

Infinite Twilight

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Chapter 1

The dog leapt at me, its sharp edged jaws tearing into my loose clothes as I turned to fend it off with the metal bar I'd found.

I could hear it menacing growl between its clenched jaws as it pulled, as its forelegs scrabbled against my legs. I had to get it off, as its intent was clearly to hurt me. These dog patrols only had one thing in mind, and that was to keep people out.

This dog had a firm grip on my clothes, and there wasn't any way I was putting my hands near it, so I hit the dog across its back with the bar, but it hung on, growling even more as I saw its terrible eyes looking up at me.

I was really afraid now. I'd been lucky enough that when it leapt at me, it had snagged my baggy trousers, but it had a vicious look in its eyes.

Twice more I hit the dog as it growled from its slavering mouth, and started twisting about, tearing at my clothes.

Suddenly it pulled free, leaving a torn opening my by trousers. I made a run for the next walled area, leaving the dog behind. Around the corner of some broken structure, I took a glimpse back, seeing nothing I was thinking I'd lost the dog, but it came running around in pursuit, catching fast.

I had no chance of escape it. Slowing to a halt next to the wall, I turned about, facing the dog off. It came to a halt also, as if matching my stance, trying to anticipate what I was doing.

As it sensing my fear it advanced, its feet clicking on the dark pavement as it stepped forward.

I was afraid.

Chapter 2

My life up until now had been a lie. The things I knew, or had known, were all wrong. For so long, I'd had these feelings, these emotions, and dreams that I couldn't explain.

Father had always said it was my imagination, the focus of an underdeveloped and under worked mind. His answer had always been to make me work harder, stay out longer hours, from before dawn, until some time after dusk, when I couldn't hardly see where I was going, unless I scavenged an old glow tube form somewhere.

Life with Father had always been hard, as far back as I could remember, which was barely after I could walk. As I grew up, Father always said I was special, and I came to realise this after a time, as I could never find anyone else like me.

"Klaur!" That's what Father called me, though sometimes in private he used to call me some other strange name, the same name as the star in our sky. Sun.

It was just as strange as what I called him. Growing up, I always called him Father. That is until on day when we were outside at a market, he backhanded me. "Never! Never call me that! My name is Russi, and you'd better use it."

I was shocked. Not that he'd hit me. He'd done that many times, but this was the first time he'd done it in front of some many strangers. It was like part of the marketplace had suddenly died. I looked about, seeing many people staring back at me, as I realised we were the centre of attention suddenly.

It was embarrassing; as I was sure my face was glowing from the strike on my face. I did my best to ignore it, walking on behind Father... behind Russi.

Some time later after we'd gotten home; he apologised to me, saying it was a big misunderstanding. He told me that Father was my private name for him. I was only to call him that when no one else was around. But any other time, I was to call him Russi. In public, with other people around, I wasn't to say Father at all.

It was like that with all things, as I grew up, as Father taught me things. Always it was Father had trained and taught me, everything I knew. He was why I was here, facing this dog, with a slim bar of metal.

Chapter 3

The dog leapt at me, this time not for a leg, or a stray piece of clothing, but at my face. My reaction was to bring up my hands to cover my face, thinking it going to rip my eyes and nose out.

Inadvertently I brought the bar up too, which had hung loose in one hand. It came up quickly, and before I knew what had happened, the dog fell back to the ground without touching me.

It was growling once more, as it turned about, but this time it had blood on the side of its face, which it licked as it stared back at me.

I risked a glance down at the bar, which now sported a stain, a dark stain of blood.

The bar. It was a weapon. I hadn't even thought of it.

Chapter 4

I'd seen big men use large bars, and other strange things as weapons, to hit dogs, and other people before, more so just recently.

But I'd always been too small to use one myself. Father had always protected me from some assaults, using small pieces of wood joined together at the ends by metal rings. He'd swing them around so fast, you could hear them in the air, and when they hit something. It would sound like two ten's of men had just punched something all at once.

Father usually kept these hidden in the fold of his clothes. When he wanted to be noticed that he was ready for any trouble, he had a long wooden pole, which he could use just as effectively. He could drop an unprepared man with one sweep of it. Or take on two armed men at once.

Trouble usually came like that, or with three or four at times. One particular time I'd gone with Father into a troubled area, as he went looking for new clothes for me, as I seemed to be growing a lot.

We'd gotten directions from a man who was vending vegetables, of a shop and went down some streets looking for it.

Father had come prepared with his pole, knowing the area was trouble. It was ordained almost; as we rounded a corner two men appeared from the side buildings, blocking our way.

Father told me to turn back, but as I did so, two more men appeared there also, blocking my way.

"Two more." I told him.

He seemed to know this already, "Stay close to me Klaur."

"Give us your money, and we might let you live." One of the men in front said. He held a jagged edged blade that looked flecked with rust. "If you don't we'll kill you, and the dwarf."

Father didn't answer them. To me, it didn't look like he was prepared to fight them, just standing there with his pole resting on the ground.

