

Scarred

'You can't catch me!' yelled Victor as he ran away from his friends. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him, but in his playful mood he was not paying attention to where he was running. As he turned to head to see if his pursuer had gained any ground, he ran straight smack into a tree. The other boys stopped and crowded around Victor who was holding onto the large cut above his right eyebrow.

Wincing in pain, he looked at the crowd around him and barked, 'Well? What are you waiting for?! Bring *him* to me!' There was a quick shuffling through the crowd as no one really wanted to be the one to touch "him".

Victor was above average in height and built like a bull. His large frame made him seem more impressive and all the other boys in the orphanage saw him as their ring leader and flocked to him. Four of the boys reluctantly broke off, in fear of further angering Victor and trudged off to fetch "him".

Dalziel sat alone in the dark, musty corner in which he had sat ever since he could remember. He sat drawing pictures in the dirt floor, of lands which he hoped to explore when he was finally old enough to leave the orphanage. Finally able to live his life without the constant fear of being dragged against his will to accrue another scar that was not his. With that thought, he stroked the one scar that he had actually gained on his own. Almost the entire back of his left hand was covered in a lumpy, red burn scar. He didn't remember how he had gotten it, but for now it was a source of his identity, his sanity. The other numerous scars that littered his body were not of his doing, though he remembered each one as clearly as if it were his. The implanting of memories was the part he hated the most. To have actions and thoughts that were not his, darting through his head

Dalziel was a small boy. He stood roughly three inches shorter than the average thirteen year

old and was also thin. His pale complexion provided a stark contrast to his thick, unkempt dark-brown hair. His eyebrows overshadowed his light green eyes and his nose protruded awkwardly from his face. He and Victor could not possibly be any more different in personality and in appearance, yet they shared so many memories together.

The door swung open and four other boys walked uneasily into the room scanning the rows of beds for Dalziel. Never did he see the same person enter the room twice in a row; with the amount of children in the orphanage it was not a hard feat. It was small enough for everyone to know of every other child, yet large enough that there were distinct groups of children. Yet nearly every day, Victor sent for Dalziel and sometimes even arrived himself. In that regard, Dalziel almost felt some strange attachment towards Victor; he was the only person he knew that was not afraid of him. Many, if not all, of Dalziel's implanted scars came from Victor and, Dalziel could not help but glean some sense of connection to him. Dalziel knew that every time the door opened, another injury was about to be gained. Some were scar-worthy, while others just lasted a few days and disappeared. Regardless of how serious the injury, the memories that came with each lasted forever. They were not long memories, usually just enough to know where and how the injury had come to be.

'He wants to see you...' said one boy uneasily. Dalziel pretended as if he had not heard him. He knew that eventually it would come down to force, and even if he were twice as large, he could never win four versus one.

'Hey! He was talking to you, freak!' Again, Dalziel paid no attention to the small crowd, continuing to draw his adventures in the sand. Finally the four henchmen had had enough and they stomped over to where he sat and dragged him backwards with their arms tucked under his armpits, careful not to touch his skin. Dalziel made no effort to move and let himself be dragged out the door and across the yard to be unceremoniously dumped at the feet of Victor.

‘What took you guys so long? Next time speed it up! This cut hurts, you know?!’ and with that Victor grabbed a hold of Dalziel, froze for a split second as the injury was being transferred and then let go, breathing heavily. Dalziel winced as he felt the pain of running face-first into the tree and the sharp throbbing associated with the cut that Victor had been wearing seconds before. Dalziel, now with blood trickling down his face, crawled off to the side and continued drawing his adventures in the sand as if nothing had happened. He imagined great cities that he could explore, with busy markets and people and goods from everywhere, journeys across the Great Sea to foreign lands that spoke different languages, and most of all, finding out where he had come from and how he had gotten the burn scar on his left hand.

