

Fantasy novel, a modern man's heritage is a medieval world.

Fortress at Dison

By Richard F. Schultz

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Richard F. Schultz

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Second Edition

* Three *

Home for Tim was his Mom and Dad's place on the outskirts of Francis, a small town in southern Georgia. Actually Francis wasn't really that small. It was, he had always thought, a special kind of town . . . a small city which happened to be the home to a decent size state college. Lots of academic types, lots of businesses that catered to the students and of course, lots of students. When school was in session they were everywhere, fifteen thousand or better. Then, between semesters, the city became a ghost town. The streets were quiet; a few of the bars and local hangouts even shut down. Business at the restaurant slowed substantially, though weekends still managed a decent crowd.

Tim and his folks had lived in Francis his entire life. His father, Robert Hamilton, was a biology professor at the college. They were fortunate to live on a little over thirty acres about half an hour outside of town, and this was where Tim had grown up. Some might not agree, but he thought of their small spread as their own private little piece of heaven. Other kids in town had teased him for being a country boy, but he had never really paid much attention to their taunts. He'd grown up playing in the old barn, in nearby fields, and following the seemingly endless game paths running through the woods. There was even a small cave in a hillside where he'd found animal bones, a few pieces of flint and what his father said was Indian pottery.

Their home was an old farmhouse near the center of their acreage. The property was bordered on one side by a school-owned wildlife sanctuary. Since the sanctuary was state-owned land there were no neighbors behind them, and never would be, which was fine by both him and his folks. The

previous owners of the preserve had donated it to the college with the understanding that it must be used for wildlife research, so it would never be developed.

They enjoyed the privacy; not having to lock their doors was a privilege folks in town had given up years before. And there was an added bonus as well; in addition to being a biology professor at the university, Tim's father was the director of the wildlife preserve. Tim had spent his childhood growing up playing on a piece of property where humans were not allowed without invitation. Of course there were students constantly monitoring this or that research project, but for the most part the land had seen little human influence for the past thirty or so years. The preserve was over fourteen thousand acres, and as he'd grown older he'd had free reign over the entire property.

His Saturday mornings were usually spent with his Uncle Dubbs, a man of unique and far-ranging talents. Tim could never remember a time without Dubbs around, and it wasn't until around the age of ten that he realized Dubbs was not actually his real uncle, and hadn't always lived nearby. By accident one evening he'd overheard his mom and dad talking about the couple that used to live across the street and wondering whatever became of them. Tim had never known of anyone living on what was now his uncle's property beside Dubbs.

When he asked his father about the old neighbors he was told about a family named Jenkins. Mr. Jenkins was a manager with one of the few manufacturing businesses in town, a small but growing regional mobile home builder. When they opened a new plant in Dothan, Mr. Jenkins was transferred to Alabama to run the facility.

A buyer appeared before the Jenkins home had even hit the market. It was really a choice piece of property so no one was surprised it sold so quickly. There were twenty-four acres

of fields and hardwoods stretching all the way to the paved road. The house was a beautiful log home built about fifteen years earlier, and though fairly small it was well constructed. As a kid Tim particularly liked the loft and the cubbyhole-like connecting closets created under the steep-pitched roof. There were lots of places for kids to hide, and Dubbs gave Tim and his friends the run of the place. The small pond out back was an added bonus. He'd spent countless hours swimming, chasing frogs and fishing in the clear, cool water. The pond was spring fed, and during the rainy season a small stream ran down the hill, under the road and into Blue Pond about a half mile into the preserve.

Dubbs had introduced himself to Tim's folks within several days of moving in. He looked to be maybe seven or eight years older than Robert and Susan, but this small difference in age made no difference at all, and soon a fast friendship had developed. Tim was just two years old at the time.

His uncle's real name was Uncas Dubbins, though he had been "Dubbs" to Tim since early childhood. The man was an absolute unending fountain of practical knowledge. Tim had always been quick to learn from books and at school, but it was more of a chore than true interest. Dubbs, on the other hand, seemed to know a lot about a surprising variety of subjects, and every one of them was fascinating. At the top of Tim's list was the man's woodsman skill. Tim learned things that most other kids would never even consider; how to track all manner of animals, including people, all about wilderness survival, the medicinal value of plants and much, much more. When asked where he'd learned it all Dubbs would just shrug his shoulders and give a vague answer about life in this or that army, or having studied somewhere for a few years, then quickly change the subject. After a while Time gave up asking.

When Tim was eight years old Dubbs took it upon himself to begin teaching his nephew self defense. It started with wrestling and quickly moved on to boxing, then finally martial arts. By the time Tim was fifteen he was an accomplished fighter with a reputation of being someone not to mess with, a reputation that came in handy at times in school. He had toyed with the idea of open competition at regional martial arts tournaments, but Dubbs had always stressed these skills were not for the enjoyment of others or to be flaunted.

By the age of sixteen Tim could best Dubbs with any weapon. He had a particular flair for the staff and would spend hours of his free time roaming the woods playing Robin Hood and Little John, defeating the Sheriff of Nottingham and winning the fair maiden. Dubbs encouraged the games and would even join in sometimes. He insisted that a strong imagination was a sign of a healthy mind.

Once a month on Saturday morning Tim and Dubbs would play a game of their own invention with the unimaginative name of Fox and Hound. The rules were simple: the fox would be given a brief head start, usually ten minutes, then the hound would start the hunt. Each month they traded roles. Tim's skill as both hunter and hunted soon reached the point where he and Dubbs were at a stalemate. At first Tim could barely catch a glimpse of Dubbs before the two-hour time limit was up, but as time passed Tim had learned to pick up his trail and close to within striking distance before the end of the first hour. When in the role of fox he had eluded Dubbs for the entire two hours six of the last seven times they'd played.

Right after Tim's thirteenth birthday Dubbs had added a new element to the game . . . combat. Each of them carried a sword made of bundled sticks and a short wooden knife. A real knife was carried as well, though there'd never been any real need for it. It was not there for combat, just as a tool when

required. Dubbs insisted it might come in handy at some point. When the hound found the fox a battle would decide the winner. By his sixteenth birthday Tim could hold Dubbs to a draw. By his eighteenth he never lost. Dubbs would huff and moan and usually storm off after losing, but Tim knew his uncle was secretly pleased with the way he'd fought. Once in a while Dubbs would throw in a different attack or feign a weakness in an attempt to draw Tim off his guard. It had worked the first few times he had tried it, but hadn't worked since.

Never did the game grow boring. Each month there was a new variation to the rules and a new challenge for Tim to overcome. One month it would be a heavy pack filled with stones and blocks of wood for weight. Another month they would wait for rain and try their luck in the muddy streambed. Sometimes they would even wait until late at night to start the contest.

Twice now they had made the long drive to the mountains of North Carolina during the coldest part of winter to test their skill in snow and the rugged mountain terrain. Those had been special weekends; camping in the Great Smoky Mountains, days spent living on roots, snared rabbits and melted snow just to see if they could do it, tracking deer and even bear to see how close they could get. Once Tim had climbed a tree above a game trail and waited three hours for a small buck to pass underneath. At just the right moment he dropped down beside the startled animal, grabbing it by its small rack of antlers and turning it underneath like a cowboy with a steer. The deer had dropped to its side in the deep snow, then struggled to its feet and run some thirty yards down the game trail before stopping to look back and see what had happened. Dubbs had grinned like the Cheshire cat when Tim described the look of confusion on the young buck's face. Neither had known a deer had those kinds of facial expressions.

This morning was to be an early start. Dubbs had set a pre-dawn meeting to take advantage of the early morning conditions. The advantage would belong to Dubbs, however, since this morning he was to be the hound, and Tim would not be given much head start. The dew made tracking easier, and the early morning light made for better visibility than an evening hunt. Under these conditions Tim expected to be tracked down within an hour unless he was able to throw Dubbs off. Today he had a few surprises in mind to slow the hound down a bit.

As he approached the front door of the cabin his heart sank. Pinned to the door was a small piece of paper with a note written on it. Dubbs was gone more often than he was home, though he made a special effort to be around for their monthly contests. Occasionally his uncle would disappear for days, even weeks at a time. Whenever this happened and it interfered with their hunt, there would be a brief note on the door saying “gone until Tuesday,” or something else that was really no explanation at all. When asked where he’d been Dubbs would only shrug and mutter something about “family business,” or “off doing a little research.” It was no use pushing too hard. He wasn’t going to get a straight answer.

For that matter, Tim really didn’t know exactly what Dubbs did for a living. He thought there must be some sort of family money, an inheritance or trust fund perhaps, but he had no idea of how much, where or why. His uncle was a bit eccentric, and even more of a loner. It wasn’t necessary or proper to pry, and it didn’t really matter. They were as close as two people of different ages could be. Dubbs would give him answers when he was ready. There was plenty of time.

Tim pulled the note off the door. It read “*Change Of Plans! Take the SE path and skirt the pond to the south. Coffee*

and breakfast waiting at Devil's Den (maybe). Weapons allowed. Be serious."

