

Prologue

The bright sun of early summer shone with fierce heat on the parade ground of the Crossing Point garrison, but from the reviewing platform Sameth could see the gold and russet leaves of autumn trees ~~was~~ spreading colour along the hills across the Wall.

'It's so unfair,' he whispered to his friend Nicholas, who had come with him to say goodbye for the summer holidays.

'What's unfair?' Nicholas whispered back, without moving his head. Unlike Sameth, he had never been to the perimeter, or seen the Old Kingdom across the Wall. He also wasn't used to the pomp and ceremony that was taking place on the parade ground, with strange-looking Aneelstieran soldiers wearing mail over their khaki, presenting arms with longswords instead of rifles.

'That I never get a summer holiday,' Sameth whispered back. He did turn his head, because he'd seen this ceremony more than six times already. The Crossing Point Scouts were parading for him, as a mark of respect, as they had done every time he crossed the Wall, going home from school for the holidays.

stupid

'What are you talking about?' Nicholas muttered.
'This is the summer holidays. We don't have to go back for ~~six weeks~~ eight weeks.'

Sameth rolled his eyes at his friend and made nudging notions with his head, indicating the Wall and the autumn forest that stretched at behind it.

'I get a holiday, but it's always autumn!' he exclaimed bitterly. 'Then when I come back here it's autumn! I get double autumns!'

'Ssssh!' interrupted a stern voice behind him, 'Your Highness is being disrespectful.'

Sameth sighed, ~~and~~ but not too loudly, and looked back at the assembled ranks before him. In a few minutes the officer in command would come up and invite him to review the ranks troops and he would obediently trot along behind, nodding as if he was noticing something about each man. They would stare ahead, professionally not seeing him. But he was sure they were thinking: 'who's this annoying kid again? Some Old Kingdom big-wig's brat...'

Or maybe they wouldn't, he thought again,

looking at the Charter Marks just visible under the brims of their helmets. The Scouts knew who he was, even if ^{most} ~~most~~ of the Perimeter garrison had no idea.

He shifted his weight on to his other leg as the officer ordered the men to attention, readying himself to salute and step down for the review.

The sooner it was done, the better, because he hated the Crossing Point; hated the chafe of his school tie and stupid blazer; hated the delay incurred by this stupid parade; hated missing summer yet again...

But most of all he hated - and feared - the presence of the Dead. He could feel the closeness of Death all around, the almost tangible desire of the Dead to come through at this place where so many people had died. The only thing that held them back were the Wind Flutes of the Abhorsen. He could feel them too, like heavy ~~bars~~ ^{holding} hands ~~pressing~~ closed a door. A door that was constantly under pressure, bowing out under the strain...

'Northern Perimeter Reconnaissance Unit ready for inspection, Your Highness, Sir!' bawled out a voice, the officer suddenly in front of him.

Nicholas saw his friend Shiver, as if surprised by the bellowing officer, then he stuck his shoulders back and stepped down to walk along the ^{first rank} lines of men, stopping every now and then to say something that Nick couldn't hear.

Not that he was very interested in the parade. His eyes were continually drawn to the other side of the wall. It was clearly autumn there, and much later in the day. Nick couldn't see clearly, but the shadows were longer and already clustering darkly in the hollows.

Surely there must be a scientific reason for it, he thought, sudden dreams of discovery racing through his head. Sayre's Law of Discontinuity, Sayre's Theorem of Irrelativity...

His day-dreams were interrupted by another shout, the officer standing the men at ease while Sam marched back to the podium.

'Well, that's done for another year,' he said cheerfully. 'And only four years to go till I won't have to cross at all.'

'You mean you won't come back to Ancelstierre after you leave school?' asked Nick. 'What about university?'

'I don't think I'll bother,' said Sameth, surprising his friend, who had always presumed they would both go to university in some distant and only barely imagined future.

'Time for your Highness to change,' said Oren, indicating ~~the~~ a nearby wooden building. 'We don't want to miss too much of the afternoon light - such as it is.'

Nick looked at him strangely, the remark seeming so out of place with the morning sun so hot on his face. But at the same time he realised Oren had no thought for what was going on in Anselstierre. He was tuned to the rhythms of the Old Kingdom. Everything about him declared so, from his weathered face to the plain-hilted sword at his waist in its dark, long-polished scabbard.

And, like Sameth, he had the weird brand on his forehead, the mark that you could only see some of the time. A specialised sort of phosphorescent paint, Nick presumed. It was one of the things Sameth didn't talk about.

'You had better go back to your vehicle, Master Sayre,' Oren continued. 'You'll see Prince

Sameth next term.'

'Can't I come up to the Wall?' burst out Nick.
'That would be all right, wouldn't it?'

'I don't think so ...' Oren began, his voice becoming even more forbidding, ~~but he was~~

'Let him come along!' interrupted Sameth, at the same time the Ancelstieran officer, Major Dwyer, said, 'No harm in it, surely?'