The men advanced slowly from all directions, some holding weapons, and some not.

Father waited patiently and I stood behind me, knowing what would happen. Suddenly the pole was gone, as Father stepped forward, the pole's tip smacking across the head of lead man with the knife, felling him instantly.

The three men seemed stunned momentarily by this, but rushed in anyhow. Father was ready for them, sweeping the other front man aside to take on the two behind us.

I had to step out of the way, or risk been trampled or hit by Father as he swung the pole about, trying to beat back the now prepared men.

And prepared they were, as they took on Father in a seemingly coordinated action. Though it seemed like they had the advantage, Father was beating them.

All would have gone well, until the third man returned to the fray, choosing an easier target. Me.

I was small, and not very strong as he grabbed at the clothes on my unsuspecting back, lifting me off the ground.

"Drop your staff, or I'll kill the dwarf." He said.

Father heard this, and halted in his attack to turn and see me hanging in the air.

I couldn't do much at all hanging from where I was. I couldn't kick, punch, or even bite his hand, and Father knew this. It would have been the end for me right there, except for something I'd picked up recently.

A small knife, Father didn't even know about it. It was a small thing, designed to fold into itself. I pulled it out of the folds of my clothes.

All Father saw was that I held something in my hand, as I smiled back at him. He knew I was up to something, so didn't place his pole down right away, instead holding it out at an angle away from him, as if here were about to let it drop.

The knife swung out from its handle with a flick of my wrist, and I reached up. I could well have stabbed at the hand on the man holding me, but I had no intention of doing so. Instead I swiped the blade through the cloth bunched in his hand, finding it cut easily through, before I found myself falling flat to the ground.

I looked up to find the man staring down at me, and then at the cloth in his hands, before I noticed his foot rising over me. I was a little stunned from the fall, and hadn't expected it to be so hard.

Before he could move any further, I saw the end of Father's pole hit him right in the face. There was a kind of surprised expression, as he toppled over on the one leg, falling above my head.

Slowly I got up, making sure I didn't cut myself on the sharp knife, and hiding it away again. It might prove to be useful again later.

I found Father dispatching a third man, before the fourth turned and fled.

Chapter 5

I swung at the dog that leapt backwards out of the way. It wasn't as dumb as it looked. But how was I loose the dog? I couldn't out run it, and I wasn't any match for it, as it stood more than half my size.

I recalled one of the many things Father had taught me, so long ago, when the world seemed much taller.

Chapter 6

"All things have fear Klaur." He said.

We were in a bazaar at the time, in amongst many strange animals, that hissed, growled, and spat. It was the first time I'd seen so many animals, and all but a few of them stood taller than me. The ones that didn't have sharp teeth that could bite.

"You see, all these animals fear us. That's why they make themselves appear ferocious to us. Like that snake over there."

He pointed out a snake that some man had in a basket. "You see how it spreads out its neck, and stretches into the air? It does that to make itself appear bigger to frighten off other animals. Even the biggest of animals fear us in some way. Many of them fear other things more so, like particular images, or sounds."

We walked well within the bazaar, seeing many strange animals, beasts of burden, pets, those used for food, and other wild creatures, like horses.

"You see the tamed horse can be a useful creature to us, giving us a fast way to get around. Handlers teach them be tame, by using many devices, including fear. They use a whip, which the horse learns to fear. Other animals have similar fear already in them. To master an animal, you have to learn to know its fear, yet not show your own fear to it."

Chapter 7

"Show no fear... Show no fear." I said to myself, staring straight at the dog.

I had to frighten it, or at least make it leave me alone.

It stayed just in front of me; its teeth drawn back as it growled again. I wasn't too sure, but maybe it sensed my fear.

"Show no fear... Show no fear... Show no fear."

I kept my head downcast at it; eyes focused only on the dog. "Scram dog!" I yelled at it, hearing the high pitch of my voice echo around me.

It stayed there, staring back at me.

"Rack off, go home!" I swept my free hand over it, keeping the other ready with the bar.

It had no affect, except to make the dog growl more. I wondered if maybe it was going to leap at me, and lock its sharp jaws around my throat.

"GO AWAY!" I scream at it, lifting both arms above my head, and stepping forward.

It stepped back from me, me now, as if it took the idea, but stalled again when I stopped, and barked at me before growling again.

I got prepared to swing the bar at it again, when it suddenly looked around, and darted off. I wondered briefly if I had finally got through to it, then dropped the bar and ran real fast. Whatever had sent it away; I wasn't going to stick around for it to come back.

This region was quite bare of things, except for the rubble of the hard grey stone that littered the area. It was bleak and hot. The sun made the stone heat up, giving me reason to slow from running and drink from my water bag. I had far to go yet, and running in this sunlight wouldn't get me there.

I had to pace myself, maybe even try to travel at night rather than during the day. I considered it for a while, why made my decision for me.

There was a covered area, sort of made of this wall of grey stone with square windows in it. It provided enough shade from the sun, as I settled down trying to make myself as comfortable as possible on the hard stone like stuff.