So . . . he hadn't left! This was Dubbs at his most challenging! Tim knew the rules. He was to follow the southeast path leaving Dubbs property into the preserve. The path lead to Blue Pond, an old sinkhole full of water about sixty feet across. The water was crystal clear and always cool, no matter how warm the day, and was surrounded by large, old oak trees. It was Tim's absolute favorite swimming hole in the summer. Beyond this by about half a mile was Devil's Den, a limestone cave they had discovered when Tim was still a boy. The cave mouth was well hidden, and had Tim not slipped and slid down an embankment he would never have found it in the first place. As it was he stopped rolling in a thicket of palmettos with his feet stuck in the air and most of his back and shoulders stuck in a hole. Had Dubbs not been there to pull him free he might have spent a rough night in a very uncomfortable position. They had dug out the opening and could now walk through the entrance and into the large front chamber at little more than a slight crouch.

Their makeshift rules stated that the fox wasn't allowed to stray from the path by more than twenty yards in either direction, but the hunter, or the hound, could move around at will. Somewhere along the path there would be a few "surprises" as Dubbs like to call them. His uncle could be quite devilish in setting these traps, and Tim had been caught unaware more than once. Once he had hung upside down from a snare for a good ten minutes. Another time the ground had suddenly given way and he ended up down the bank and in the pond, not much fun in January.

As Tim had grown older, some of the outings had become more dangerous. Whenever one of Dubbs' notes read "*be serious,*" it meant exactly that. If either man was careless

one of them could be seriously hurt or worse. Several years earlier he'd tripped a wire and been surprised by a small log swinging down across the path. Fortunately it had caught him a glancing blow on in the shoulder and not the chest as it was designed. He'd been lucky then, a bruised shoulder was much better than busted ribs. Another time Dubbs had appeared out of nowhere with a dulled metal practice sword and caught him broadside on an upraised and unprotected forearm. Though the sword was not sharp, and not designed to cut, it had still taken six stitches to close the wound.

"Weapons allowed" meant exactly that. He was to come armed and prepared for combat. Not only would he have to evade snares, rocks and heaven knew what other surprises, he would also be randomly attacked. It was a great challenge and his absolute favorite way to spend a Saturday morning.

Tim checked his weapons and set out. He was carrying a practice broadsword, a short sword made of weighted, bundled willow branches, and was wearing light chain mail under his shirt and arm guards. And a real belt knife of course. They both preferred the practice weapons because it allowed more realistic combat. From time to time they would use real swords, though blunted to avoid the chance of a serious injury. But with real weapons it was necessary to pull the blows more. It changed the timing and took away from the realism.

The fence between Dubbs' property and the preserve was about a quarter mile down the trail, the trail itself being little more than a footpath winding through a mixture of thick brush that occasionally changed to open pine forest. The land in this part of Georgia was hilly, with little of the clay base that covered so much of the state. Here there was a limerock bed covered by many feet of sand and topsoil. The cave they'd found was part of a limerock outcropping.

Tim was immediately alert. Many times he had been ambushed before reaching the fence, once before even pinning the note back on the door. He'd learned quickly to take advantage of whatever defensive measures he could muster.

Here was where studying with his uncle really paid off. Before taking two steps he willed his perception of the world around him to change. With very little effort he slipped into a finely tuned sense of heightened awareness that he'd been training for years to perfect, another extension of his "blindman's" gift. He still wasn't entirely sure how it worked, but his best guess was that his five senses combined together somehow, working almost as one to give him a sort of sixth sense . . . an extra level of awareness Dubbs had patiently helped him develop. The concept was far fetched, but it was as good an explanation as any.

Alert to any threat he crossed the open yard and entered the path, each step carefully guarded. He knew the path to the preserve as well as he knew his own room. There were dozens of places where an ambush would be possible, and many more not as obvious but just as effective; behind trees, from beneath deadfall where trees had fallen during previous storms, from depressions in the ground, even thickets and bushes. A patient man could cover himself with sand, springing from the ground as his prey passed by. Fortunately there were few rocks to speak of in this part of the state, so large boulders didn't come into play in an ambush.

As he passed from open ground into the forest his sense of warning from his blindman's gift began to kick in. He knew that somewhere nearby there was a trap; he could sense it but not see it. Before he had a chance to spy the threat, a wufft of sound off to his left gave him a split second warning, and as he instinctively reversed direction an arrow brushed past his shoulder.

At times like this he was especially grateful for his uncle's teaching. Years before he'd learned how to lead a moving target with a bow. All well-trained archers had that skill. What most did not truly understand, however, was that with enough warning a shot fired from a distance of thirty five yards or more gave an alert moving target just enough time to stop, or even back up a tiny bit, and avoid the arrow, provided the target had heard and identified the twang from the bowstring. Even a well silenced bow made some noise, and that was what had just been fired. Why it did not work as well when competing with his father he didn't understand. It probably had to do with the bow his father used. His dad's bow was a modern compound, difficult to hear even up close. Dubbs used a shorter woodsman's version of an old style curved longbow.

Tim hit the ground and rolled backwards, coming up behind a large pine tree as another arrow hit the dirt where he had just been. He counted to thirty. Under their makeshift "rules of engagement," if an arrow wasn't fired for thirty seconds, the "hound" had to abandon his position and move on to his next point of ambush.

After allowing sufficient time for any error, Tim reached down and pulled the arrow from the ground near his feet. The shaft was beautifully made and hand fletched, the blunted point padded and wrapped, but still very streamline. If it hit you full-on it might leave a nasty welt, but would not do any serious damage. Both he and Dubbs were excellent marksmen, and both were comfortable the other would not make the mistake of an accidental head shot. It was why neither wore protective head gear, unlike with his father.

If his mother knew just how potentially serious their game could be she would have tanned them both regardless of their age.

It was time to move on, so Tim began working his way deeper into the woods. A deer path on Dubbs property paralleled the fence line for the first hundred yards or so before taking an abrupt turn and crossing the fence. The fence was standard six by six field fencing, with a strand of old rusty barbed wire along the top that was left over from the days when cattle were kept on preserve property. The closest gate was nearly a mile down, so the only way over was to climb. The barbed wire and the large mesh field fence made for a crossing that was functional, but hardly graceful.

This was a favorite ambush point for both of them. You were very vulnerable crossing a fence. Tim surveyed the scene for several minutes without seeing any hint of a trap laid in advance, or of anyone about. Satisfied, he worked his way to the fence line. Nothing. No sign of any hidden snares or other traps. The only things out of place were two old pine logs lying on their sides and placed on each side of the fence as a step, and two others lying close by they had brought in but never used. He and Dubbs had placed the logs there the previous summer.

Tim had already stepped up on the first log when he sensed something wasn't right. He could feel it, but he couldn't spot anything out of place. He tensed to jump the fence when suddenly his internal "radar" as he sometimes thought of it went from mildly alert to fully engaged. Tim had seldom felt this level of warning before, but when he had it had always been dead on. He carefully stepped down from the log and backed away. As he expected his tension eased.

Time was working against him. He only had two hours to reach Devils Den or lose today's contest. Keeping within the twenty yard limit he again surveyed the fence crossing. Unless Dubbs had resorted to using some sort of remote powered laser to trip a hidden snare, there was nothing Tim could see that would explain the overwhelming sense of danger. Besides,

using modern technology was not only against the rules, but was something neither of them would ever consider doing. It would spoil the challenge.

Unsure of what else to do, Tim mounted the log step one more time. Again his intuition told him something was not right, but he still could not see anything out of the ordinary. Whatever it was he would have to deal with it once over the fence. He took one last look around, abandoned caution then lightly sprang up and over.

As his feet cleared the barbed wire a rush of images and a sensation of general danger stronger than any he had ever experienced assaulted his mind. For a brief moment time seemed to slow to a crawl, and an image . . . a *vision* of sorts flashed through his minds-eye. Then, just as quickly, it ended, but not before the image had registered. As his feet hit the log on the other side of the fence his reflexes kicked in. Gymnastics as a child combined with wrestling and judo gave him legs with the recoil of a tightly wound spring. He vaulted forward and hit the ground in a tuck and roll, coming up better than a body length away from the step log, and only a few feet away from the second log lying unused in the sand.

Later he would not remember if the hunting knife he wore on his hip was in his hand before or after he hit the ground. Either way it was there as he came up. In mid-roll he had reversed directions so he was facing the second log. There was a flash of gray movement in his direction. In the same instant his left leg pivoted to the rear and out of the way as his knife-wielding left hand flashed down in a sweeping motion. It was over almost before it had started.

Lying where his left foot would have been was the writhing, headless body of the largest diamond-back he had ever seen. On top of his left boot lay the head; mouth open and fangs extended in a reflex reaction. The rattlesnakes' body was

still moving, and would continue to do so for the next few minutes. Tim estimated its' length at over six feet. He kicked the head off his boot, then reached down and picked up the body to examine it. It carried eight rattles and two small buttons; this snake had been around a while.

His heart was pumping like a jackhammer, but his blindman's gift was no longer warning him of any danger, and so the adrenaline rush began to wear off. None of this made any sense. This couldn't be one of Dubbs' traps! But rattlesnakes seldom struck without warning, and definitely not without provocation. Why didn't the snake warn before he had jumped the fence? And why didn't he see the snake while looking for the danger he felt sure was there?

