



GRIFFIN BLADE
AND THE BRONZE FINGER

You see things, and you say “Why?”
But I dream things that never were, and I say “Why not?”
– *George Bernard Shaw*

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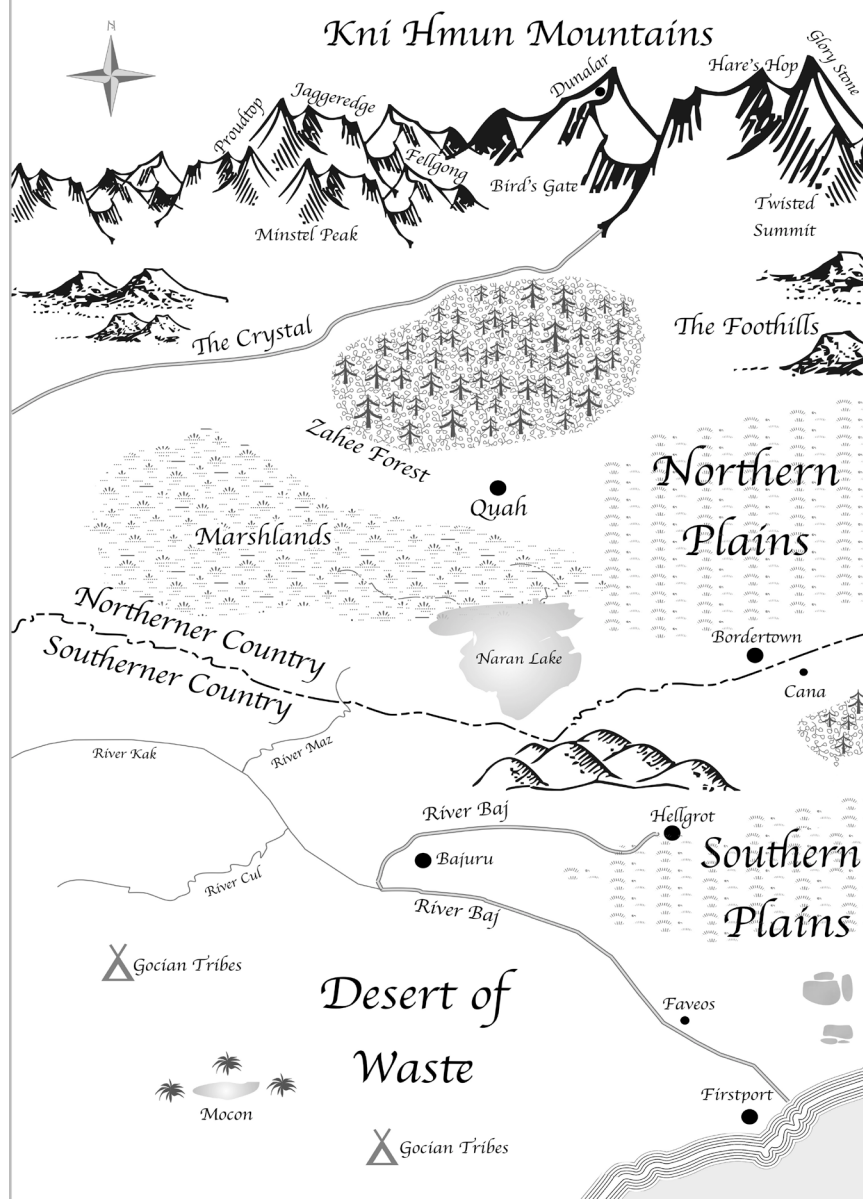
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*To Ms. Jenna Hofer
and the members
of the PGMS book club*

ALASTIAN



↑
Far North



Sea of
Emrad

Isles of Confusion





CHAPTER 1

Griffin heard shouts coming from nearby. “Curse them,” he muttered. He looked down at the Hiamahu Jewel, a sparkling gem that felt at home in his hand, despite the fact that he had just stolen it. The jewel glimmered bright blue before he quickly placed it in his breast pocket. He reached back over his shoulder and readied his crossbow, suddenly wishing he hadn’t used four bolts as footholds to climb to the upper floor of Scadnik’s treasury. Only two bolts remained.