Having been born with the gift, or curse, of being able to transfer anyone’s injury from their body over to his, Dalziel wished to find out who his parents were and where he came from. Who had given him the power to take upon himself any injury he wished with just direct skin contact and where were they now? Everyone else in the orphanage was there because their parents had died in the Great War against the Northern Kingdoms, but there was no explanation as to why Dalziel was there. No one knew how he had come to the orphanage, and by the same token, no one questioned it, and he had been there long enough that no one cared anymore. It was as if one day, seven years ago, he had just appeared and everyone accepted it. He started out just like everyone else, a new kid at the orphanage that was constantly receiving new children. But once his power had become known, everything changed. Victor immediately placed a stake on Dalziel as his personal “doctor” and anyone else who dared to exploit Dalziel’s ability was given a thorough beating.

Life at the orphanage was methodical. Every morning the children would wake at the crack of dawn and take care of the daily chores. The orphanage was set deep into the countryside of the Southern Kingdoms far from the warring borders of Malovia. It was a self-sufficient little

orphanage complete with a farmland and livestock for fresh produce. After the daily chores of feeding the animals, milking the cows, and other miscellaneous odds and ends were completed, the children were allowed to eat breakfast. Immediately following breakfast they would then learn about various crafts so one day they could leave the orphanage and possibly take up apprenticeship, even though most would probably end up dying in the war.

The orphanage was run by the hired help of the Lords who saw the orphanage as a way to atone for the death of the many peasants they sent to war. Also, it provided them with a small training facility for soldiers that would most likely end up fighting for them. There were many similar orphanages scattered across Malovia.

During the schooling time the children learned basic history of Malovia and how they had been in constant war for the past two-hundred years. There had always been tension between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, but when a prince from the North eloped with a princess from the South, the war erupted. Over time, the Great War just became a part of daily life and everyone had learned to cope. Mothers tried to not grow too attached to their sons and the women far outnumbered the men. The war would have stopped long ago but, the constant fighting always gave the common peasant something to do. If he could not farm, he could go sign himself into the army of some lord and support his family. Even if he ended up dying in the pointless war, his service would be duly noted and his family taken care of until the next male member grew old enough to fight. This also provided the lord with many widowed mistresses for him or his household that could produce more soldiers. It was an endless cycle of death, but it was the Malovian way of life the people had learned to shoulder it.

Most of the other boys in the orphanage, including Victor had no interest in any of the crafts they taught during the schooling time. They were more interested in the hours that followed which were basic swordplay and archery. It was more likely that most of them would end up fighting in

the war, so they all started learning how to handle a weapon from an early age. Each day they met and practiced with wooden swords and had target practice on straw dummies. They had one goal in mind: to become the mightiest warrior and claim revenge for the death of their parents they never met. This was one of the things that set Dalziel apart. Having been the personal “doctor” for Victor for as long as he could remember, he had grown to hate the violence that pervaded throughout the culture of Malovia.

Another thing that set Dalziel apart was the handkerchief that he owned. The single possession he could call his own. It was a thin, sad looking piece of cloth. Almost all the color had faded out, but he could still see the intricate work that had gone into it. A crest with a shield split into four different sections by a cross all underneath a leafy design sat in the middle of the cloth embroidered with once-golden thread, now a faded grey. Without a doubt in his mind, Dalziel knew he was not the son of some ordinary peasant that died in the war. He had to be from some special family, a family with power. Why else would he have the ability that he did? That crest held the secret to his past. Was it a crest found in Malovia? Was it perhaps a kingdom from the North? So many questions about his origins plagued him, he longed to find out where he was from and in what strange land the handkerchief been fashioned. He longed to grow older and discover who he was, to escape this prison of an orphanage where all he knew was pain.

With the constant influx of new orphans from the war, the orphanage had to maintain a way to keep the population in check. They used the schooling a way to educate the children enough so that on their sixteenth birthday they were kicked out of the orphanage and sent on their way, free to choose the path of their lives. With the sheer amount of children in the orphanage, there was at least one different boy sent out every month. The orphanage’s resources were limited and they had adopted a “no exceptions” policy, and thus, those born in the winter had a much harder time surviving their first year alone left with no other choice but to sign into an army or

die cold and starving on the side of the road. Fortunately, Dalziel's birthday lay perhaps at the best time of the year, towards the end of spring but still long before the hot summer heat set in. When it was his turn to leave, the weather would be almost perfect for traveling.