Tim cautiously approached the log where he thought the rattler had been and examined it for clues. A depression in the sand gave him his answer. It appeared the snake had burrowed under the edge of the log where it was resting, maybe digesting an early dinner. He examined the still wiggling body more closely, and as expected it was thicker near the stomach, probably a rat or mouse, or maybe even a small squirrel. From virtually every angle it had been completely hidden from view. Apparently he startled it when jumping over and landing on its hiding place. The snake striking as it had was purely a defensive measure.

But this was not what puzzled him most. He had long ago learned to accept his unusual ability to concentrate on a task in a single-minded fashion and still be aware of what was going on around him. Even his ability to sense danger no longer surprised him. Long talks with Dubbs had convinced him that these talents were rare, but not entirely unique. But never had a vision, or any kind of mental picture sprung into his head. The more he thought about it the less sure he was it had really happened. And moving on instinct quickly enough to behead a

snake in mid-strike was something he simply could not accept. It had to be a fluke. Maybe he would kick it around with Dubbs a bit over breakfast.

Dubbs! How much time was left? Glancing at the lightening sky he knew he must have lost a good fifteen minutes. He removed the rattles as a souvenir and tossed the snakes body off into the palmettos. Some lucky fox or raccoon would dine well this evening.

Tim again started down the path, and he crossed over half a mile of rolling terrain without incident. This worried him. The fact that he'd seen no hint of Dubbs made him even more cautious. Two hundred yards remained before coming in sight of the pond. He was sure something would happen before then.

But it didn't. As he cautiously rounded a gentle curve, the path opened up to reveal a small clearing. Twenty more paces and he would be near the pond's edge, a particularly dangerous spot for more than one reason. Dubbs would like nothing better than a repeat of the dunking he had given his nephew several years earlier. In fact, he had made it something of a mission in their monthly contest to be sure it was repeated. Almost without fail Dubbs tried some new and elaborate attack intended to send Tim sprawling into the cold water. Today would be no different.

He stepped from the thick woods and began skirting the relatively open edge of the pond. Again, as expected, his sixth sense kicked in, but this time without a vision. Not sure how to proceed he stopped and listened for a hint of movement. Nothing. Not a peep, not a sound out of place. In fact, it was too quiet.

Something slammed hard into his back, pitching him forward and forcing him to his hands and knees and tumbling him straight toward the steep bank. His long sword flew ahead of him, down the bank and into the water, with Tim right

behind. As his hands slipped over the edge of the embankment, his right foot tangled in the roots of a massive old wild grapevine, and by sheer good fortune he stopped. Instantly he rolled to his right knowing that an attack would immediately follow. As he rolled, his hands reached for anything he could use as a weapon, finding nothing more than some weeds and rotting leaves. Worse, he was wearing an old pair of short-top hiking boots, and one was now caught in the vine and would not come free.

He was flat on his back with his foot tangled, his practice sword floating out toward the middle of the pond, and his only weapon, a short sword, strapped to his waist. Unfortunately it was pinned under his back instead of in his hand. And as expected, his uncle was six paces away and advancing quickly, sword rising for a killing blow.

Tim reacted without thinking. His right hand grabbed a fistful of dirt and leaves and launched it at Dubbs face, buying him a precious second. At the same instant he reached his left foot up to the heel of his right shoe and pushed hard. His right foot slipped free of the tangled mess, his sock along with it. He kicked both feet up over his head and rolled away from his attacker.

Instantly he was on his feet, short sword in hand. Dubbs was no longer a match for him with equal weapons, but the longer sword gave his uncle a distinct advantage in reach. Tim would need to be at his best to have any chance of winning the match.

Dubbs smiled his "I've got you now" smile that Tim was far too familiar with and attacked without hesitation. He had a long sword in his right and a short sword in his left. He fainted first with the short sword then delivered a vicious blow aimed directly at the neck. Tim lightly dropped back and avoided both, but it only bought a few extra seconds. His uncle

wasted no time in pressing the attack. With a quick series of lightning fast combinations, he pushed Tim back. It was all he could do to keep his balance and ward off the blows.

One thing Tim had learned early on was that real sword fights were not like those seen in the movies. They are usually over quickly, sometimes in a few seconds. The first to inflict a serious wound was most often the winner. The wounded combatant was immediately at a distinct disadvantage. Mail, arm guards, leather and other armor had dulled the advantage somewhat, but first blood still gave a psychological advantage if nothing else. On the other hand, two highly skilled, well protected opponents could hack away at each other for fifteen minutes or longer, the advantage sometimes going to the one with the best conditioning . . . or best luck.

In this case neither of the two were novices. Dubbs had many years of experience while Tim had the reflexes and conditioning of youth. The first combatant to gain an upper hand had the best chance of winning. Both men were very good, but now Tim was at a definite disadvantage because of the missing long sword. He needed to find some way to equal the odds, and find it quickly.

Dubbs kept coming and Tim kept backing away. Twice he was caught on a wrist guard while defending against one of the two weapons. Fortunately the blows were light, only exploratory, or they could have ended the match. Tim found himself purely on defense. He knew something would need to happen to change the balance or he would not last much longer.

So far he'd been backing up and moving to his right, which was Dubbs weaker side. With a spin and a slashing cut toward the stomach he reversed direction. Dubbs easily blocked the blow with his long sword and attacked with the shorter blade, but this time Tim was ready. With a quick counter he caught his uncle on the left wrist. The wrist guard saved Dubbs

from any serious injury, but the blow cleanly knocked the short-sword out of his hand.

Now the scales had turned more in his favor and Tim went on the attack. Even though the long-sword should have kept him at bay Tim was able to press the attack, work his way inside and force Dubbs to give ground. He could sense his uncle was worried, and that made him press even harder.

Suddenly, and with no hint it was coming, Dubbs came at Tim with a furious series of combinations, working him back towards the embankment. Tim countered with ease and was about to respond with his own series when his shoeless foot stepped on the sharp edge of a root. The pain caused him to flinch for a split second, which was all the time and advantage Dubbs needed. A quick outside cut caught his gloved fingers and weakened his grip, then a second blow on the inside of the short-sword sent the practice blade flying off into the bushes.

Weaponless, Tim was completely at his opponent's mercy. Never one to waste an opportunity, his uncle reacted quickly and raised his sword arm to score the winning hit. Tim had two obvious choices; take the blow or concede. With reflexes honed by years of practice combined with simple instinct he took a third choice, moved inside his opponents reach and grabbed the sword arm near the wrist in both hands. Instead of struggling for control of the weapon, he instead took advantage of his uncle's forward momentum and dropped backward to the ground, pulling Dubbs along with him. At the last instant his right foot came up and caught the inside of Dubbs thigh, lifting him up into the air and sending him flying over the embankment.

The effect was beautiful. Dubbs had no control at all over his flight. He reminded Tim of a child trying to perform a running flip off the end of a dock for the first time; arms flailing, feet lifting up over his head in a mad cartwheel of lost

control. With a huge splash the pond opened up and accepted its newest inhabitant. The wooden broadsword landed several feet away in a low clump of grass.

For a few moments Tim remained crouched in a defensive position, a little surprised at the turn of events. Then he watched as his uncle stood in water slightly less than waist-deep and began making his way out of the pond, his helm dragging behind him in one hand, water pouring out. Small strings of water plants were draped over his shoulders and arms. As he reached shallow water his boots slobbered water out of their tops. Altogether it was an unforgettable picture.

Tim couldn't help it. He pulled himself up to a kneeling position and began laughing so hard he could barely catch his breath. Dubbs didn't say a word. He just stood at the edge of the pond, dripping water and watching Tim with a look frozen somewhere between embarrassment, anger and disgust. This only served to add to Tim's amusement, and he actually began to laugh even harder.

Dubbs was definitely not amused, but also was not commenting, almost as if waiting for something else to happen. After a few moments, still grinning from ear to ear, Tim began to rise. As he came up off the ground he was unexpectedly struck with an urgent sense of impending danger. Instead of standing up and looking about he launched himself off to the left where Dubbs broadsword lay. As he hit the ground his right hand closed on the hilt, his momentum carrying him up and over, and he ended up in a defensive crouch. It was the only thing that saved him.

Not six feet away and moving fast was a mountain of muscle and armor. Had Tim not known better he would have believed himself under attack by a character from a medieval tale. The man was well over six feet, broad at the shoulder with a chest like a beer barrel. His upper arms were the size of most

men's legs, and he wore leathers and armor as authentic as anything Tim had ever seen. Every piece appeared to be hand made by craftsmen who must have had their skills passed down for centuries. Were it not for the practice sword Tim would have been sure he was facing the real thing.

Orvis!

There was no time to consider this new development. Orvis was coming in swinging, his huge broadsword already whistling an arc from right to left. Tim did his best to counter the blow with Dubb's sword, but there was no finesse in the move. He was vulnerable, and he had no choice but to catch the entire force of the blow head on. The impact slammed into the sword and numbed his hands, sending him reeling off to the right and landing on his rear in the sand.

