it were a spear.

It took an hour to reach the far rim of his valley, and another three to jog down the game paths on the other side, through two wedge-shaped channel canyons and over several streams, swollen with frigid runoff from the melting snows. At last he paused in the fold of a barren ridge, far above the black stain which billowed across the farm fields below him. Madrigan. It was a small city, prosperous, at the junction of two trade routes. Or it had been. It had been turned to blackened pillars of stone amongst heaps of cinders and ash. He did not really need to venture any closer to know the extent of the damage, of the death. Nor did he need to see anything else to know who'd been responsible. He drew a breath, realizing he'd been holding it and now he filled his lungs with the smoke

tainted air, blowing it out again in disgust. The foul wind stung his eyes and they watered.

A sound caught his attention then—metal on metal—and no ordinary clang of farm implements either. A battle yet waged below. He lunged forward, then stopped, turning his head back toward his valley, hefting the hoe in his hand. His chin sagged against his chest for a moment as his hands clenched, and then he made his way slowly down the ridge.

No one saw him. No one would look for a lone man coming from the mountains, not in the midst of a battle. But had anyone stood watch, still they would not have seen. He made use of all the sparse cover, of depressions in the rock, of shadows, of colors and wind. At last he came to the edge of northern road out of the city. Now he was close enough to see who fought amidst the swirling shadows made of smoke, and froze there, hunched behind a clump of ragwort. He bit his tongue and sat back on his heels. He had thought the citizens defended their town, but it was more. They'd been joined by the Emperor's dog soldiers, and now they fended off Veshtar's marauders together.

He spat and made no move to join them. Sword clanged on sword, horses neighed and shrieked, men cried and moaned and died, and all the while the fire roared and crackled orange and red, sending black tendrils into the air, reaching down the fighters' throats and about their feet and blistering the soft insides of their noses as they breathed. One of the dog soldiers fell, his chest split nigh in two. Another mounted on a sorrel war-horse charged the marauder and the two careened off each other, the flanged mace of the first swinging wildly as he pulled up and made to charge again.

The man's hair had long since dried and once again its shaggy lengths fell into his eyes. He brushed it aside absently, wrapped up in the destruction which played itself out before him. Now two of the mounted marauders cornered a lone dog soldier by the husk of a building near one of the gaping gates. They grasped up the soldier between them and rode out of the city, north, toward the watcher. He scrunched lower and his grip firmed on the hoe. The soldier squirmed and kicked at the horses, but made no other sounds. They pulled to a stop just opposite of him, across the road, and flung her to the ground, for indeed it was a woman. They heaved off their mounts, one punching her in the jaw with a gauntleted fist as she bounded to her feet and brought her sword up, the tip wavering as she battled the pain of a broken wrist. The man saw that blood trickled from her forehead already, and now she dropped in a heap, her breath whistling between her lips. Her limbs twitched, and then she was still but for her ragged breathing.

He knew what they were going to do. They liked doing it to the Emperor's dog soldiers in particular. It was better than gold, to be able to brag they had had one. Never mind it was rape. Never mind she was unconscious. Their tale would grow with the telling and before long she would have begged them on the battlefield, pulled her clothes off and spread her legs wide in delight, taking them both on at once. Who would be around to challenge them? Who of theirs wouldn't be enthralled by such a tale?

The one who'd hit her had undone the laces at his waist, and was fumbling to get himself free of his breeches. A glance at the city was enough to show that no one would be coming to her rescue soon—that none of her cohorts knew she was gone, or if they did, they assumed she lay among the heaps of bodies that already littered the battleground.

He didn't pause to let himself think—didn't dare. Grasping the hoe in both hands like an ordinary quarterstaff, he crept from behind the ragwort. His legs tightened and bunched as he gathered himself, gauging the distance. He swung. The blade of the hoe caught the first marauder at the base of the neck and his head collapsed forward and bounced against his chest, his spine severed. The man let the blade finish its work, and then with easy grace, he bashed the end of the handle against the second marauder's jaw as he jerked around, his mouth and eyes round with surprise. The marauder crumpled, the lower half of his face crushed. The hoe spun around and the blade buried itself in the fallen man's throat, severing the jugular.

The man knelt beside the woman and checked her pulse, satisfied with its strong beat, before taking up one of the dead men's swords and laying it close by and wiping the blood from the blade of his hoe. The sounds of fighting from the city had waned and now he heard only the occasional ring of swordplay, though he could see little through the shroud of smoke which clung to the city.

The sword he held was heavy and short, made to be wielded one-handed in close quarters. He liked it little. But it was sharp, and a better weapon to face his enemies with than the hoe. He looked back toward the city, seeing nothing. He ran his fingers over the hilt—a nervous habit he'd never been quite able to tame. There were notches scratched in the guard, and his lip curled. It was the weapon of arrogance and insolence, and dishonored the one who carried it. His hand loosened and he let it fall to the ground. Better the hoe.