Years passed, and with each passing year, Dalziel gained more scars, but still the most tell-tale scar was the one that sat above his right eye. It ran from the middle of his forehead down across his eyebrow and ended just above his eyelid. No hair had grown over the scar so he was missing most of his right eyebrow. It was as if he was already a war-scarred veteran at the age of fifteen, but he had yet to see a single battlefield. He had grown accustomed to the seemingly ritualistic transfer of injury from Victor to himself. It was as if Victor tried to be as clumsy and dangerous as possible because he knew that no matter what he did, Dalziel would always be there for him to take the injury.

Finally, it had come time for Victor to take his leave. It was the just at the end of winter, with a thin layer of snow still left covering the ground.

'When we meet again you will be serving under me. I'll work my way up the ranks, become a general and then immortalized as the man who single-handedly ended the Great War!' And without another glance back, Victor marched off south to the closest recruitment center. Dalziel breathed a sigh of relief as his years of torment had finally come to an end. With Victor gone, he was left alone, free to do as he pleased and perhaps gain a few scars of his own, but he was unsure of how to do that. He had spent so many years just living in fear. Spending his days trying to shrug off the pain of each new scar and distract himself with the adventures he would have once he left. He did not know for sure how to live his life without the ever-present threat of Victor.

Another month passed and the time came when Dalziel was free to travel the world. It was his sixteenth birthday, so the orphanage packed up some simple necessities, gave him a copper

and sent him on his way. Free to do as he chose whether it was conscription into the army or possible apprenticeship. He left without much bustle. Everyone else just continued with their days as normal and Dalziel walked out undisturbed.

With the clothes on his back, handkerchief in pocket and day's worth of rations in a small knapsack, Dalziel struck out north towards the city of Candar. It was a full day's trip to reach Candar, and Dalziel had learned that during his schooling. He knew he had to travel fast before the gates of the city would close, keeping its residents safe. He could hardly contain his excitement as he took his first steps towards freedom, leaving behind the memories of Victor that haunted him. He knew that his hardships had made him who he was today, a little more hardened and much more resilient, and they had definitely changed how he looked. He rubbed his left hand for good measure and hoped that Candar would hold more answers than the orphanage had offered.

The closer Dalziel got to the city, the more people he saw. At first when he set out, there were a few signs of civilization. There would be one small farm every three miles where a family had decided to live isolated from the rest of the world. Then slowly, but surely as he progressed towards Candar, the lone house every three miles turned into a small cluster of houses every two miles.

Finally he reached the outskirts of the city where there was expansive farmland to provide food for the population of Candar.

As he reached the main gates, the sun was just beginning to dip below the horizon. The guards were obviously trying to expedite the line of citizens entering the city, not checking the contents of each cart with particular care.

'You there!' one guard barked suddenly. Dalziel jumped with a start and looked down from the towering walls of the city to find that the guard was pointing directly at him. Uncertain of how to

respond to such a call, Dalziel quickly looked down to the ground and imagined what he would see when he got to the market: bustling night performers adeptly tumbling, jumping, twisting and diving hoping to earn a spare coin from the amused passerby, groups of people loudly singing along to a fiddler's song, and maybe even a silent mime, living his public life in silence.

'Hey! You with the scar!' Dalziel reluctantly looked up towards the guard barking the orders.

'Yes, you! C'mere.' Dalziel moved out of his place in line and walked over to the guard. 'I can tell you're new in town. That dumb look you had on your face when you were looking at the gates gave you away. We need all non-citizens to register, unless you have a merchant's pass, and by the looks of it, you ain't got nothing to sell, do you?'

'No sir, I don't'

'Alrighty, come with me.' The guard turned and quickly walked down the main street towards the center of town. Dalziel followed dodging the massive flow of people. His eyes darting back and forth all around him, bakery to his right, carpenter on the left, all the different crafts he had learned very lightly during his time at the orphanage.

'Keep up now! Don't get lost. You can explore the city as soon as you've registered.' Dalziel scurried to cover the distance that had unknowingly grown between him and his escort. Finally, right outside the center of town, the guard finally entered a plain looking building. An old, worn sign lay hanging in front. Heavily weathered and faded Dalziel could just barely make out "Customs" and he quickly ducked inside.

'Sir, new comer here to register and by the looks of it he's fresh out of an orphanage.'