Orvis Traylor was more than just an occasional participant in the Fox and Hound game, he was the closest thing to a genuine Master of Arms Tim could ever imagine meeting. He was also Tim's teacher. Dubbs had introduced them when he was only nine years old, and as a youngster he was immediately in awe of the man. That had not changed. Orvis's size and bearing alone were enough to send most children running for their mothers' skirts. That and the fact that he spoke in a loud, deep, rumbling voice, and with a strong accent Tim had never been able to place. Everything about the man's appearance was intimidating.

His comings and goings were even more mysterious than those of his uncle. Tim had never actually seen Orvis outside of Dubbs property or the preserve. They'd never gone into town for dinner, watched a ball game on television, or talked about much more than warfare. It was as if the man truly lived the life of a warrior.

Once or twice a month he would show up at Dubbs' house for a lesson in fighting old world style. All manner of

medieval weapons were included: sword, mace, bow and arrow, fighting on horseback (not his choice by a long shot), even battle axe. But Tim's favorite remained the staff. He couldn't say for sure why, though if pushed for a reason the best one he could give was simply that it was acceptable. The staff was a weapon one could carry in today's modern world without drawing attention. As far as he knew it wasn't illegal anywhere to carry a walking stick. Orvis always complained in his bear-like rumbling voice that the staff was for magicians and clergy, not a man of arms. Odd statement, but he was entitled to his opinion. Though Tim had become more than proficient in more conventional arms, he excelled with a staff, and could easily disarm his uncle in moments. It was why the use of the staff was not allowed in Fox and Hound.

Tim quickly rolled away and sprang to a crouch. Orvis' presence was a surprise but not totally unexpected. He had shown up many times before, which pretty much guaranteed a loss on Tim's part since he had never defeated Orvis, though they had reached a stalemate twice in the past year. Each time it was only because of Orvis being hampered by an old leg injury, not to any improved skill on Tim's part. The man just couldn't be beaten.

Orvis definitely was not feeling poorly today. He moved with the speed of a panther covering half the distance between them before Tim could fully recover. His speed for a man his size was unnerving. Again he raised his weapon for the kill, but this time Tim had a split second more to consider his response. As Orvis raised his weapon Tim spun around, his head near where his feet had been. As simple as the move was, he moved so quickly that Orvis had no time to adjust. Tim aimed for the legs and connected with the tendon on the outer edge of Orvis left leg just above the knee. The legging would have stopped a

blade, but still the leg buckled and Orvis went down to one knee. Tim rolled clear of the big man's still swinging weapon.

No time was wasted enjoying this minor victory. Instantly he was on his feet, with Orvis also back on his before there was any chance to take advantage of his being down. A huge grin split open the massive bearded face. "Finally got one in on me didn't ya, ye blasted whelp of a pup. Don't go gettin' all a'cocky on me now. Yer about to get yer comeuppance."

Tim knew better than to respond. He didn't want to waste an ounce of concentration on a witty comeback. The two combatants circled each other slowly, and in an explosion of movement Orvis was pressing the attack. Tim countered readily, circling to his right as he did so. Orvis pelted him with a series of combinations that he somehow managed to avoid, all the time looking for an opening. He was not likely to get one though. Orvis would not make a mistake. If Tim had any chance of winning he would have to create his own opening.

Fending off another series of blows Tim suddenly changed directions, moved left and pressed the attack. For the first time he could sense surprise and a very brief touch of concern from his opponent. Orvis was forced to move back and into the edge of a stand of palmettos. With his mobility compromised he was suddenly vulnerable, and as Tim pressed harder Orvis was pressed further into the palmettos, the bushes reaching above his waist and forcing him to fight with only his arms. His legs were busy trying to find decent footing among the roots and vines.

Tim could sense that Orvis was now genuinely concerned. He was cornered, and like a wounded animal would fight with a strength and ferocity unmatched under normal conditions. He had no interest in losing. It wouldn't be much longer before the Armsmaster made a move to get out of the brush and back onto solid footing.

He didn't have long to wait. With a guttural battle cry and a vicious series of combinations, Orvis pushed hard and fast toward the edge of the bushes. This time Tim was ready. He gave ground as slowly as possible, forcing Orvis into an even stronger series of wickedly fast blows. As he crossed past the edge of the bushes the grin returned, and he pressed harder still. Two cross cuts pushed Tim back, the final one pushing Tim's sword out and away from his body. His neck and shoulder would be vulnerable for as long as it took him to recover. With a victory yell Orvis whipped his sword up and around, headed into a down stroke.

But instead of bringing his own sword up to block the blow Tim let the force of the last strike push him to one knee. His own sword, knocked back and out of position, came whistling back and into the Armsmaster's exposed stomach.

Orvis was stunned. The same force from a real weapon would have spitted him, leaving his intestines pouring out onto the ground. As it was his breath was taken away. He dropped to one knee holding his bruised midriff and struggling to catch his breath. Tim stood over him, sword in hand. After what felt like an eternity Orvis looked up at Tim, surprise mixed with intense pain on his face.

"By Hearsies, I yield lad. I yield!"

Tim could hardly believe it! He had never beaten Orvis with any weapon, much less sword to sword. He reached out his right hand and as Orvis reached up, they clasp wrists, and Tim pulled the big man to his feet.

"Well done, lad. Well done indeed."

The entire battle had taken less than ninety seconds. Unsure what to say, Tim nodded as a big hand reached around and slapped him square between the shoulder blades. Together they walked back over to the edge of the pond where Dubbs was picking up the rest of the weapons, having waited to watch

the outcome of the battle before doing so. Tim could still sense the pain pounding through Orvis' stomach. "Are you alright? I'm sorry; I should have pulled back more on that last hit."

"I'm fine. And never apologize for somethin' done right. The only way past my sword was with a shot as fast, as hard and as sneaky as that one. Ye've got to be able to take as well as give."

Dubbs interrupted. "Gentlemen, there's a warm fire and a hot breakfast waiting for us at Devil's Den. Why don't we continue this there before I melt?"

Tim grinned. Orvis let out a big guffaw. "If ye wanted fish for breakfast there are better ways to catch one."

Dubbs just shivered and set off for the cave.

* Four *

Not long after arriving they had a small fire burning and a pot of coffee brewing. Tim never really understood the mechanics of it, but when Dubbs built the fire the smoke always seemed to draft high then slip out the door. Whenever he did so, even in the same spot, it seemed to eventually fill the room. Today was no exception.

Dubbs kept a few cooking utensils in the cave and had brought in a small pack with eggs, bacon, cheese, some biscuits and a few spices. He also had dry clothes.

“These were supposed to be for you.”

Tim nearly choked on a biscuit. “Me! Why would I need a change of clothes?” He left it at that.

Orvis leaned back against the wall and laughed out loud before reaching down and holding his stomach. “No more funnin’ Timothy or you’ll be cleaning my insides off the floor.”

Tim grinned back then took another bite of biscuit.

Breakfast passed with pleasant conversation mixed with the comfortable silence of longtime companions. As usual Tim used the time to ask questions, hoping to correct any mistakes he’d made that morning so he wouldn’t make them again. He commented that he had not clearly sensed Dubbs’ first attack at the pond. This happened occasionally, and when it did Dubbs always passed over it without much comment. Pressing didn’t seem to help much so he changed the subject.

“What did you hit me with,” he asked while rubbing the back of his head. “I never saw it coming.”

“A rock, my boy. Just an old fashioned rock.”

Tim could hardly believe it. All this weapons training and he had been almost knocked unconscious by a man throwing a rock at him.

“It felt more like a boulder. I’ve got a knot on my back the size of a lemon.”

Orvis spoke up. “A well thrown rock is as good a weapon as an arrow sometimes. Remember, catchin’ an enemy with anythin’ he doesn’t expect may be just what ye need to end a contest quickly. Battle is as much about winning as it is about honorable victory. In a fight to the death there be no rules.”

Tim had heard something similar from Orvis more times than he could count, but he still took it to heart. Surprise tactics had cost him more than one bout with both of his friends. He’d given up wondering about “fight to the death” comparisons. He doubted he’d ever find himself in that position.

After breakfast he brought up the incident with the rattlesnake, touching lightly on both beheading the snake and the image he’d seen in his mind. Dubbs listened quietly to the entire story before shrugging and passing off the incident to chance. Orvis remained silent, but looked a lot like he expected more to be said.

Slowly the conversation turned to more common topics; battle strategies, woodsmanship, school, work, even women. Before long it was midday and Tim had to leave. He said his good-byes and began making his way back toward home. Tonight was a work night and he had errands to run before being to work at four.

* * *

Not long after Tim had left for home Dubbs began packing up his gear and making ready to leave. Orvis watched the ritual quietly for a few moments before speaking.

“Nice touch with the serpent.”

Dubbs grunted, “That one wasn’t my doing. The boy’s got good reflexes.”

“That he does.”

There was silence. It was obvious to the Armsmaster that Dubbs had little interest in continuing the conversation. But Orvis did, so he pressed on.

“The lad bested me today, Baron. He truly bested me.”

“I saw.”

“I’ve not been taken like that since I was a lad myself. He’s fast, and as strong as an ox. Instincts for fightin’ and for warfare are better than any I’ve ever seen, and that’s saying a bit.”

Dubbs continued his packing without comment.

Orvis watched a few more minutes while chewing on the last piece of a biscuit. Finally he spoke up again.