The shouts grew louder, as a group of guards stormed into the room. They wore leather armor and carried black shields adorned with Lord Scadnik’s crest—an orange lion head, its mouth pulled back in a snarl. *How did they find me?* Griffin wondered.

As the first two guards arrived, he shot the closest one in the shoulder, careful not to aim for the heart. The second guard took a bolt through the thigh. *A shame, thought Griffin, but they’ll survive.* He then grabbed a rope that had been attached to his belt by a hook and tossed it upward to a brass chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. The hook

looped around an arm of the chandelier, and Griffin leaped, swinging across the room and landing on a narrow ledge halfway up the wall on the opposite side. Wasting no time, he shortened the rope and again leaped, this time toward a high window, as the chandelier began to creak from his weight.

Holding on with one hand as he swung, he removed a heavy dagger from his belt and hurled it toward the window, shattering the glass just before he arrived. Grabbing hold of the window sill with his fingertips, he began to climb through the open space. He turned to face the guards below, their mouths agape. Two of them rushed to a corner of the room, where javelins gathered dust on a rack. They grabbed the weapons, returned to the center of the room, and aimed them at the intruder.

Griffin glanced upward and grinned. He tugged hard on the rope that had been his savior, and the ceiling began to crumble. Just before the chandelier fell atop the unfortunate guards below, rendering them unconscious, they could have sworn they saw Griffin Blade wink.

Griffin raced through the darkened streets of the city of Quah. During the day, the city was bustling with life—merchants charging up and down the streets, practically begging customers to buy their wares; friendly travelers tipping their hats or nodding toward passing strangers; burly men boasting of their skills; and pages, usually children of noblemen, running about on errands.

At night, however, the mood of the city changed. Locals locked their doors. The Main Gates of the city were closed, and nobody was allowed in or out. City Guards were posted along the walls above the gates, staring into the darkness, waiting for invisible foes. Also when night arrived, new figures emerged. Some of them were rogues like Griffin. Others were outcasts and bandits and spies and mercenaries dealing in dark business.

After Griffin made sure he was not being pursued, he finally ceased running and began striding down a side street. A stooped man in a gray cloak, his face hidden by a hood, walked toward him. As the man neared him, he suddenly veered into Griffin, knocking him to the ground.

“Very sorry, good sir,” the man whispered. “Here, let me help you up.” He held out a long, calloused hand. As Griffin grabbed it, he noticed that the old man’s index finger was mechanical. *Odd*, he thought, as he brushed the grime of the street from his clothes. Griffin turned to ask the old man about the finger, but he had disappeared.

Griffin walked farther until he reached a dark alley in the most questionable part of town. Attached to the wall in the alley was a small, wooden board. Griffin tapped it three times, then twice, then three times again. Suddenly, the board moved to reveal a slot. All Griffin could see was a pair of eyes staring back at him.

“Code,” the eyes asked.

“Heron.”

“Name.”

“Griffin Blade,” he replied. “I wish to sell an item to the Lord of Lies.”

The eyes seemed to accept his answer. “Very well, you may pass.” A stone door that had blended in with the alley wall slowly swung open.

“I don’t want any trouble outta you,” said the eyes, as Griffin prepared to walk in.

Griffin raised an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

As he passed through the stone door, the air became considerably cooler. Griffin could see his own breath. He began to make out figures moving about in black cloaks. The air smelled of sewage, a scent Griffin had learned to tolerate. He remembered the first time he had visited the black market of Quah. He had been seven years old...

Young Griffin tried to keep up with his father. Ramyr Blade had dark brown hair and matching eyes that were constantly scanning his surroundings. He stood erect, one hand never far from his sword’s hilt, the other gently on his son’s shoulder. “Come, Griff! Business does not complete itself!”

It was dark, later than he had ever been allowed to wander the city, and Griffin began to make out shadowy figures strolling the streets. Suddenly frightened, the young boy stopped in his tracks, his hands trembling. “W-where are we, Father?”

“A place... for people like us,” his father slowly replied. “Sometimes the shadows are the safest place to be.”