The man sitting behind the desk stacked high with papers, peered over his gold-rimmed glasses and looked up and down Dalziel's frame. Letting out a sigh and fumbling for paper and ink he said, 'Alright. Thank you, you are free to leave.' And with that the guard gave a quick bow and marched quickly out of the room. 'Now for you, you're going to have to answer some questions.'

First off, what's your name?

'Dalziel, sir.'

'No need for the sir, just some necessary papers to fill out before you stay here. Now I'm assuming you don't have a last name, being an orphan.'

'No, do I need one?'

'You need one for our records here. We have so few orphans coming to the city nowadays, all of them go off and try and fight for some *glory* and just ending up dying,' said the man nonchalantly. 'We used to just assign all orphans with "Orphain" but since you're the first one in a long time I suppose you could pick. Did you have anything specific in mind?'

'Not particularly...' Dalziel pondered in thought as to what would have a nice ring to it. Stroking the scar on his left hand mindlessly, he felt a jolt as if an injury were being transferred. A sudden surge of memory hit him and he replied, 'Medicaeus.' He was confused as to what had happened, but he shrugged it off, preoccupied with the task of starting a new life outside the orphanage.

'Okay then, Dalziel Medicaeus you are, registered new visitor of Candar, if you come back in six months you can become a full citizen. Also I'm assuming you're going to take up apprenticeship somewhere? I hear the blacksmith, carpenter, and tailor may be looking.'

'Thanks for the information, but I wasn't really planning on staying too long. Just long enough to get my feet beneath me.'

'Well either way, you need a place to stay tonight, I recommend the Golden Goblet. It's right across the town center here. I'm sure Innkeeper Terry wouldn't mind giving you some stable space and some food in exchange for some good dishwashing.'

'Thank you!' When Dalziel stepped back outside, the sun's last rays were just disappearing into the night and most everyone had cleared the streets. A few stragglers here and there, hurrying

to get back home and out of the chilly evening air. Straight ahead of him Dalziel could see the sign for the Golden Goblet, a well-lit bustling inn with loud music and laughter leaking out into the quiet night. He made his way over and cautiously entered the front door. Immediately a strong scent of alcohol assailed his nostrils and he saw the boisterous tavern filled with men who had had just a little too much to drink. Quickly scanning the perimeter, he spotted a one man who did not seem to be filled with drink. Dalziel made his way over to him, careful not to touch any of the wobbly patrons lest he accidentally take some injuries. He made a mental note that he would need to procure a pair of gloves and a hooded cloak to cover his bare skin.

'Hello. Are you Innkeeper Terry?'

'Yep, that'd be me. What can I do fer ya?'

'My name's Dalziel, sir. I'm a new visitor and I thought perhaps I could wash some dishes in exchange for some food and a place to sleep?'

'Ah, another one of you new'uns. Been a while since I can last remember renting out my stable loft to anyone, but my dishes would gladly take a nice washin'. I've got some beef stew leftover from the evening as well. Yer welcome to help yourself to a bowl. And judging by the size of ya, you won't be eating much!' laughed Terry. 'The dishes are in the back here, I'm sure one of the waitresses will tell you where everything is, now get to it!'

'Thank you, sir,' said Dalziel with a small bow. He walked to the back where the kitchen was winding down in activity. The waitresses were spread out, each enjoying a break from standing and running back and forth with orders all day.

'I'm here to wash the dishes?' Dalziel said inquisitively to no one in particular.

'The dishes are in the sink and the soap is in the bucket behind you. If you need more water the pump is right out in the alley back here,' said a slender, attractive young waitress motioning out the back door.

'Thank you,' Dalziel replied as he rolled his sleeves up and prepared to tackle the pile in front of him.

He was almost done washing the dishes and going out to grab one last bucket of water.

Unfortunately, in one of his earlier water runs, he had spilled a little water that he planned to mop up when he was finished. To his dismay, as he was nearing the door, he slipped on the puddle of water and in reflex his arms flailed out searching for something to catch himself and he brushed the arm of the waitress who had given him directions.