“He has it now, doesn’t he?” It was a statement of fact more than a question.

Dubbs ignored the comment and gathered the last of the utensils.

Orvis stood and walked up beside Dubbs, reaching out and clapping his shoulder gently but firmly. “It’s best if I know, so tell me. Does he have it?”

Dubbs gruffly pulled his arm free, glanced up at Orvis, and speaking more sharply than he intended answered, “Does he have what?”

Orvis followed him toward the cave entrance. “It might be easier, Baron, if ye’d not play word games with me. You know what I’m askin’. The talent. Does he have it?”

Dubbs turned and walked out the cave barking back in an irritated voice, “Of course he has it.”

Orvis watched him walk several paces down the path before stepping from the mouth of the cave to follow.

“Then he’s ready.”

Dubbs stopped dead in his tracks. Slowly he turned and looked Orvis straight in the eye. “He’s not ready. There’s too

much to do. I've months of preparations to make still, and so do you."

Neither spoke for several moments and neither looked away. Orvis broke the silence.

"Time's runnin' short, Baron. We cannot wait much longer. He's been ready for more than a season. We're the ones who are not."

Dubbs dropped his pack and stepped past Orvis back into the cave. As he passed by Orvis heard him mumble two curt words under his breath.

"I know."

* Five *

Tim had been walking past a downtown pawnshop several months earlier when he'd seen something unexpected in the window; a sword. Such a thing was not uncommon in pawn shops, even in a small town like Francis. But something about this one caught his eye. Though he was not an expert on craftsmanship, the intricate designs on both sides of the blade, the keen edge and its overall workmanship had an attraction he couldn't explain. He'd been handling blades for most of his life, and he knew by heft and balance that it was a well-made weapon. It even had the appearance of age. Not likely though. No blade of any real worth would end up there.

He had immediately decided to buy it as a gift for Dubbs. He'd asked the clerk for some history on the blade and had only been told that an old man in need of some quick cash had brought it in a few weeks earlier. That was all he knew. Tim had negotiated a price and given a deposit on the spot. Since then there had been two more payments made, and he'd finally stopped by and made the third and final payment on the way to work that afternoon.

Dubbs birthday was the following Wednesday, at least that was the day they had chosen to celebrate years ago. His uncle would never give more than a hint of the real date. Why he was so mysterious with such simple information no one knew, it was just his way. Tim's mom and dad had invited Dubbs over for dinner the following evening. Tim would give him the sword then.

Work had been hectic as usual. Sonder had not shown up again, though Tim didn't really expect he would. Sandra had been off that evening but stopped by for a few minutes on the way to a movie with some friends just to remind Tim of their

moving date the following afternoon. There was no mention of the previous evening in the parking lot.

It was after midnight before he cranked up the old VW and headed for home. The drive generally took him about half an hour, but he didn't mind. It always relaxed him, and by the time he hit the dirt road to his family's old farmhouse he had left work behind and was planning his Sunday afternoon with Sandra. Maybe he should ask her out on a more formal date. Even though it was mid-summer there were still plenty of activities on campus this time of year. A concert, or maybe just a simple evening at a student union movie might be what they needed to get to know each other a little better.

The turnoff to his folk's place was about three quarters of a mile down an unpaved country road that dead-ended into a gate at the preserve fence line. Several years earlier his mom had designed a mailbox with a woodland scene burned into a wooden cover. He and his dad had spent two weeks worth of evenings in the workshop trying to get it just right. Finally his mom had approved and the custom mailbox cover had been attached to a new box they'd picked up at the local hardware store. It was something his mother never failed to comment on whenever given a chance. Sometimes the simple things were those most appreciated.

He turned into the driveway and wound his way down the long, wooded, two-rut road to the farmhouse. As the woods ended and he entered the clearing he began to get an uneasy feeling. The first thing he noticed was that the porch light was off; his folks always left that light on for him when he was out late. No other lights were on in the house either. He hadn't noticed a power outage at the main road.

For some reason, as the noisy old bug rolled closer, the more uncomfortable he became.

He tried to shake the feeling something was not right. His blindman's gift was not fully engaged, which was good, but there was still a tickle in the back of his mind. This almost never happened outside of some sort of contest with Dubbs, and Dubbs would never try something this late at night, particularly at his folk's home. Tim killed the engine and lights early and coasted up to the house. There was no harm in being careful.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, the first thing he noticed was the open front door. Without even thinking he reached behind the seat and grabbed the pawn shop sword lying on the rear floorboard. The door to the VW opened with a creak, and he silently cursed himself for not having greased the hinges earlier. He left the door open. The inside light didn't work anyway so there was no concern about it compromising his night vision. Again without thinking he slid the sword from its leather scabbard, then set the scabbard down lightly on the hood of the car. Under the front seat was a flashlight. He reached under and pulled it out, then cautiously headed for the house.

As he approached his intuition kicked into high gear. The front window was broken and there was glass all over the porch. It looked like it had been broken forcefully from the inside. Tim began to feel a hint of panic. Where were his parents? There was no sign of life anywhere; not a light was on in the house! Something was seriously wrong.

With concentrated effort he forced himself to remain calm. Years of training had taught him that running blindly into a situation just like this one could be foolish. An inherent sense of caution took over and he circled around to the back entrance. That door was shut, and he approached it moving as quietly as possible. There was no sign of forced entry here. He reached out and grabbed the knob turning it slowly, thinking it might be locked.

It was not. The door opened easily. Tim crouched low and slipped into the kitchen.

There was no moon yet, but it was a cloudless night and there was enough starlight filtering in to see shapes. He did not want to use the flashlight until really needed in fear of giving away his location, but he could still see that something was not right. There was no sound or movement so he flipped on the flashlight. The condition of his mother's kitchen confirmed his worse fears.

The room looked like something described in a cheap detective novel. It was obvious there had been a struggle. His mother kept her countertops neat and tidy, with containers for flour and sugar, salt and pepper and an old Pooh Bear cookie jar ready for service. Everything was knocked to the floor, the cookie jar smashed to pieces against the refrigerator. The silverware and the knick-knack drawers were pulled out and scattered all over the floor. The wooden block that held kitchen knives was across the room and up under the sink, the knives strewn about and mixed in with other kitchenware. The kitchen was in shambles.

Tim was completely stunned, and at a loss as to what to do next. He had never imagined such a scene in his house, and for a moment he wasn't sure how to proceed. Maybe his folks were still here somewhere. They would be able to tell him what had happened. If not, then he would search the property for more clues before calling the police.

The door to the living room was hanging open and half off its hinges. Unbelievably, the kitchen looked neat in comparison. All the furniture was flipped over as if someone had been searching for something. His mother's teacups that she had collected for over thirty years were scattered over the floor, most of them broken, the cabinet his father had made to house

them ripped from the wall. Even the curtains had been pulled from the windows.

Fireplace utensils were scattered about. The screen was ripped off the face of the fireplace and the glass doors were shattered. The small amount of ash left over from the past winter covered the floor near the hearth, as if someone had dug through them searching for something. A small, free-standing bookshelf behind the sofa was overturned, books thrown everywhere, some with pages ripped out and tossed aside. Framed pictures were off the walls and scattered about the room. Pillows had been pulled off the sofa and love seat and sliced apart.

His parent's bedroom was no better, and his own bedroom had been completely trashed with the bed turned over and the mattress in tatters. As Tim looked closer, he realized his mattress was more than ripped open. The cuts looked almost like claw marks, as if it had been shredded by a grizzly. His closet was completely emptied, clothes covering the floor. All his clothing for the contests with Dubbs were tossed in a corner, giving him the mental picture of someone searching them one piece at a time before discarding.

How was this possible! And why? Why would someone search his house like this?

And where were his parents?

He continued working his way through the house looking for something to give him a better idea of what had happened and why. Finding nothing, sword still in hand, he picked up the flashlight and moved outside to look for clues.

Twenty minutes later he was no wiser. The barn was in the same condition, tools and lawn equipment tossed around and over. There was nothing he could see that gave him any better idea of who had done this or why.

There were boot prints everywhere, along with some sort of large animal track he'd never seen before. At first glance he thought it might be a man going barefoot, but with a closer look he could see it was different. The toes were longer and more curled, and there was the definite hint of very long nails, almost like claws at the end of each toe. But every dozen yards or so and with no pattern he could make out, a second set of tracks appeared. It was almost as if whoever made the tracks was dropping down to all fours and moving for a few yards, or maybe stopping to look on the ground.

What kind of creature made such tracks, he wondered? Creature might be a stretch but considering the condition of the house and barn anything was possible. No, this whole thing was insane! His fears were feeding his imagination.

Other things seemed out of place as well. The most obvious was any hint of a getaway car. One thing he would have expected but hadn't seen was car tracks. It had rained late in the afternoon, one of those short lived but heavy summer thundershowers that washed away all tire and animal tracks. His were the only car tracks in the dirt driveway. Why weren't there others? Whoever had done this must have come in by car!

Using the flashlight, Tim followed the footprints. They led straight to the driveway, one set a few hours older than the others. The set coming in appeared to be at least four or five men in boots or heavy shoes, maybe even six, plus the barefoot "things" tracks. It was hard to tell exactly how many since he had just driven the VW down the dirt driveway, covering some of the tracks. There was a fresher set leaving, but that didn't seem to help much.

