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IT HAD BEEN RAINING FOR A WEEK.

Not heavy rain, but a steady, persistent, soaking rain that finally overcame the protective oil in their woolen cloaks and worked its way into the fabric itself, making it heavy and sodden.

And cold.

As they had done for the previous few nights, Halt and Crowley were camping out in the woods. Halt suggested that they should avoid towns and villages until they were sure they were clear of Morgarath's sphere of influence, and Crowley initially agreed. Halt, after all, had more experience of traveling as a fugitive than he did. Now, however, he wasn't quite so sure about the decision.

They were sitting under a rectangular oilskin sheet that they had spread between four trees, with the lower side angled so that the rain would run off it. The ground beneath them was saturated and they had constructed low cots from tree branches to keep them off the wet earth. Each cot consisted of a rectangular frame, with a series of short crosspieces, and leafy boughs laid across it to form a rough mattress. Each day, they would



disassemble the frames and carry the longer timber pieces with them, lashed in a bundle.

A few meters away, their horses were tethered. The animals huddled together, sharing their body warmth and keeping their hindquarters turned to the wind and rain.

Halt shivered and pulled his cloak more tightly around him. As he moved, a runnel of water ran off the cowl and landed on his nose, continuing its downward passage to drip off the end. Seeing it, Crowley laughed.

Halt turned an accusing eye on him. "What do you find so amusing?" he asked coldly.

Crowley, also huddled inside his cloak, nodded his head toward his friend. "You sitting there, hunched over and dripping, like an old man with a runny nose," he said. Unfortunately, the shrugging movement dislodged a stream of water from his own cowl and the drops ran down his nose. He sniffed, the smile dying on his face.

"You find it amusing that I'm soaked to the skin and dying of cold?" Halt asked.

Crowley made as if to shrug, then realized that such a movement would send more water running, and restrained himself. "Not amusing, perhaps. But certainly *diverting*."

Halt turned, very carefully, to face him. "And from what does this sight divert you?" he asked, with careful attention to his grammar. When Halt was in a bad mood, he invariably paid careful attention to his grammar.

"From the fact that I'm also sitting here with water running off my nose, cold, wet and miserable," Crowley said.

Halt considered that. "You're uncomfortable?"

Crowley nodded, sending more water cascading. “Totally,” he said.

“Some Ranger you turned out to be,” Halt told him. “I thought Rangers could face the worst discomfort in the line of duty with a smile on their lips and a song in their heart. I didn’t realize they would sit around whining and complaining.”

“Facing discomfort doesn’t mean I’m not entitled to whine and complain about it. Besides, only a few minutes ago, I was laughing and cheerful.” Crowley shivered, and pulled his cloak tighter. More water ran off it. “These cloaks are good up to a point. But once the water has soaked into them, they’re worse than nothing.”

“If you were sitting here wrapped in nothing you’d soon see the difference,” Halt replied. Crowley grunted, and a brief silence fell over the campsite, broken only by the persistent patter of rain on the leaves and the occasional stomp of one of the horses’ hooves.

They were faced with another cold supper. The air was so moisture laden that getting a spark to take from Halt’s flint and steel to ignite a handful of tinder would be beyond his capabilities. And even if he could manage that, there was no dry firewood. Usually, they traveled with an emergency supply of tinder and kindling, but they had run out of both two days previously.

Pity, Halt thought. Even a small fire would have provided some warmth, and the flames would have given them a psychological boost as well. He reached for the pack on the cot beside him and found a piece of beef jerky. He bit some off and began to chew methodically, his jaws working on the tough, flinty meat. Maybe the exercise of chewing the jerky would warm him, he

thought. The meat was certainly tough enough to require considerable effort from his jaws. Slowly, the smoked meat flavor began to release from the jerky and fill his mouth. Then, of course, he realized how very hungry he really was, and how little opportunity he would have to relieve that hunger.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Being cold and hungry was miserable. Being wet was equally so. Being all three was well nigh unbearable.

"I've been thinking . . .," Crowley began, leaving the sentence hanging for a few seconds.