He heard the thump of hooves and the creak of leather before he saw the riders. They came at him out of the smoke, like phantoms out of Hades, yanking their mounts to

a sliding stop as they blundered over the bodies of the marauders. The first, a corporal, glanced around, assessing what had happened by who was dead and who was not, and then turned his gaze to the man who had risen and now leaned against the hoe, his lean seasoned body tensed to respond to whatever happened next. The corporal raked the man from head to foot, then his eyes widened as he looked closely at his face. He pointed two fingers at the dog soldiers who had reined up on either side of him and said,

"Stay. No one moves." He looked at the man once more and then swung his horse around, kicking the animal into a furious gallop.

The man watched the two soldiers watching him, and then crouched down again, turning his attention back to the woman. She still lay without moving, but her eyes had opened and her green eyes met his, just a shade bluer than ice. She sat up and waved away the concern of her fellows as she staggered up and dusted herself off. He watched as she examined his handiwork, and then spat on the man he'd decapitated before wiping her blade on his tabard and resheathing it. Next she turned to the riders, accepting the extended arm of one, swinging up on the saddle behind him. The sound of hooves warned them of the return of the corporal. Soon they appeared out of the smoke. The corporal and one other.

The second man wore a helm worked to resemble a snarling wolf's head, and the tabard over his chainmail bore a grey wolf on a purple field. He pulled his horse up just beyond the dead marauders, yanking the helm from his head before he swung down and passed his reins to the corporal. He was tall, with wide shoulders and narrow waist. A blond braid snaked down his back, pulled sharply from his face which was grimed with soot and spattered with mud and blood. He ignored the two bodies, acknowledging their

presence only by stepping over them as he approached and came to a stop opposite the man who had again risen and leaned against the hoe.

"Cass."

"Medwin."

Medwin looked at the hoe in the other man's hand and at the two bodies. "You are as good as ever." It wasn't a compliment, but an accusation. Cass did not reply and Medwin turned back to him.

"In all my dreams, I never imagined finding you with such as that in your hand. But then, I had never dreamed that you would have been such a yellow craven coward either."

Cass didn't flinch from the insult—from the venom in the other man's voice—didn't glance away from Medwin's angry gaze. Medwin shook his head and sneered.

"Do you know how it goes now? How far Veshtar has encroached—how much death he's brought? And you, here, hiding in the hills—what, farming? A fine thing for the Duke of Amberai, closest friend and counselor to the Emperor himself. Who, I might add, laments your absence hourly at least, if not more often. I'm sick to death of it. Treason is what I call it. Base betrayal. Better your craven hide had never been born. I tell you, if he didn't want you back so bad, and if I were a little less loyal and a little more like you, I'd separate your head from your shoulders right now and put an end to it." He paused, waiting. Then, "have you nothing to say?"

For a moment Cass did not answer. Then he spoke, his voice long unused, sounding like the grating of stone on wood. "Do you think you could, Medwin?" The other man growled and reached for his sword, his hand clutching on the pommel.

"I say you are a coward, Cassilon of Amberai. And I say that you are as much a threat to the kingdom as Veshtar and all his unholy minions. But the Emperor believes otherwise. When I tell him of your whereabouts, I doubt not that he will come himself to beg your return." He shook his head, disgust evident on his countenance. "You're a selfish man, Cass. What happened to you I wonder? I remember fighting with you—I admired you as much the Emperor. If he comes, Veshtar will find a way to kill him."

Medwin spat in the dirt at Cass' feet and strode back to his horse, waving the others back to the city.

"I'd take you in irons, but you're right. I couldn't take you then, and I can't take you now. You've always been damnably good, and I won't lose good people to the likes of you. But the Emperor was your friend, and his blood will be on both of our heads." He spun his horse around and then stopped and looked over his shoulder.

"I once thought of you as the most honorable man that I knew. I thought you were incorruptible. After today, I know you still know the difference between right and wrong, good and evil. You wouldn't have taken the chance on discovery otherwise. So tell me, how do you justify what you've done?" He didn't wait for a reply, for none was forthcoming, but kicked his mount into a gallop and soon disappeared into the smoke, leaving Cass alone with the two dead marauders.

Medwin's words throbbed in his head as he climbed back up the ridge, heading toward his valley. How did he justify it? Had it been right to take the easy way out? Not easy, he corrected himself. Not easy at all. And it had seemed the only answer at the time. He had been a liability—Medwin knew that. He hadn't been fit to lead his people, to advise the Emperor. Not after sacrificing Faron—her blood still stained his hands—his

very soul. They called him a hero for that. For not giving in to Veshtar's blackmail. But Veshtar had sent him her body—drawn piece by piece from her yet living body—until he could stand it no more. Would she really have understood why he hadn't come for her? That he'd put her second to the needs of his Emperor? He'd sworn her his eternal love, had given her his heart and soul, and she had entrusted him with her life. He'd failed her—No! Betrayed her."