Grabbing the scabbard for the sword off the hood of the VW, he strapped it on without thinking and slipped the sword inside, then continued to work his way up the driveway until he reached the curve that headed up toward the dirt road. Here the

driveway veered left, while straight ahead a path led out to the road and across to his uncle's driveway. None of the tracks followed the road. They all followed the woods path.

There at the entrance to the path was what he had been looking for, a clear print of a smaller shoe . . . probably his mothers. His mom always wore comfortable slip-on shoes around the house with a flat, boat-shoe type of sole. It was the first clear print he'd seen, as if she were being carried then put down for a moment to stand on her own.

Tim had been on the edge of a controlled panic for nearly an hour now. Seeing his mother's shoeprint changed that panic to a slow, burning anger. It looked like someone had forced their way into his house, ransacked the entire home then forced his parents to leave, probably carrying his mother against her will. She would never have gone without putting up a fight, which probably meant she had been tied and gagged. The thought of his mom carted off like a Christmas turkey only fed his anger, making him more determined to track them down.

The path to Dubbs' place crossed the dirt road several hundred yards up. There he was sure he would find the tracks ending and car tracks heading back to the main road. It made more sense for some sort of prowler or small band of thieves to enter the property down the path, though they would somehow have to have known it was there in the first place. That thought did not bode well. It meant there was more premeditation than he wanted to consider.

Here they would be able to keep their vehicle well hidden until it was needed and sneak up on the house without being seen. His folks seldom if ever locked their doors. Security never seemed much of an issue.

Tim turned off the flashlight and waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, then quickly but quietly worked his way up the path. There was always the chance the

intruders were still around, so he made as little noise as possible. He'd made this trip countless times, even blindfolded once or twice just to see how quietly he could move through the woods at night with limited vision. His night vision was excellent, but the exercise had been forced on him by Dubbs anyway. Now he was more than grateful for the lesson.

He reached the road in record time, slowing just before arriving to be double sure he made no noise. There was no car and no sign of anyone around. The night was quiet without any unusual sounds. He waited a few moments and listened before turning on the flashlight.

The prints were still there, except now they split up. Three sets headed right toward the end of the dirt road just down the street. Three other sets of boots and an occasional print of the barefoot man headed straight across the street to the only other house on the road, his uncle's.

Now what? The prints were much clearer on the dirt road. There were no prints matching his moms' in either set. However, there was one set heading down the dirt road that could be his fathers. And they were deep as if he were carrying something, something like his mother!

That made his decision for him. He would follow the three sets heading further down the dirt road. He turned off his flashlight and began moving away from the path following the footprints. He'd taken only half a dozen steps when a flash of blue light and a cracking noise interrupted him. As he spun about quickly to locate the source it happened again. It was coming from Dubbs' house!

There was no need to think things through this time. Tim sprinted down the path towards the source of the disturbance. As he rounded the bend and the house came into view, the window to Dubbs living room blew outward in a flash of blue light, glass flying in all directions, followed closely by

the flailing, smoking body of a man. The man's back hit the porch railing with a sickening crunch, splintering the rail with the impact. He tumbled over backward landing in the bushes a few feet from where Tim had stopped.

The man groaned one time then rolled over before falling completely unconscious. At least Tim thought he was only unconscious. As hard as he'd hit the railing, he would be lucky to even be alive!

As he was taking all this in, Tim was shocked to see the man was dressed in the garb of a medieval soldier. He wore it all: helm, gauntlets, leggings and chain mail. An empty scabbard was tied to his waist.

Tim took two quick steps toward the front door when he had the sudden feeling he was being watched. His blindmans gift was giving him warning. He stopped and turned toward the large oak at the corner of the house, the most obvious place for someone to be hiding.

“Is someone there?”

There was no answer for a few seconds. Then slowly a man stepped out of the shadows and into the dim light from the overhead porch lamp. He was dressed the same as the man on the ground, though he looked to be a few years older.

“Who are you? What's going on here,” Tim asked.

Another few seconds, no answer. Tim had the feeling the man was taking his measure; certainly he was being looked over closely. Then, without provocation, the stranger stepped forward and drew steel.

Tim took two steps back and put his left hand up in a gesture meant to show peaceful intent. “Look, I don't know what's going on here, but I don't have time for this now. If you're doing this for Dubbs then . . .”

Before he could utter another word the stranger closed ground between them and came in hard. Without thinking Tim

had already drawn Dubbs' gift sword and easily countered the blow along with the three that followed, all the time protesting out loud that this was no time for games. The stranger didn't seem to hear. The blows were hard, very hard. It felt like he wasn't pulling off at all. Tim wasn't wearing any protection. A missed counter could cause a serious injury!

After the first assault the stranger backed up three steps and circled left, eyeing Tim warily.

Tim lowered his sword slightly and spoke. "Look, I'm not wearing any armor. This is way too dangerous. Something's happened and I've got to find Dubbs. Now cut it out, okay?"

The answer was a head on rush with a slashing blow toward Tim's stomach. At the last possible instant Tim countered and slipped the thrust off to the side. A split second later and he'd have been headed for the hospital.

That did it. Now his battle blood was up. He had far more to worry about than some yokel from the fair circuit Dubbs had talked into a late-night sparring match. With a quick series of combinations Tim countered the stranger's follow up attack and went on the offensive. He couldn't believe this. Here he was in a nighttime sword fight with an opponent he'd never seen before, using a sword he'd bought at a pawn shop to give to his uncle for display, not for actual combat. The blade would probably be completely ruined.

Three quick strikes and the stranger was forced back. He had to admit this pawnshop dress sword had great balance. The heft and weight fit him as if it had been made for him, and the blade did not seem to be chipping or splintering like most cheap replicas.

Tim broke off his attack and took his own moment to size up his opponent. The man was dressed in authentic fashion, just like the unconscious man near the porch. The clothing was

similar enough to be a uniform of sorts, all the way down to the boots they were wearing.

Boots! Both men were wearing boots. The tracks coming in from his house looked to have been made by booted men. Could these be those same men?

That settled it. Tim could not afford to take a chance. If this man was part of the party that had visited his house earlier there was every chance that this was more serious than just sparring. Besides, if the man knew anything Tim would want him alive and singing.

The man remained wary, sizing him up again, obviously looking for an opening. Purposely Tim gave him one.

The thrust came straight for Tim's throat. He backpedaled slightly, parried the thrust and countered with two ringing blows toward his opponent's upper body. The stranger blocked them both, but a third forced his sword back and away giving Tim an opening. He struck hard. At the last instant he turned his wrist and caught the stranger on the side of the head with the broadside of the blade. He staggered. Tim moved in close and slammed his blade, broadside again, across the wrist of his opponent. The man's blade fell to the ground. Tim pivoted and spun, delivering a roundhouse kick to the midriff.

With that the fight was over; the man went down in a heap, holding his stomach as he curled onto his side. Tim did not take the time to see if he was okay. He deserved every bruise he'd been given. Instead he turned quickly and headed for the front door, sword still in hand. He crouched and stepped across the threshold.

Standing across the room, sword in hand was a third man. He was in an attack posture, sword raised and in mid-step.

Except he wasn't stepping. Instead, he seemed frozen in place, lightly glowing in that same blue light Tim had seen earlier, and looking straight across the room at an even stranger

sight. That sight was another glowing man, a man bathed in a pale yellow light, and who was casually leaning up against the wall as if glowing men were an everyday occurrence in Francis, Georgia.

The man was Tim's Uncle Dubbs!

Tim didn't move a muscle. Instead he stared at Dubbs for a moment, glanced over to the frozen man and then back again. Dubbs looked at Tim for a moment then walked over to the frozen man. He casually reached up and disarmed the soldier, turned and tossed the blade to Tim who caught it in his left hand.

"Take a look at that. Not nearly as well made as yours, is it."

Not the least bit interested in the blade he still glanced at it anyway, seeing in a moment the inferior craftsmanship. It was badly pitted with almost no cutting edge, more for beating an opponent to death than cutting him. He nodded slowly.

"Dubbs, what's going on?"

Dubbs moved slowly around the soldier who still had not moved a muscle.

"He's Octarian. See the crest drawn on his helm? Lions head. Yes, he's Octarian alright."

Tim didn't say a word, standing mutely waiting for Dubbs to explain.

"Probably one of Garthe's men. Garthe always was one to send foot soldiers when he should be sending trained assassins. Very expensive, assassins are. Some people never learn."

Dubbs circled the man one more time, then, still glowing, moved off into the kitchen. "I assume the third man outside is at least unconscious or else you wouldn't be standing there. Coffee?"

Coffee? Coffee! Tim dropped the soldier's sword and headed toward the kitchen.

"Dubbs, what the heck is going on? Who are these guys? Why is this one . . .?"

Before he could finish the sentence he sensed movement from the front door. The sudden feeling of danger was overwhelming. He spun around just as an ear-splitting howl cut through the room and a blur of movement flew at him, catching him squarely on the left shoulder and bouncing him off the frozen soldier. Both men went flying across the room, the soldier landing on his back on the sofa, Tim catching the edge and falling into the corner.