While still falling, Dalziel felt a rush of a memory flooding in and the familiar pain of a transferred injury. His finger now had a new cut from when the waitress was cleaning up a drunken customer's shattered glass. He quickly stood back up mumbled his apologies and bolted as normally as he could out the back. Adrenaline was pumping through his veins. That had been too close of a call. He had grown too accustomed to everyone knowing of his ability. Out here in the real world, he would have to be extra cautious. He didn't know how people would treat him if they knew. There were two possible reactions, just like what had happened at the orphanage, abuse or fear. Luckily the cut was a few days old so she probably didn't notice the small amount of energy it took to transfer such a minor injury. Still shaking from the adrenaline, he turned to fill the bucket and in the process splashed some of the cold water on his face.

He examined the new cut, and pondered over the new memory. This was the first memory he had of someone else other than Victor. It was a strange feeling.

'Hey, you okay? That was a pretty big fall.' Dalziel jumped at the unexpected sound of a voice behind him and was even more surprised with the tone of concern that it held.

'Oh yeah... I'm fine. I've had much worse,' replied Dalziel while turning to see who sounded so concerned for him. She was even more beautiful under the soft light of the moon. The young waitress from earlier stood in the doorway. Her wavy, dark brown hair fell a little past her

shoulders and her large, light blue eyes were filled with worry. Her cheek bones were well-defined and high up on her face and the moonlight seemed to bounce off of them.

'No you're not. Look! You've got a cut on your elbow. Wait here. I'll go get a bandage.' Dalziel lifted his arm to inspect the cut. In his hurry and concern over taking someone else's injury, he had not even noticed that his elbow was scraped. As quickly as she had left, she reappeared holding a thin strip of bandage and walked over to where Dalziel was now seated at the edge of the pump.

She worked quickly, her fingers dexterously wrapping and neatly tying the bandage around his arm. 'It's been a while since we last had a newcomer here to wash dishes. What's your name? My name is Tallara.'

Dalziel had very little experience talking to girls. The girls at the orphanage always left him alone, so having a young woman, and an attractive one, who seemed genuinely interested in him, talking to him was surprising and left him a little embarrassed.

'Dalziel,' he replied softly. He felt blood rushing to his face. 'Nice to meet you,' he said, his tongue seemingly caught in his throat.

Then as if sent from above, Innkeeper Terry yelled from inside, 'Tallara! Where are you? Get back to work!'

With a smile and light curtsy, she said, 'I hope we'll get to talk later,' and hurried back inside.

Dalziel sat alone gathering his thoughts and continuing to calm down. Going over the events of the day, he had already had a much more exciting day than any of his past years at the orphanage. He'd traveled a day away to Candar, registered at the customs officer, found a place to stay, and met an attractive woman.

'What a busy day. I did so much more than wait for Victor to appoint his day's worth of injuries on me' Dalziel thought to himself. Shaking his head, he tried to push thoughts of his past out of

his mind. He had to move on; he no longer had to live his life from injury to injury. His thoughts were interrupted by the loud grumbling and stirring of his stomach, reminding him that he had not eaten since his midday break with the rations he was given. He quickly pumped out a new bucket full of water and finished washing the dishes. Reluctantly grabbing a plate he had just cleaned, he went and helped himself to some beef stew while lamenting the fact that he had not thought to eat before washing the dishes. He took his bowl out into the common room and found himself a table tucked away in a corner. There he ate his meal and enjoyed the warm hum of the evenings activities while exchanging a smile with Tallara every so often. Quietly thinking of what he needed to do, he put his hand into his pocket and felt the familiar frayed edges of his handkerchief. He would need to find a library where he could find some books to possibly discover where he came from. But before he did that, he would have to somehow obtain gloves and a hooded cloak to cover his skin when he was out in public.

'I need a way to make money,' he thought to himself. 'I can't do anything with only a copper. I can't wash dishes and sleep in hay forever.' So many things to do now that he was on his own, but those chores would have to wait. It was getting late and the day's travel had left him tired. He retired himself out to the stable, exchanged one last goodnight smile with Tallara, climbed up to the loft, rolled out his blanket and fell quickly asleep.