Griffin shook the memory from his head until it began to throb. But he could never shake it completely. His memories

of his father were like slowly fading embers from a fire. He feared the day when they would be mere ashes. He sighed and continued through the dark hallway. From a nearby room, he could hear a small band of men singing an eerie song, their low voices working in harmony:

“By raven’s call and deadly grasp
he ferries us to long-earned past.
He holds your fate,
which he shall rate.
He decides the path you take...”

Griffin shivered. The song only further depressed him. *Think about business*, he mused. *Business first, all else second.* He made his way to an open-air courtyard and strode up to a large, gray tent, torches flaming on either side of the entrance. He paused and peered down into a small puddle of water. Griffin always expected to see a boy with nervous eyes and a small frown. Instead, he was greeted by a smirking, bright-eyed man, chestnut hair falling across his forehead. He stepped into the puddle, sending the reflection rippling away, and took a deep breath as he walked inside the tent.

Moments later, he found himself looking at a short man with bushy eyebrows above large violet eyes, a trimmed red beard and a curly mustache that was darker, almost black. He wore light brown hunting boots and a red robe made of the finest silk. His name was Alnardo Fist, but he was more commonly known as the Lord of Lies. The man leaned back and put his feet on his desk.

“Ah, Blade. I presume your mission was a success?”

Griffin nodded. “More or less.”

Fist removed his feet from the desk and sat up straight. “Less?”

Griffin grinned. “I used up the last of my crossbow bolts.”

The Lord of Lies began to chuckle. “With the amount I’m paying you, you could purchase the finest bolts in Quah.” He paused, and his eyes narrowed. “You do have the gem, don’t you?”

“Of course.” Griffin reached into his breast pocket, but was startled to find that it was empty. He mumbled, mostly to himself, “It’s... gone.”

“Gone? GONE! That jewel is priceless, Blade. Priceless! Your father never would have been so careless.”

Griffin thought back to his journey through the streets of Quah and remembered the old man who had crashed into him. Could he have stolen it? “Sir, I think...”

“Do not even speak, Griffin. You will find that gem. You will retrieve the Hiamahu Jewel.”

“But...”

“You will find it! Or I will consider our deal broken,” said the Lord of Lies. “And I don’t think I have to tell you what happens to people who break their promises to me.”

Griffin shivered again.



CHAPTER 2

As Griffin lay in his bed in a shabby house on Quah's eastern side, a place purposely difficult to find, he imagined himself speaking with his father.

"Why did you not just do away with the guards?"

"I am not a killer," answered Griffin.

"But they saw your face. You are now a wanted man in Quah."

"I do not kill, Father."

"Good. I'll have no son of mine killing without reason."

Griffin smiled to himself, came up with a plan, and then began gathering his belongings. He was not entirely sure that he wasn't a killer, but he was certain that he was now a fugitive.

Before dawn, Griffin departed his home, packing his cross-bow, some throwing daggers and a few days' worth of rations on the back of his horse, a rose gray stallion and longtime companion. His face hidden by a hooded cloak, Griffin headed toward the western section of the city, the market area. When

he arrived, he stopped at a wooden building. “SILVERBEARD FORGE,” said the sign. His horse neighed impatiently. Griffin hadn’t named him Fuss for nothing.

He tied Fuss to a post and walked inside the building, where he encountered a female dwarf sitting behind a desk. It wasn’t an entirely rare sight in that part of the world, but not a particularly attractive one either. She wore simple gray clothing and old leather gloves. Beneath braided brown hair, she had wide, green eyes.

“Welcome to our little family forge. How may I ‘elp ya?”

“Well, I am looking for my old friend Roland Silverbeard. Are you a relative?”

She shook her head. “No one’s actually related ‘ere.”

Griffin scratched his head. “Well, can you tell me where I might find him?”

“If you are an old friend, ya won’t be surprised to ‘ear that he’s at Staghorn Tavern, as usual.”