I tried to rest, but sleep didn't come easily as I thought about all that had occurred before meeting the dog.

Chapter 8

"Russi! Russi! He's back!" came this loud voice, calling for Father.

We were sitting down to eat at midday, during the hottest part of the day. Father had to get up again, after stuffing a portion of his food into his mouth to eat it quickly as he went to find out who was calling for him.

"What do yah want?" Father called back as he pushed past the curtain to find one of his contacts standing out the front.

I followed discreetly, eating my food as I listened in. Father in his wisdom had taught me to find out everything I could, and not let a situation pass me by if I could help it. Whenever he'd been meeting some of his contacts, he'd always wanted me to listen in, because I could learn things.

Even though I could have heard them easily from inside, I found it better to actually look at whoever Father was speaking to, putting faces to voices, and watching how they reacted. From all the people I've seen, everyone seems to have this mannerism in how they hold themselves, the way their hands move, right down to the way they stand.

I've been able to know how some men have reacted; just by the way they stood. This was something Father had first taught me.

"Russi, he's back!" The man said, now in reaching distance from Father.

"Who is back?" Father asked.

"That man, the one you've been trying to contact. Andak the caravan trader."

"Andak? He's back?" Father said.

It was unusual for him to repeat something like this. I knew this must be real important to him.

"He came in last night's traders though the north entrance, and was up this morning already selling things from his wagon in the trade area."

Father was quiet a moment, before speaking again. "Thankyou Duari. I have only one more thing to request of you, and then I'll consider you debt paid in full."

"Ask, and you shall have it." Duari said.

He looked ready to even lay down his life for Father. The debt owed him must have been great.

"I'll be needing some supplies and two packs for a journey, a long journey. I'm not sure how far as yet."

"This is simple for me. Are you sure you do not wish anything else?"

"No nothing." Father said. "Simply the packs, and the debt shall be satisfied."

"Then it will be satisfied by this evening." Duari said.

They grasped wrists and separated. I had to duck back inside before Father came back in.

"Eat up Klaur, we have a man to see before the sun as moved any further."

I swallowed the rest of my food, and emptied my mug quickly, only spilling a few drops of the sweet foaming fluid.

Father was ready to go already, having found his pole, and stood there eating the rest of his food as I caught up.

The sun was greedily hot this season, baking the hair on my head as we ventured though the areas, into the section where all the outside traders set up. Unlike the ones that reside within the town, these came with great carts and caravans on wheels, stocking strange yet wonderful items from towns far and wide from our large community.

They set up shop during the previous night after they arrive, ready to trade the next day with all who could afford it. As noon was the hottest part of the day, it was usually the quietest as everyone stayed inside to eat the midday meal.

We were only two of the few who even dare the hot sun to move about the town with tasks that seemed too important to wait until it was cooler.

Father seemed to slow, as he searched about seeking something, until he spied his goal.

"There is his caravan. It hasn't change much at all. Even the battered pans on the side look the same."

I saw the wooden caravan, which looked poorly put together, yet still stood on its four wheels on the ground, as if defying the force that pulled us down to the ground.

There was a tall slim man, with a thin pointed black beard sitting in the shade of a cloth that hung from the side of the caravan.

"So what brings two fine men to my stall in this hot sun?" He asked.

He seemed to eye me strangely, seeing that I was much shorter than the usual man.

"You are Duari?" Father asked.

"Well, that depends on who's asking."

"I'm looking for a friend of a friend, and I was told you would know where I could find him."

"Well, if it's information you're looking for, then you've found the person." He said.

"So you are Duari?" Father asked.

"Yes, of course I am!" He said, as if the presumption of him been otherwise was an offence. "A friend of a friend you say? Would you have a name for me?"

"Laren." Father said, almost with reverence. It was the second time I'd heard it mentioned. "His... name was Laren. I'm trying to find friend of his."

Father had only mentioned Laren to me once, just before that, saying that Laren had been a very close friend before I arrived, but he had died soon after. I could see it in his eyes now as he mentioned Laren.

"Laren... Laren... Hmmm, I'm not to sure I recognise it." Duari said, fingering his beard and looking to the roof.

I could have seen this, a distance off. Duari expect money for his information.

Father seemed preoccupied in Duari's answer that he didn't see the signs. I shuffled forward, making the first move in bartering.

"Three pieces for the information." I said, laying down the tokens on the table, but keeping my hands on them.

"Three? Six pieces!" Duari said.

"Three pieces, and I don't tear up your goods." I said, flipping the knife out and stabbing it into the tabletop. It didn't make the table shake, but I got it to stick into the surface.

Duari looked at me, then to father as if expecting something. "Four pieces." He said, coming down.

"Don't barter with him!" I called, seeing him wanting Father to intervene. "His liable to break your arms to get the information."

"Okay, three pieces!" He agreed.

He reached for the silver pieces, but I waved him off with the knife. "Information first."