With the sudden impact the soldier was no longer frozen. He was sluggishly trying to come to his feet, while at the same time reaching for a belt dagger, when the blur landed on him with the speed and force of an attacking mountain lion. It hit the poorly armed man hard, knocking him back onto the sofa before he even had a chance to draw his dagger. In one swift motion it swiped down with one paw and ripped the soldier's throat out. Blood gushed from the wound. The man gurgled for a moment, eyes wide open in shock, before glazing over for good.

The creature growled low and deep, then raised its head up and gave a blood curdling scream. It was an eerie sound, more like a howler monkey than a cat or a wolf. Then it turned its attention to Tim.

If he'd had time to do so Tim would have rubbed his eyes then pinched himself to be sure he wasn't dreaming. Before him was an animal unlike anything he had ever imagined. It looked to be maybe five feet tall had it been standing erect, and it was covered with light brown fur from head to toe. The face was vaguely human, though simian might have been a better description, and as it snarled a set of very

sharp looking teeth with pronounced fangs showed clearly in the poorly lit room.

The body was both human and catlike at the same time. It looked like it would be at home whether standing or on all fours. A long, thin tail much like a panther's trailed off its back end. Its hands, or maybe paws, had an opposable thumb like men or monkeys, the difference being a set of very long, very sharp looking claws. As strange and as out of place as it seemed, and despite the fact it had just killed a man, Tim couldn't help but think that it was a handsome creature.

He was worried that might be his last thought. Tim had landed back against the corner, feet out in front and in a sitting position. During the attack on the soldier, he had pulled his feet back under his body and begun rising to a defensive crouch, when suddenly the creature lept back and landed on all fours just behind the coffee table. It crouched low and growled at Tim, preparing to attack. He could see muscle rippling below the smooth fur coat. Just as he judged the creature was about to pounce, he raised his sword up for a defensive strike.

The effect was instantaneous, like that of a well-trained dog being told to drop down. The creature's face showed something akin to shock, then it sunk down to its belly and lowered its head, offering a low growl that was more of a whimper as compared to earlier. Slowly it backed away, turned, then bounded to the doorway where it stopped, sat down and began to groom itself, all the time watching outside the door as it were a sentinel on guard.

The entire scene took only a few seconds. Dubbs came running in from the kitchen to find a dead man on his sofa, something that looked like a cross between a monkey and a big cat in his doorway and a nephew standing in the corner looking completely bewildered. He was still surrounded by the pale yellow glow.

Dubbs looked at the creature in the doorway, then turned to Tim. “What stopped the werecat?”

Tim just looked at him without comprehension.

Dubbs turned and looked at the creature. “The werecat in the door. Why didn’t it try to kill you?”

Tim looked at Dubbs, dumbfounded, confusion written all over his face.

“That, that thing in the door?” Tim asked. Dubbs nodded.

“It just stopped. It looked like it was about to attack, then it just stopped and walked away.”

Dubbs nodded again, a look of understanding crossing his features before speaking.

“You can sheath the sword now. You’re safe for the moment.”

Tim glanced to the doorway then slowly lowered the sword. He looked up at Dubbs, who was now no longer surrounded by the yellow aura.

“The other men outside, they may be hurt pretty bad.”

“No, no, they’re not hurt. They’re dead,” Dubbs responded. “The werecat would have killed them both before coming in for this one.”

Tim looked over at the dead man on the sofa. “Wha . . . How do you know that? Who are they? Why did they attack us?” Suddenly the panic began to return as he remembered why he was here.

“My parents! Dubbs, someone’s taken my parents! I tracked them to the road and was following them when I saw the light over here. Dubbs, these people, they’ve got my mom and dad! We’ve got to help them.”

Dubbs shook his head no, seeming surprised by the information but not particularly concerned. “We will Tim, but not now. By now they are gone, out of reach. No one will hurt

your folks, not yet anyway. They're far too valuable alive." He walked over to Tim and grabbed him firmly by the shoulders. "Listen to me. I understand this is all confusing. But right now we've got to move. I've waited too long already and they've found us. I don't have time to explain, you're just going to have to trust me on this."

Tim was more confused than he'd ever been. He trusted Dubbs with his life, but his parents were missing, possibly kidnapped, maybe even killed!

"Shouldn't we call the police? They'll want to investigate. We could track them into the preserve. Maybe one of the wardens . . ." Dubbs stopped him.

"There's no time. Besides, I know who has them and where they've gone. The police can't help. We'll get them back. Right now we need to get ourselves to safety. Stay here, I'll be right back."

Dubbs moved off to one of the back rooms, leaving Tim in a whirl of confusion. The werecat casually watched from its post at the doorway, dividing its attention between Tim inside and nothing in particular outside. Tim paced for a moment, then glanced into his uncle's bedroom. There he watched quietly for a moment as Dubbs packed a bag, then silently stepped back into the great room. He knew from experience there was no use asking questions just now; it would be best to wait.

Dubbs was gone a good seven or eight minutes, and when he returned he was dressed in medieval costume along with a full pack, a sword strapped across his back and an ancient looking black oak staff Tim had never seen before. He crossed the room to the dead soldier lying on the sofa. Standing over the man he mumbled a few words Tim could not understand, then ran his hands from head to foot a few inches over the body. Tim watched as the body began to glow a pale blue. The color became brighter, there was a brighter flash still

with a tinge of gold, then the body was gone, simply disappeared. Not even a trace of blood on the sofa or floor. Dubbs moved past him toward the door. Tim watched without moving.

“What was that? What did you do? Where is the body?”

Dubbs ignored the question and stepped through the front door. The werecat had already moved away. Tim followed and saw that it had stationed itself thirty or so yards outside the house, its green eyes reflecting back in the dim light coming from inside the house.

His uncle then moved to the man who'd flown over the railing. Just as predicted he was also dead, and from the same wounds as the man inside. Dubbs performed the same ritual, there were the same flashes of pale blue light mixed with a light tinge of gold, then the second body was gone.

Tim watched the whole process in silent amazement. He had no idea what he'd just witnessed and wasn't sure he'd understand it when it was finally explained to him. If the situation were not so serious he'd be bombarding his uncle with questions, but for the moment he kept them to himself.

He looked over at the third man, the one he had overpowered. He had died differently with wounds to the back of the neck. The body appeared to have been shaken; picked up by the back of the neck and shaken like a rag doll. It looked more like a mouse after a housecat had spent an hour torturing it to death than a man. Either way, whoever the man was he was dead, and somehow Tim felt partially responsible.

Dubbs moved to the third man, and in a few moments he too was gone. He then entered the house, turned out all the lights and shut the door. There wasn't much point in locking it with the window broken. He surveyed the scene as if considering his options then turned to his nephew and spoke.

“We need to stop by your house and pick up a few things. We are going on a journey. Be on guard. It’s not likely there will be more of them, but I cannot say for sure.” With that he turned, picked up his gear and walked away. Tim stood dumbly for a moment, then hurried to catch up.

They reached the Hamilton farmhouse without a word being spoken between them, then stepped cautiously through the front door before Dubbs declared it was safe. He walked straight to Tim’s room.

“Strip and change into your battle clothing. Pack up your cloak and normal daywear clothes as well. Pack as if you’re going on a long wilderness camping trip, no modern conveniences. Where we’re going you won’t need them.”

He did as he was asked without question, and ten minutes later they were on the way out the door. Tim was dressed the same as Dubbs; a pack in place and the new sword strapped on his back for easy carrying. He was wearing light chain mail under his outerwear and a hunting knife at his belt. His last stop was the corner where he kept the hand-hewn staff that he used for both a weapon and a walking stick. His father had presented it to him on his eighteenth birthday. It was carved from the heart of a large live-oak branch and was as strong as a staff could be. His father had carved it himself.

Dubbs didn’t hesitate but headed straight for the driveway. Tim stood looking about for a moment. For some reason he had a feeling he might not see this house for a long time. Should his feeling be right he wanted to burn the image into his memory so he would never forget. After a few more seconds he turned, shouldered his pack and headed off to catch up with his uncle.

They followed the path back to Dubbs driveway, but turned right as if to follow the other set of tracks into the preserve rather than head back to Dubbs house. The road dead-

ended into the fence line. They then veered left and followed the fence toward their usual crossing near Blue Pond.

There was still no conversation. Dubbs was moving as silently and as cautiously as Tim had ever seen, so he made an effort to do the same. A late rising moon gave them just enough light to see shadows, and every tree and bush seemed to take on the image of a potential threat. Tim was more tightly wound than he had ever been.

Every now and then he sensed a vaguely familiar movement up ahead. He soon realized it was the animal Dubbs had called a werecat moving along in front of them, almost as if it were running point. He wasn't particularly comfortable with the idea, but he didn't sense it as dangerous, so he chose to put off questioning the creature's actions until later.

They crossed the fence without incident. Soon they had made their way past the pond and were nearing the entrance to Devil's Den, and the closer they approached the more uncomfortable Tim became. He wasn't sensing danger really, at least not as he was accustomed to with his blindman's gift. Instead it was a different feeling, kind of like the air was becoming charged with static electricity as they neared the cave entrance. Dubbs stopped short and looked hard at the opening. Tim did the same but could not see anything out of order. After a few more moments of consideration Dubbs waved him forward.