Griffin, indeed, wasn’t surprised at all. It was a quick ride from the forge to Staghorn Tavern, a well-known pub in Quah. He heard laughing and singing, as he tied up his horse while Fuss fussed. Inside, he found quite a scene. A few travelers sipped ale while seated on padded stools at a bar. Arranged throughout the room were many wooden tables of various shapes and sizes, most of them occupied by wine-drinking men and women. In the middle of the room, around the largest table, sat ten dwarves, their beards stretching nearly to their toes and each a different color—white and gray and jet black, light brown and dark brown and auburn brown, blonde and cherry red and copper red. Griffin recognized Roland

Silverbeard among the group. He had a silver beard, of course, tightly braided, and long silver hair falling to his shoulders. He was the tallest of the bunch, which wasn't saying much.

None of the dwarves appeared sober, and they were singing in their deep, dwarven voices:

“Drink the ale, pour the wine.
Slurp the brandy. Mine! Mine! Mine!
Drain the rum, guzzle the beer,
chug the cider. Hear! Hear! Hear!
Finish the whiskey and the scotch.
Empty bottles! You just watch!”

Dwarves, Griffin chuckled. He walked up to Roland, as a blonde-bearded dwarf began dancing on the table. “Roland,” he said, leaning forward into the light and slightly revealing his face, “it’s me, Griffin.”

“Wha --?”

“It’s me, Griffin Blade.”

Roland put his hand on Griffin’s shoulder. “Griffin, my boy! It’s been too long!”

“I need to ask you about something,” said Griffin. “It’s a... private matter.”

Roland opened his eyes wide and tugged at his silver beard. “Well, all right then, why don’t we talk at the forge.”

Griffin guided the tipsy dwarf to the door. “There’s a stable out back,” said Roland. “My horse, Moon, is there.”

Roland’s horse was a white pony with sea-blue eyes. They led Moon to where Fuss was tied, then Roland ungracefully

climbed aboard him. Quickly it became clear that he was in no state to guide a pony. He veered left and right, never particularly straight. As Griffin reached out his hand to balance him, Roland shouted, "I know what I'm doin'!"

Seconds later, the silver-bearded dwarf crashed into a few street-side boxes. All Griffin could do was roll his eyes. After a much longer ride than Griffin expected, they arrived back at Silverbeard Forge. The woman was still sitting at a desk. She looked up. "Drinking too much again, Roland? Ya really should know better by now."

Roland patted his throat. "Nothing wrong with wettin' your gullet, Melendi."

"Maybe so," Melendi replied. "But there is something wrong with staggering around like a fool."

Roland waved his hand. "Don't listen to her, Griffin. Stagger around as much as you'd like." He motioned to a back room where anvils lined the floor and hammers hung from various hooks on the walls. "So," Roland said, "out with it."

Griffin explained that a man with a mechanical finger had stolen a gem of his. He didn't bother with the details about how he had obtained the gem in the first place. "Do you have any idea how that finger might have been created?"

The dwarf stroked his silver beard. "A finger made o' metal, ya say? Hmmm... what sort o' metal?"

"Bronze, I believe."

"A bronze finger," said Roland. He stroked his beard again. "I can think of only one place that might forge such a thing—Briskhammer Forge in Dunalar."

"Dunalar..."

“Yes, the Marble City, the dwarven capital, ruled by Rindivor the Almighty. Briskhammer Forge is where I trained for many years. Best forge in all of Alastian.”

“That’s farther than I would have liked,” said Griffin. He had never been to Dunalar. He didn’t even know anyone who had been there.

“Aye, it’s one week to the north by foot. But only two days on horseback.” He grinned at Griffin, “Actually, I was thinking o’ headin’ there tomorrow to restock on supplies.”

Griffin’s eyes suddenly sparkled with interest. “Could you use some company, Roland?”

“Been a while since we traveled together, eh? Of course, no human has entered Dunalar for many years, but I see no reason for ya not to come along. Although I will have to educate ya a bit about dwarven customs.”

“I appreciate that, Roland.”

“Whatever ya need, my boy. What’s mine is yours, except what’s mined, of course.”

“Well, I could use a place to stay tonight, Roland.”

The dwarf nodded.

“And a quiver of crossbow bolts.”

The dwarf nodded once more. “That’ll be six gold pieces.”