"You drive a hard bargain short man." He said. "Okay, I helped transport Laren and someone else on my way here ten and six cycles ago. They were merely travelling with the traders, but I don't know where they came from, as they both transferred from another trader who went off to another town."

Ten and six cycles ago, that was beyond my own memory.

"What happened then?" Father asked.

Duari looked at me, expecting something. We were getting information now, so I pushed the first piece from my hand, towards him.

He took it like a greedy dog, checking it over before continuing. "They both got of here, and I never saw them again."

"Never?" Father asked.

"Never." Duari repeated.

"Can you remember what the other man's name was?" Father asked.

I pushed another piece forward, which Duari took.

"He had the strangest of names." Said Duari, "I thought Laren was strange, but what sort of name is Melissa for a man?"

"It's his name. That's all that matters." Father said. "Thankyou for the help."

Father turned away, and I pushed the final piece forward as I withdrew the knife and followed him.

"It shouldn't be hard to find this Melissa, wherever... he is. That sort of name will be difficult to forget." Father said.

He seemed to have a one-track mind with this. I didn't know what was happening, but I followed him as we went on a search, asking local traders and merchants for information.

There wasn't much at first, until one merchant was able to tell us that Melissa was a local to the area, and came in sometimes. We prowled about more, asking more people now, searching for him.

It was going well, as we were sure he lived or worked nearby, until a small group stopped us suddenly.

"Russi, you sure have been busy!" A man said, standing out from the group of men.

"What do you want?" Father asked.

"Direct you are. It's simple. We want to find the fabled Eden. And it's supposed treasures."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Father said.

"I'm sure you do. Since I'm absolutely sure the proof is standing next to you."

I didn't have any idea what he was talking about, until he pointed at me.

"Ah, I see you haven't told him. Have you? Well that's okay, he's still valuable enough to get us into Eden."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I've never been to Eden." Father argued.

"That may be true, but we're sure you're trying to find out who does." He said, "And we want to know who."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know what you are talking about." Father said.

It was all quiet for a moment except for the called and yells of the merchants in the nearby streets.

"That's a real pity, because we're going to have to kill you otherwise." The man said, with an ugly grin.

They all seemed to approach at once.

"Klaur, go now and find him." Father told me. "And don't let anyone follow you."

Something was seriously wrong.

"Go NOW!" He yelled at me.

Usually such a command was accompanied by a swift strike by his hand, but it still carried the weight of his authority.

"After him!" I heard the man call as I ran, making for the corner.

There were several thuds, as I was sure Father had mad his first move by taking down some of them, but I heard the footfalls of pursuit behind me.

There were some things I had learned along the way, which Father hadn't taught me. One was that me been of small size was an asset on occasion. This was one of them now, as I ducked through the first hole in a wall I came by, squeezing through into another roadway, and cutting around corners at a run.

Twice more I was almost caught by these men, until I found myself a hole to settle down in, and watched as the went past searching for me.

Chapter 9

I was able to finally nap in the hot shade, before the sun descended and brought darkness to the terrain. There was some food that I chewed on before resuming my trek.

The ground was rough and broken, making my steps difficult in the darkness, though I found enough light to see by in the starlit night.

The temperature was still warm enough as the stone gave off much of the heat that it had captured during the day, turning my trek into a comfortable march.

I didn't walk all night, stopping often to rest because my legs became sore sometimes, and drinking some of my limited water.

There wasn't much water in the bag, enough to last me two more days. Then that was it. The food might last a bit longer, but with the heat and the walking, it was the water that was most important.

Twice as I walked along, I heard the baying of dogs, or something similar. Maybe it was the same dog that had cornered me, and maybe not. Maybe it was far off, with its voice been carried by some magic of the grey stone.

I had no real idea, since this was the first time I'd really ventured into the Dead country. It was the first time I'd really been of the town also. But traders did that often, going between towns, to make their living. But no one I knew had ever been to the Dead country.

There were bad things said about it, that any man who went in there never came out, and stories of those who lived nearby that became sick with strange illnesses. Then there were the stories of lights and of ghosts of the past.

And then there was the story of Eden. That was why I was really here. That was why I ventured into the deadly area. Not of people who could kill me, but of unseen things which could poison you slowly, and others that made a loud cracking sound like Father's pole.

Chapter 10

When I was sure no one else was looking for me, I snuck back, retracing my steps back to where father was.

It wasn't far, as I came in from another direction, hiding wherever I stopped.

The sound of something breaking caught my attention, as I watched the man from before, who'd argued with Father about Eden, break a pole in half across his leg. I wondered what it was, until I recognised it as Father's pole.

I was a little afraid now, wondering what happened to father, until I saw him been held down on his knees by several men. Twice as many more were lying on the ground around him, as some men helped them up or dragged them away.

I felt good that Father had done well, taking out that many men all by himself. But I couldn't help him now, not with all those people around him.

I wasn't close enough to hear what was been said, but I was sure the man was asking Father again about Eden. That's when he used the broken pieces of the pole to beat across Father.