"Do you see anything unusual?"

Tim looked again.

"No, it all looks normal." He paused. Dubbs was watching him closely, clearly expecting more, so he studied the entrance again.

"To tell you the truth, though, something doesn't feel quite right. I can't say exactly what, but something here, no, something there, near the mouth of the cave, seems different, feels different. It makes me uncomfortable, makes my hair stand

on end.” He was used to these types of questions from Dubbs and had learned to answer as truthfully as possible.

Tim studied the cave mouth for a few more moments. “Something doesn’t look right either. I can’t say for sure what it is, but it’s almost as if I were looking through a veil or a glass of water. It’s as if something is there but not quite visible.”

Dubbs nodded. “Watch.”

He pulled his belt knife and cut a sapling near the base, then walked slowly toward the mouth of the cave holding the leafy top of the bush out in front. Several yards from the cave mouth he stopped, then tossed the sapling at the opening. Just before flying through the entrance it sizzled then burst into flames.

“That was a trap, a sort of ambush set by the same people who carried off your parents. It was poorly done, probably by one of the soldiers using a talisman created by someone with far more talent. It was weak, but very effective if you were not able to recognize it. It’s a burning spell cast to destroy any organic matter of a large enough size. Insects, birds, bats are all too small to trigger it. A bush, something as large as a raccoon, or a person, becomes an instant torch.”

Dubbs studied the door for a few moments then raised his right hand, moving both arm and hand in a fluid and elaborate, but brief motion. “There, it is dissolved. It would have done so on its own by this time tomorrow anyway. There were no bindings.”

Tim just stood quietly and watched Dubbs, at a complete loss of understanding. He had no idea what his uncle was talking about. Dubbs ignored everything and stepped into the cave. Tim took one last look around then followed.

One of the torches they kept in the cave had already been lit, though Tim was not sure how. Nothing looked out of the ordinary; everything seemed to be as they usually left it. The

smaller passage just off the entrance opened to a room about twenty by thirty feet with a ceiling no more than twelve feet at its highest point. The back wall of the cave tapered off to a small hole through which neither man could fit. Whether or not the cave went any deeper into the hill they had no way of knowing. Tim had held a candle near the area before with no flickering. Any movement of the flame would indicate air traveling through the chamber and deeper into the cave, so he assumed it was a dead end. He had explored the room from top to bottom and had long ago concluded there was nothing else to be found.

He felt a little more comfortable in familiar surroundings. Dubbs had walked to the back wall and seemed to be inspecting it carefully. Tim stood near the entrance and watched as his uncle stepped forward and ran his hands across the stone, then stepped back and looked at the wall again. Tim couldn't see anything that was worth such a detailed inspection. After another minute his patience ran out.

“What are we doing here? You've seen that wall a hundred times. Shouldn't we be tracking the men who have my parents?”

“We are. But first I've got to be sure there are no more surprises here. Be patient, and keep an eye out for unwanted guests.”

Tim hesitated for a moment then did as he was asked. Quietly he stepped back through the cave entrance and looked over the surrounding forest. There were no signs of any intruders. It was nearing midnight and a moon about a week past full had risen in the past hour. Moonlight glinted over the pond in the distance as the katydids continued their late-night courtship in the trees near the waters edge. Beyond that there was no noise, not even the sound of a dog barking in the distance.

As he re-entered the cave he saw Dubbs backing away from the rear wall of the room. Slowly Dubbs raised his right hand up to chest level, eyes concentrating on the wall. His hand moved as if in he were drawing on a canvass. A few words were muttered that Tim did not understand, though somehow they seemed vaguely familiar. As he watched, the first thing he noticed was a slight yellow aura surrounding his uncle. At first he thought it was his imagination, since if there were any light it would brighten the room around him. It did not, but he was still certain he was seeing it. It seemed similar to the blue aura he'd seen back at Dubbs' cabin, only the color was different.

Then a section of the wall a little taller and wider than a man began to waver. Tim blinked and looked closer. It was real. The wall actually appeared to glisten like the surface of a lake, or maybe more like heat wavering off of a long stretch of highway in the summer.

Dubbs took several steps back and looked at the mirror-like surface of the cave wall. He then walked over to the entrance and picked up his pack and staff, strapping the sword back over his shoulder. He turned and caught Tim's eye.

"Gather your things. We are about to embark on a journey that will be unlike any you have ever encountered." Gesturing to the wall he continued. "Consider this which you see before you as nothing more than a doorway. In this case, in truth, it is a doorway . . . a portal actually, a gateway between two worlds." He held his hand up as Tim started to interrupt. "I know, you have questions. Soon we will have time to sit quietly and discuss all you've seen tonight. But for now safety is our first concern. Again I must ask you to trust me. Also, though I am fairly confident we will have no difficulty on the other side of the portal, you should still pass through with your weapon in hand."

Dubbs moved toward the shimmering wall. “What about you,” Tim asked. “Shouldn’t you draw your sword as well?”

“No, they’re too much trouble. It would only distract me.”

That made little sense, which fit in perfectly with everything else that had happened so far.

As they approached the wall a low, rumbling growl came from behind them. The werecat was crouched just inside the entrance to the cave, eyeing them with an expectant look.

Dubbs didn’t seem at all surprised to see the animal. “Are you coming?” He then motioned the creature toward them.

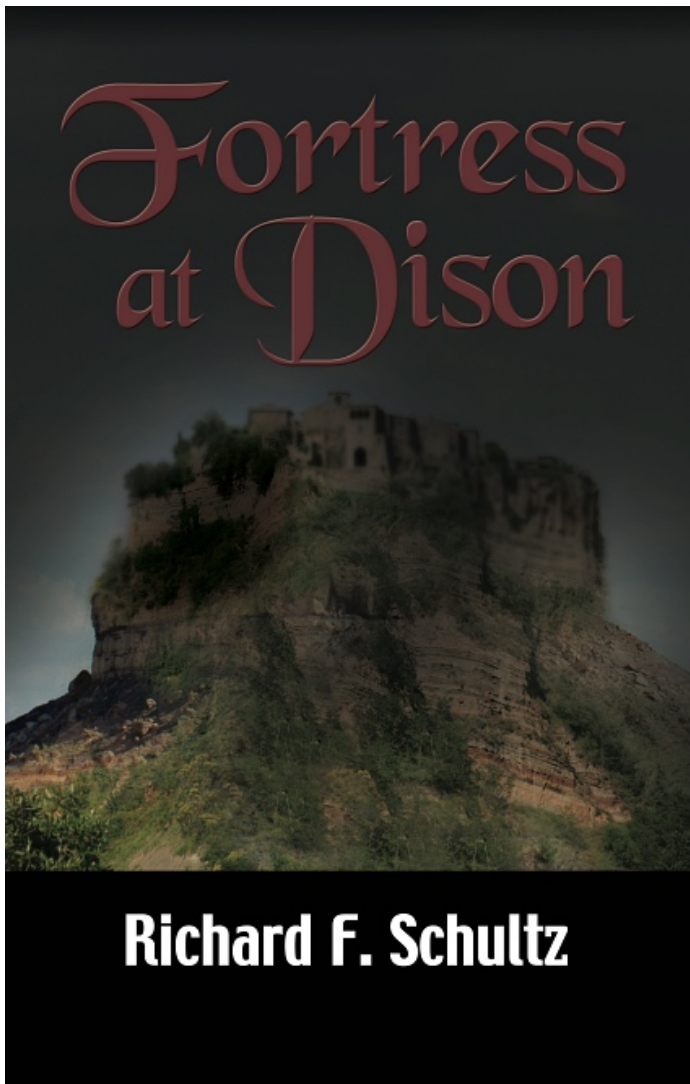
With little effort the catlike creature took two bounding leaps straight at the wall. Just as Tim was sure it would break its neck slamming into solid stone its paws made contact with the shimmering surface Dubbs had called a “portal.” Instead of bouncing off the rock, as its front legs touched the surface it seemed to slow down in mid-air, then slowly, then more quickly it was drawn into the wall. With an almost inaudible “plop” it disappeared into the shimmering surface.

Dubbs shook his head and looked at Tim with a mixture of mild irritation and amusement in his eyes. “No matter what you may hear in the future, those creatures are far more mischievous than they are dangerous.”

Tim looked incredulously at Dubbs, then slowly reached out and touched the surface of the wall. Instead of solid stone he felt something he imagined had the consistency of molten metal, but without the heat. There was a sort of quicksilver-like consistency. As he pushed he could feel his hand being drawn in. He pulled away and looked to Dubbs for an explanation.

“Just step through the portal and let it pull you though. There is no need to worry about breathing, the transfer is instantaneous. Watch as I step in then follow me immediately. Once you are through I will close it off from the other side.”

With that said, and without hesitation, Dubbs lightly stepped into the wall. In a moment he too was drawn completely in and had disappeared. Tim took a last look around, adjusted his pack and slipped his staff into a specially made loop on the pack where it would be readily available if needed, then drew his sword. He reached out and touched the wall. Again he felt it begin to pull him inward. He paused for a moment longer, then threw caution to the wind, took a deep breath and stepped in.



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