Halt shook his head. "And here am I without pencil or parchment to record this momentous event."

Crowley raised an eyebrow in his direction. At least, he thought, that didn't send water cascading down his face. He raised his other eyebrow as well, just to make sure. No cascade, so he relaxed them both.

"I think we might have crossed the border out of Gorlan Fief," he continued. Halt grunted, a noncommittal sound.

Crowley took that as a signal to expound on his theory. "That river we crossed late this afternoon, I think that might have been the Crowsfoot River, and that's the border between Gorlan and Keramon Fiefs."

"Equally," said Halt, "it might have been the Salmon River, and as I recall from the map, that's still kilometers inside Gorlan."

But Crowley shook his head. "The Salmon is much narrower—much faster running. And it's farther west, closer to Redmont. So unless our navigation is well off the mark, we wouldn't have come close to it."

"Well, you were the one doing the navigating," Halt said.

Crowley gave him a hurt look. "My map reading and sense of direction aren't wonderful. But I'm rarely twenty or thirty kilometers offline."

"Rarely, of course, implies that sometimes you are," Halt pointed out. But Crowley stuck to his point.

"Not this time. And as I say, the Salmon is narrower and faster running."

Halt decided to concede. "So, if you are right, what point are you making?"

Crowley shifted as cold water ran down inside his cloak. Halt was right, he thought, it might feel miserable sitting huddled in a soaking cloak, but at least it still kept most of the water out—and it did allow some body heat to be retained, damp as it might be.

"My point is, if we've moved out of Gorlan Fief, we might be able to look for an inn in a village and spend a few nights."

"You think Morgarath would stop at the border between the two fiefs?" asked Halt.

Crowley stuck out his bottom lip. "Perhaps not Morgarath himself," he admitted. "But if he sent some of his men after us—and we don't even know for sure that he has—they might well decide to turn back once they reached the limits of the fief. Particularly in this sort of weather. They won't be enjoying it any more than we are."

"It's possible," Halt said. "So do you have a village in mind?"

Crowley nodded. He'd been studying the map before the light failed. "There's a village called Woolsey," he said. "I'd guess it's about ten kilometers away and a little off the beaten track. It's big enough to have a tavern or an inn. And if it doesn't, we could always look for lodgings with one of the villagers."

Halt said nothing, considering the idea. Then a problem occurred to Crowley.

"Of course, we'd need money," he said. "Usually when I'm traveling, I pay with a chit that can be reclaimed from the Corps. But I can hardly do that now."

Since their confrontation with Morgarath, and the fight with his men, they had decided that Crowley should relinquish his identity as a Ranger. Morgarath's men would be looking for a member of the Corps. So far, Morgarath was probably unaware that Halt had joined Crowley. To this end, Crowley had set aside his mottled Ranger cloak and was wearing a simple wool cloak in a dark gray color. Halt's cloak was a forest green. Both colors were adequate for concealment, and not as instantly recognizable as Ranger cloaks.

"I have money," Halt said, and Crowley looked at him with relief. "But it's Hibernian. I'm not sure if innkeepers here will accept it."

"Is it gold?" Crowley asked and, when Halt nodded, he continued. "They'll accept it."

"Well then," Halt said, "tomorrow we'll head for Woolsey village. It'll give us a chance to dry out our clothes and our gear. And the horses will benefit from spending a couple of nights in a stable."

"Or even a week?" Crowley suggested optimistically.

Halt turned a baleful eye on him, peering at him through the multiple drips of water that were now running from his cowl.

Crowley shrugged. "A couple of nights is good."

"Let's turn in," Halt said, yawning. It had been a long day and the thought of a dry bed on the morrow was an attractive one. He lay down carefully and, shivering slightly, wrapped the

soaking wet cloak around him, pulling the cowl high up over his head. A gust of wind shook the tarpaulin above them and water cascaded down on three sides. He shivered again.

“To blazes with Morgarath’s men,” Halt muttered. “I want a nice roaring fire tomorrow night.”

“And a hearty beef stew,” came Crowley’s muffled voice.

“And a hearty beef stew,” Halt agreed.