Oren hesitated, looking down at the two boys. Sameth could protect himself to some degree, but the other lad was Ancelstieran, without a Charter mark. He wouldn't even know what was happening ... if something did.

But the sun was high, and the Crossing Point had been relatively quiet for months. He had twelve men of the Royal Guard - all Charter mages - and the Major Dwyer's scouts were by no means unskilled.

'Very well,' he said slowly. 'You may come to the Wall with Major Dwyer's men - but you must do as you're told and you must not - ~~must not~~ even try to cross. Is that understood?'

'Yes, sir!' exclaimed Nick. 'Thank you, sir!'

Nick had to wait ten minutes ~~before~~ while Sam got changed into his Old Kingdom clothes, but he spent the time writing in his notebook.

Observations on the apparent time difference between Anielstierre and the Old Kingdom, notes on the way clouds seemed to be vertically ~~streaked~~ cut off above the Wall...

He was scribbling something about a bird he'd seen fly south across the Wall and the sudden flurry of gunshots and arrows that had brought it down - and the tension he'd noticed in Major Sawyer, quite out of proportion for some crow or raven or whatever it was...

Sam looked totally different in his Old Kingdom gear. At school he was just like everyone else, except he had private lessons in fencing and some religion or something. Now he did look like a Prince out of a story or moving picture, with his silvered ~~chain~~ mail hauberk and a helmet with a gold band around it. ~~There was~~ He had a shield too - a ~~round one~~ ^{black disc deep ~~or~~} ~~with a cover on it~~ ^{deep blue and streaked} printed with a mixture of silver keys and golden towers against a deep blue background.

'Your Highness,' said Nick, half-jokingly. Sam shrugged, embarrassed, and muttered, 'Don't tell them at school or I'll kill you.'

Nick shook his head, then nodded it, somehow conveying that he wouldn't mention it and that this was a binding promise.

'Let's go then,' said Major Burger, looking around at Oren and the mixed party of Old Kingdom guardsmen and Anielstieran soldiers. 'Sergeant Stewart - ~~take point~~ ~~take~~ is the crossing party prepared? All right - let's get going.

He led the way to a communications trench, four men following him with drawn swords. Two Levin machine-gunners followed, on the off chance the guns would work - and there was something to shoot at.

Royal guardsmen followed them, then Sameth, Nick and Oren, more guardsmen and more soldiers.

No-one took crossing the Wall lightly.

They ~~followed~~ a zig-zag way ~~thru~~ along the trench, then climbed out on to open ground,

more Anelsterran soldiers pulling moveable sections of the wire entanglements aside to let them past.

The Wall loomed up ahead, ~~grey stone~~ heat reflecting off the perfectly-cut stones in shimmers like ripples through the air.

Nick's shoelace came undone, and he bent down to do it up. Instantly, Oren stopped, one gauntleted hand gripping the boy's shoulder.

'What's wrong - why have you stopped?'

Nick looked up, surprised by the urgency in the man's voice, surprised by the tension in all these armed fighting men around him.

'My shoelace's come undone,' he said, reaching back down to tie it up. But ^{he} still looking up at Oren, and his hand missed the shoe, fingers digging into the dirt. — ~~and sudden~~

Sudden pain sparked through his finger, and he almost cried out, but it was gone so quickly he swallowed the hurt back down.

Quickly tying his shoelace he stood back up and looked at his finger. Even in the bright light, he could only just see the faintest speck

of blood.

'What is it?' asked Sam, as Nick kept on staring and the tiny blood spot closed over and disappeared.

'Nothing,' said Nick, shaking his head, his hand falling back to his side.

'You should turn back now anyway,' announced Oren, ~~turning~~ his voice distracted. 'I felt Free Magic close by then ... I can taste it on the air... you must go back immediately!'

'Eure Uh ... OK,' stammered Nick. Quickly he shook hands with Sameth, muttered something about school next term and then he was hurrying back the way they'd come, escorted by four sword-wielding soldiers.

Behind him, Oren drew Charter symbols in the air, magic to seek out the spells or creature he'd felt pass close by them. But nothing was revealed, and already it was almost dark on the other side.

'Come - we'd best hurry,' he said, taking Sameth by the arm as if he were still a little boy and not a rapidly-growing 13-year old. 'It must have been an old spell

Something lingering and lost in power. Nothing to concern us.

He spoke as if to convince himself, but Sameth didn't argue. He'd tasted that hot, metallic tang as well, and the fear had ~~grown~~ blossomed in him too. He just wanted to get away, away from the tainted, dead-ridden landscape of the Crossing Point.

A day after the crossing, Nicholas Sayre had a sudden pain in his wrist. It was cripplingly painful for a moment, then it passed.

Over the next five years, he would suffer other sudden ^{brief} pains, including an awful stab of agony in his chest on the very first day of attending the University of Corvere. ^{They all passed so quickly he never even wondered what they were.}

He never connected them to that day at the Crossing Point, and never knew that a sliver of ancient, ~~magic-ridden~~ arcane metal had entered his bloodstream and made its way long and tortuous way to his heart.