I so wanted then to go out there and stop them, but Father's last words echoed through my mind, reminding me to follow his commands.

But that could wait. At least I could sit here and watch, until they eventually had to release Father. They couldn't keep forever I was sure.

I was so sure. So sure that he would be released, that I didn't expect the man to suddenly turn the broken pieces of the pole, and run then into Father.

I was shocked, that I didn't move, and sat there seeing from the distance, as Father fell over backwards.

I could see his face clearly now from my position, the two parts of his pole, now sticking up from his chest, the red stains spreading outwards.

Never before had I felt so distressed, watching him lie there with his blood flowing away, and I couldn't do a thing to help him as the men stood about.

There was the faintest movement in Father's face, and I was sure then that he could see me. He always could tell where I was, as I could never hide from him. His lips seemed to move as he said something. Though he was upside down and I couldn't hear him, I was sure I could understand each word. "Find Melissa, and find Eden." He said.

That was it; his last movement was those final words that I could make out, before I could stop the water that suddenly came from eyes. I crawled away, keeping out of sight until I reached the safety of a Tavern.

It was open at all hours, as I pushed my way in past the flapping door, and took a dark corner to myself to settle down.

I sat there brooding, until someone came over and served me a drink.

"If you want to sit there you have to buy something." He said.

"Then I'll take the beer." I replied, tossing him a two-bit piece.

It was worth it to maintain my hiding place. But then I thought of something before he turned back. "I'm looking for someone, by the name of Melissa."

"Melissa. Sure, he comes in here occasionally. He should be in soon if he's coming in."

I was lucky to have found the right place at the right time. I sipped on the drink as I waited, having to order one more to stay in the Tavern, until finally I saw the man talk to someone who came in.

He looked a little odd, with a freshly shaved face, and angular cheekbones, and a strangely shaped body. I wasn't sure about this, but this was what Father had died for, for meeting this man, which I had no idea about.

He came over, his eyes looking me over, as he stood by my table.

"Hello there little man. I heard you've waiting here for me."

He spoke with a strange accent, and a light voice that I hadn't heard before.

"Yes, I've been... Father..." I guess I choked up a bit, remembering what Father had been through, and forgot what I shouldn't be saying. "Russi and I have been looking for you."

"Back up a bit. What did you just say?"

He had a strange way of talking that I had trouble following him. "Russi. He's my friend. I'm Klaur."

"No." He said, suddenly sitting down opposite me, leaning across the small table. "You said Father." He whispered, as if he knew not to speak it aloud.

His stare was intense on me now. Not like before, not as if someone was trying to figure out if I was a dwarf or some freak, but something different.

He reached out a hand, and I drew back fearing something dangerous.

"It's okay." He said, in that voice that seemed to radiate honesty, "I'm not going to hurt you."

I stayed still as he touched the skin on my face and chin.

"You're only a child." He said.

I was mystified. "What's a child?" I asked keeping my voice low like his, knowing it was important not to be overheard.

"You don't know... Do you know how old you are?" He asked.

I shook my head, not understanding the question. What was old?

"No, of course you don't know." He said, "You can't be more than twelve or thirteen. You mentioned you Father. What happened to him?"

"Father..." I didn't feel very comfortable talking to this person with his personal name. "Russi was killed today, trying to find you. By some men, trying to find Eden. Russi was trying to find you, because you a friend of Laren's."

"Laren?" He said, almost astounded. "What happened to Laren?" He asked, leaning across the table.

"Father..." I forgot again, "Russi said he died when I came along."

Melissa sat back down, as if in shock. "Dead? She died having a child?"

He said some strange words, as if they were slurred, but I didn't notice anything wrong with his mouth.

He seemed preoccupied, before suddenly looking around the Tavern. "Did your Father mention to you what Eden was?"

"No." I said, not knowing what Father had been trying to do "He was only trying to find one of Laren's friends."

"It's reasonable enough. Laren probably told him. Damn Laren." He said, "We have to leave here, now."

It was so sudden, as he stood up, grabbing my wrist and dragging me along, outside

I was about ready to yank myself free, but I saw one of the men from before suddenly come across the street.

"So there you are. And I see you've found your way to Eden too."

"Damn." Melissa said.

"It's them. They killed Russi." I said.

More of them filtered out from the surrounding buildings, including the Tavern itself. Some were from before with bruised marks from where Father had hit them.

"I don't want to loose either of them this time." The man said.

I didn't like this one bit as the advanced in. I couldn't see any escape this time, and Melissa was only one source of help now for what Father had left me.

I felt Melissa left my wrist go, as the group came in around us. He didn't pull any weapon out, just stood there like Father did, sort of relaxing.

That was until one of them came into reach, when Melissa suddenly moved. I wasn't quite sure, but he moved in and around them, feet, legs, arms, swinging in motion to hit and send them flying in different directions.

I saw him draw two men come together, to smash their heads together like soft fruit. I did my bets to stay out of the way, except when someone tried to grab me. I had my knife out quickly, slicing across the arms, which departed just as quickly with a scream.