Cass began to jog, driving himself as he had not done in years. He'd thought the pain had dulled. When he came to a melt-swollen creek, he plunged in, letting the water drive him into rocks and snags, letting it pull him under until he thought he'd drown, until at last he found himself on the opposite bank, more than a league downstream from where he'd gone in. The sun was sinking and he felt chilled to the marrow of his bones. The hoe was gone, lost he knew not where. He walked now, weighted beneath memories and guilt, unable to do more than plod through the trees.

Warm lips, mocking laugh, skin like satin over steel. Faron. She'd been sharp edged, sent by her father to charm the influential Duke of Amberai. She bore the bruises of her defiance; she was not to be ordered about so easily. And yet she had charmed him with her anger, with her wit, with her passion.

Kidnapped.

Held hostage.

Blackmail.

He hadn't succumbed. How could he? The Emperor was his friend and liege lord. He could no more betray him than So he'd betrayed her instead. Oh yes he'd been arrogant. As arrogant as the marauder who carried that sword, notching death into the

guard. He'd blamed the Emperor for his own weakness. The weakness that was his love, that was the bottomless black pit which sucked him in when he closed his eyes, when he was alone, when he was not with her.

He came over the lip of his valley in the dark and the moon did not cut through the shadows which filled it. He shivered uncontrollably as he stumbled down the path, and fell more times than he could count. A nicker welcomed him home, and he clung to the horse's mane when it came to him, leading him to his cabin. He staggered in, fumbling in the dark for a poker to stir the coals. He tossed a handful of kindling on top of the cherry spots and flames soon sprouted. When they had caught sufficiently, he added several logs. Still shivering, he stripped away his clothing and wrapped himself in a bearskin blanket.

Cass. He hadn't thought of himself as that man for a long time. He couldn't remember when he'd stopped thinking of himself at all, and just was. He'd had no time to think about anything but finding food, making shelter, making clothing—or perhaps he'd not wanted to. That was it, really, he now admitted. Cass was the Duke. The man who grew vegetables on the ridge was no Duke, had not chosen to betray first Faron, and then his Emperor by deserting him. He sighed. Truth was, Cass of Amberai was a coward. He had run away from what he'd done. But the demons had followed him, for he never slept a night but that he was jolted awake, his blankets soaked with his own sweat, stinking with fear.

He stared in the flames. He'd not escaped. Medwin would be glad of that. He looked around the cabin, at the saddle in the corner, the chain mail folded carefully and wrapped in oiled skins on a shelf above it, the two-handed longsword, sharp, sheathed,

and rolled in more oiled skins standing in the corner. Cass stood and crossed to his sword, lifting it in his hands, and unrolling the skins which protected it from the air. It hadn't changed since he'd last cleaned and sharpened it. The blade was bright, the hilt shaped his grip. The hilt glowed in the light of the fire and invited his touch. The bearskin drifted to the floor as he assumed a guard stance and swept the blade from side to side. It was time and time and time. Time to crawl out of the pit and face judgement. Proud he'd been once, even arrogant. And craven. Medwin had had him dead to rights.

Cass laid his sword on his bed and dressed himself. There was little in the cabin to take with him. Into his saddlebags he loaded a spare shirt, his knives, his whetstone, flint and tinder, tea, food supplies, some hooks and a fat pouch of coins. He next set about straightening the room, hanging his cookpots, putting his plate and mug on a shelf above the fire, stocking the woodpile and folding the skins and setting them neatly in a stack. When he'd finished putting it to rights, he sat before the fire and waited for the dawn.

The red horse didn't care much for the saddle and bridle, but then he never did, after months of freedom. Cass had him tacked and was mounted before the sun came up over the eastern lip of the valley. He had donned his mail coat and leggings, and his tabard sported a silver eagle in full flight on a field of midnight blue. They felt heavy and cumbersome, and more than a little loose. Yet the sword in its harness on his back fit there as the hoe had in his hands. He rode up out of the valley's shadows into the sun's welcoming rays, turning back only once. Across from him on the far ridge, the rich black patch of newly turned earth waited in vain for his sowing. Undone, he thought. Will I always leave something undone and needful behind me? The chesnut horse snorted and

sawed against the bit, dancing beneath him in anticipation. Cass turned the animal's face to the sun again, and gave him his head. The horse tossed his head and bucked as he leaped down the trail, blowing frosty plumes from his nostrils. It might have been the bright sun, the cold sting of the air, or the drifting smoke from the still burning city, but a bright crystal track of tears glistened on the man's cheeks as he turned his face toward home.