There was a mass of bodies around before Melissa called me to follow. I ran after him, knowing it was better than staying here. He brought me around into a small dwelling nearing dusk as we tried to loose our pursuers.

"It's time to leave this town." Melissa said, snapping on a bright glow tube. He started packing stuff, throwing strange objects in a pack.

"And you're going to have to come with me." He said.

I wasn't sure about this. Leaving this town, my home. The only place I knew. "Where are you going?" I asked.

He stopped to look at me. "Eden." He said simply.

That what Father had wanted. But I had no idea what Eden was, and why those men had killed Father to find it.

"What's so important about it?" I asked.

He seemed to take a deep breath before speaking. "No one is really supposed to know about it. I don't know how those men found out, but they shouldn't. And now my own presence is a risk. So is yours. Eden is somewhere safe for both of us, where we can be who we really are, and not pretending to be men."

This was confusing. Father had always called me a man. Well... sometimes.

"You really don't know do you?" He said, staring at me in an odd way.

"You see, everyone in this town, and in all the other towns, except for a few certain people like you and me, are all men. Or a man."

Okay, so if they're all men... "Then what are we?" I asked.

"You are what's call a child, or a boy. What is also known as a young man," he said.

A boy? Young man? "So we are a boy?"

"Oh, no. Not me. Just you. Until you grow older of course, in a few more years or cycles, then you'll be a man."

"So I'm not a man now, but I will be soon?"

"Yes."

"And what will you be?" I asked.

He seemed to have trouble with this one. "I'm a woman."

"A woo-man?"

"A woman." He said it fast as if it was one word. "A female."

I still didn't understand, and showed it by shaking my head in frustration.

"A woman is different to a man, because she has different appendages." He said.

He slurred that word again, as if on purpose.

"Look then. You have a thing between you legs."

"Yes." I said, trying to follow. "I pee from it."

"All men have one of those to pee from." He said.

I nodded in agreement with this, having seen them many times. There wasn't anything special about them, except that it hurt when they were hit, and he sun could burn the skin. The sun was mainly the only reason clothing was worn, so it didn't burn our skin. Occasionally when the weather was mild, and it rained, some of us would venture

out to have a shower in the clean water, removing all our clothes and using a block of melted fat to wash with. So I knew what he meant.

“Well women don’t have those. We have a cleft, a hole from which urinate from.” He said.

“Then how would you pee?” I started.

“We don’t stand up.” He said. “We take a seated position.”

I shook my head, no understanding. How could a person have to sit down to pee? They’d have two holes then! How strange that must be.

“Jeez, I never thought I’d be teaching about the bird and bees.” Melissa said. “Okay then, I’ll just have to show you.”

I had no idea what to expect as he stood up, and released the belt holding up the long pants, revealing a thong strapped around his hips that also went between his legs.

He slipped this down, where I saw nothing. No dangling member to pee from. In the light from the glow tube, I could see a thin red crack surround by light hair. I leaned over with my hand, thinking maybe this was some sort of defect, as some men had missing ears or fingers, but he pulled up the thong again, and re-belted the pants.

“That is the most obvious of differences between a man and a woman. There are others, which you’ll learn about. But it’s important for us to leave here now, before this...” He pointed between his legs. “Is found out by anyone else.”

Melissa finished packing gear into a second pack for me, and we trudged out into the darkness after he turned the glow tube off.

“We should be able to hitch a ride with one of the traders going out of the town.” He said, as we went through the semi darkness, headed back towards where Father and I had been earlier that day.

Chapter 11

The nights were long and tiring as I walked, following the simple directions I had marked on a piece of parchment. A certain place not to tread or go near, and a path of safety that led towards Eden.

It was dark and lonely. I didn't even know where Melissa was, as she'd left me when we started out on foot, and gave me the parchment. I was a little frightened, not knowing what was happening with her, or what Eden really was.

Was it just another town like my own, but only filled with women? I still couldn't understand half the stuff she had told me. I still had trouble with just understanding the words.

A woman was a female and a man was a male. She went there, and he went there. That was her stone, and his stick. That was her running along there, and him running along there.

Each word sounded like it had been cast from that of a man, like a bad slurring.

It served to keep my thoughts occupied when I rested during the next day, much closer now to where Eden lay. I should reach it hopefully by the morning after, soon after I run out of water.

Chapter 12

Melissa secured us a seat on a Trader's caravan, sitting on the back edge of the rickety construction, staring back into the darkness to where we could here another caravan following the pre-morning darkness.

There wasn't anything to do, except to hold onto our seats, trying not to fall off, where we could be run over. I'd seen what horses could do to a man, yet these caravans were pulled by groups of them, steadily moving along in the darkness.

"We have a fair distance to travel on the caravan before we get off." Melissa said. "If you want to rest, try to do so, because it doesn't get any better than this, except when the traders stop to feed and water the horses."

"Are we going to the next town?" I asked, curious as to how far we were going. I wanted to see some of what lay outside my town.

"No, we'll be leaving it about half way, in about two days when we pass the Dead country."

So I wouldn't get to see another town. It didn't really matter, as I'd gone further than I'd ever expected. I was out on the road now, travelling the open country, with... It wasn't Father.

The grief came over me, as I remembered Father lying there in the dirt. He had been all I knew of my world, and now he was gone, dead because of some secret, a secret that I was been led too.

I looked up at Melissa in the half-light, seeing the strange features I'd seen before, and noticing others that still didn't make sense. A woman. That's what he called himself.

"Melissa, you used some other words before, like you were slurring." I said.

"Slurring? Uh, how?"

I did my best to imitate her, "Shh-he. When you said you a woman is different because shh-he has different things."

"Oh, she! I guess it sound like it's slurred." He said, changing his position to face me. "It's the way a woman is described. When you talk about a man, you say he does something. But with a woman, you say that she does something. There are others also."

He talked about this for a while, explaining how you talked about a person, using these words that also indicated their gender. That was a new word also, but I was beginning to understand the concept when she started relating it to horses, as some were fillies and some were studs.

She told me that fillies were actually female, and studs were male. It was all very strange but I understood what she was saying now, though she sometimes used a new word.

"And new horses are created when a female and male horse have sex." She said.

"What is sex?"

She looked at me, as if waiting for something. "Well, sex is part of the process which is used to... create a new thing. When a male and a female horse get together, they can create a new horse. A male and a female dog would create a new dog. And also when a man and a woman get together, they can create a new person."

I was following this with some difficulty, and she could see that.

"Let's see. Have you ever seen a small dog before, about this small?"

She held her hands together, as if she were holding a bowl.

I shook my head. Dog had always been big things to me. Some had even been my size also. Scary creatures like horses. But horses didn't have sharp teeth that could bite.

"Wait! I remember seeing something once." I said. "A trader a one time, had these small furry things in a basket, trying to sell us. He called them baby dogs."

"Well good then." She continued. "When a male dog and female dog she together, they do what is called sex. The male dog leaves something inside the female dog, and it grows there for several tens of turnings, before it comes out about this size. From there it continues to grow over a cycle until it's the same size as any normal dog."

"It grows?" I asked.

"Ah huh. But it has to eat a lot when it's growing. It's the same with people, which is what you need. You're still growing also."

I was a little surprised by this, but I think I already knew this, even if I wasn't aware of it. I could remember a time when certain objects used to be much bigger. Certain things that I couldn't climb over, that I can now. Certain holes I used to be able to crawl through that I can't any more. I had been growing.

"Let's get some food and water now." Melissa said.

We sat there as the caravan continued on, eating a small portion of the food she had placed in the packs. We talked some more about comparing people with other animals, and what their young looked like.

Eventually we were able to rest I the hot part of the day, as the caravans stopped briefly as the traders rested.

Other times the traders stopped the caravan to rest the horses, we didn't speak much, as many of the traders clustered around the water hole, making it difficult to speak on any subject to with Eden or women.

We stretched our legs, and rested our arms as we filled up the water bags before setting off again.

During the night the caravan continued its journey through the dark without heed to the visibility. Many of them lit up glow tubes, so the following caravans could see them in the dark to follow.

We had a reasonable amount of light around us as we held on.

I thought about all Melissa had told me, questioning her on things, and making sure I was saying everything correctly. "How does a man and a woman have sex? You said he and she come together."

"Well, you know how I explained the main difference between men and women?"

"How I have my thing to pee from, and you have a... a hole." I said. I think she called it a hole.

"That's good enough. There are other names for them both, but they'll only confuse you. But you have this..." She held up one hand, with a finger extended. "And I have this..." She held up the other hand with her finger curved over her thumb. "A man and a woman... or a male horse and female horse. He places this into her hole."

She slid the finger into the other hand. I didn't understand it for a moment, until it just came over me. "You mean... I... you... uh... we..."

"Yes, just like that." She said.

"... Pee in each other?" I finally got out.

"No! No. Nothing like that!" She said, suddenly. "There are other things they do when a man and a woman couple like that. But that's all I know. But obviously Laren and your Father did it together, and you were the result. I had always wondered what happen to her when she went off like that. Then... she suddenly didn't come back at all."

Melissa looked sad now. I thought I could understand, knowing what it was like when father died. "I'm sure she was a good friend." I told her.

"She was Klaur. She was." Melissa said.

We were able to get some sleep in turns as the caravan rattled along. I spent the time thinking all about what she had told me, as I made sure she didn't roll off the back.

It was rough going all the next day also, as the ground seemed to change, becoming smoother and blacker. There were also large piles of broken bricks, and large flat grey stones arrayed like buildings as some reached off the ground, except they were all broken, and crumbling into pieces.

"We'll be getting off shortly." Melissa said. "Unfortunately we can't get any more water. We'll have to suffice with what we've got, until we can reach Eden."

"How much further will it be?"

"Several days walk. It would be more like four, except we can't travel in a straight line. There are many dangers between here and there. Many that can't been seen."

She explained the strange invisible poisons that could kill a person, and other strange things that protected Eden from unwanted intrusion, things called guns.

When the time came, we jumped off the caravan, dodging the next one as it came along, as Melissa had us pretend to have fallen asleep and rolled off.

The traders didn't have much concern over passengers. Not even bothering to stop as they continued on without us.

We turned about, looking east into the broken land when we heard something.

"Horses." Melissa said, turning to see a rising cloud of dust following up where the caravan had come from. "I don't like the look of this."

Melissa pulled out a piece of parchment with a drawing on it, talking quickly. "This describes the route to take around the dangers. It's the safest way into Eden. Go quickly. I'll try to lead them away."

"But what about you?" I asked. It's the first time I realised that I liked her. I'd lost Father, who had been my only friend. And now that I thought I'd found another, I was losing her too.

"I know another way in, though its riskier. When I loose the pursuit, I'll follow. Just go."

She gave me a push towards the east and I kept running, looking back once to see her standing there until I lost view of her.

Chapter 13

That had been a day before I ran into the dog. I'd followed the directions, seeking out the path that wound around the unseen things, and sometimes looking back, half expecting to see Melissa following.

Sometimes I thought that she'd been killed, and the horses with the men were following. That's what I thought when I ran into the dog. It had to have been one of theirs. Where else would a dog have come from out here?

But as strangely as it had appeared, it had gone too, back to wherever it had come from.

But now I was closing in upon my destination, a small mark on the side of the parchment. I didn't know what it was, except that it was close by.

I found the thing soon enough, as the sun was getting hot in the sky now. But I was confused. It was a building. Made of the same grey stone of the broken ones around me, except that it was intact.

I walked around the four walls, finding it perfectly square, with no openings. On one face I found a strange hollow, but that was all. Nothing else. His couldn't be Eden. This was just a building. There wasn't anything else around for as far as I could see. No towns, trees, animals, or anything, just a broken land with mounds of stone.

I sat in the hollow for the shade, and drank the last of my water, finding it all gone now. That was it. My flight. The death of Father, all that Melissa had told me had come to nothing.

She was probably dead, and I would probably die too. It would take days to travel back along where I had come, with no promise that I would make it alive.

All my hopes died as I sat the day out in the shade, slowly getting thirstier. I had some food left, but it had little moisture, and left me feeling drier still.

Maybe I should try to head back then. When it got dark. Travelling in the daylight was sure to make me thirstier.

Slowly, as the sun started to settle, I heard noises. Pattering sounds and rocks rolling down something. My thought turned back to the dog. It had followed me all this distance, and now it was about to catch me.

I stood up, looking about for something to seize, but the ground was oddly bare of anything to grab. All I had on me was my knife, which I drew out.

The sounds got louder, until I could hear where it was coming from, until a dark figure came around a pile of stone into view.

I was all ready to defend myself, as I recognised the form.

"Melissa!" I called.

"Klaur?" She said, coming close. "Why are you still out here? Why not go inside?"

"Inside where? There's no opening."

"Ah, you don't know about the door." She said, going past me into the dark hollow. She pressed something, and the back swung away.

She stepped into the dark of the room.

"Come in, it's safe." She said.

I stepped into the darkness, as the opening closed off, sealing us in complete dark. I was afraid for a moment, hearing only the sound of our breathing, until some glow tubes mounted in the ceiling suddenly lighted the room.

Looking around, I saw strange walls and a floor. I still didn't know what this building had to do with Eden. "How much further is Eden?" I asked.

"Well be there shortly." Melissa said, pressing something against a wall, and the room started to move.

I wasn't sure about it all; leaning against the wall to I wouldn't fall over.

"Klaur, you might want to step back from that wall." Melissa said, standing in the centre of the room. I looked at her for a moment, keeping her balance there.

"Why?" I asked.

Suddenly the wall beside me disappeared, and I fell back to sit on the floor. The wall had disappeared above me, rising up with a vast ceiling, lit up with tens upon tens upon tens upon tens of huge glow tubes. Looking out from where I sat was a vast green floor, spotted with blue and brown and other colours.

There was a sense of space in front of me, and I put a hand out, finding a hard surface stopping me. It was clear you solid enough to stop my hand.

The green floor below slowly grew larger and larger as if we were descending from the sky. Up above, the ceiling no longer looked like a ceiling, but a blue sky, with a bright spot of a sun.

The green floor became larger still as I recognised green trees and other growing things, which reach up for us as we continued to descend. We passed below several hills and several trees before another wall appeared around us.

"What was that?" I asked, turning to Melissa.

"That was Eden." She said, helping me up. "Why don't we go out and see it for real. There'll be a great many people who'll want to meet you also."

"Are there any women?" I asked.

She seemed to laugh at that, as she opened the wall to let us out onto a green ground. "We're all women down here. We're all female. But I believe you are the first child to ever be here."