As was his habit, Dalziel woke at the crack of dawn and picked the stray pieces of straw sticking into him. He wandered out into the town center where a few merchants were just setting up for the day. He walked over to the baker and bought himself a loaf of bread and a small wedge of cheese with the only copper he had. Now broke, he nibbled on his breakfast and walked around exploring the city he now inhabited. He walked down towards the gate he had entered where the guards were just raising the gate for the day. He wandered around aimless from there and walked from gate to gate. There were four in total. One in each cardinal direction: north, south,

east and west. From these four entry points, there was a main road towards the center of the city and branching off periodically there were side pathways that curved around to form concentric circles around the whole city. At each corner of the city there were barracks where the townspeople and guards could obtain weapons and armor if the city were to be under attack. Dotted along the sides of the main roads were the major crafts of the city such as the bakery, tannery, candle maker, stone mason, and shoemaker. As he passed each one, he stopped in and asked if there were any menial chores he could do to help out, but most of them already had apprentices so his offers to help were rejected. He was starting to lose hope when the baker, stone mason and shoemaker all turned him down, but then he remembered that the blacksmith needed help.

As he neared the smithy he could hear the rhythmic clinking of hammer against steel. He walked in and immediately felt the heat of the forge. The blacksmith was working with no shirt under his thick, leather tunic hammering away at the beginnings of a sword. With each powerful blow, the shockwave rippled up his arm and revealed his well-defined muscles from working the anvil and hammer every day. Dalziel watched the man work in silence, amazed at how precise, yet powerful each swing of the smith was.

Satisfied with his work, the smith dipped it into the water and was greeted with a face full of steam. He placed the unfinished sword back into the forge and pumped the bellows a few times and turned to Dalziel.

‘What can I do for you? Looking for an apprenticeship? I could use an extra pair of hands around the shop.’

‘No, sir. I can’t take up a full apprenticeship, but perhaps there are chores I can still do for a small wage?’

With a sigh, the smith replied, ‘I guess any help is better than no help. I can give you three

coppers for a full day's work. By the looks of it, you're going to have some trouble at first, but nothing a few days of hard labor can't fix!

'And if I can only work half a day?'

The smith rubbed his furrowed brow, 'It'll have to vary day by day depending on how much work you do. For today, you can go out back and split some logs to heat the forge. Work through as much as the pile as you can and make sure the pieces are even. The axe is leaning against the pile. Name's Northrop by the way.'

'Dalziel. I look forward to working for you. Thank you.'

'Well then Dalziel, I'm not a man for wasting time and I've got a quota to fill! Get to it!' The smith turned to the forge, pulled out the sword, examined its color, and placed it back in the forge and pulled on the bellows a few more times.

Dalziel walked out back and turned towards the work in front of him. He picked up the axe with some difficulty, surprised by its weight, and began chopping away. The first few tries he missed the log entirely hitting just the stump of wood below. They did split logs occasionally at the orphanage, but Dalziel was never assigned for duty, as someone of his size could expect.

Determined to earn his wages, he buckled down and took a few more swings until he got used to the weight and feel of the axe. The methodical clings of Master Northrop working inside still echoed as Dalziel labored away. He had worked up a good sweat and his arms felt like lead. He had to take frequent breaks to catch his breath, but the pile of cut wood was slowly getting larger.

The sun was almost directly overhead when Dalziel walked into the forge and saw Northrop already eating. 'Don't expect to be fed every day since you're not formally my apprentice, but since it's your first day, help yourself to some bread and cheese. There's also a little ale in the pitcher.'

Dalziel ate his meal feeling the soreness from the morning's work set into his arms. The hard work would definitely take some getting used to, but as tired as he was, the physical labor felt good. It was so stark a contrast to his time at the orphanage. There he was a freak, free to do, but mostly not do, as he wished. Here in Candar he was just another person with a secret. No one knew who he was, and no one cared enough to find out more. It was also nice to feel pain and tiredness that he had created by working rather than just by making physical contact with someone. He could get used to a normal life, but before then, he still yearned to find out where he came from.

'Tomorrow,' said the smith interrupting his thoughts, 'come after midday. I want to show you how to clean up. Here's your payment for today.' And he placed two coppers on the table next to Dalziel. 'Now get outta here! If you can still walk, that is,' he joked.

Dalziel scooped up his hard earned money, and replied, 'Thank you. I'll be sure to come tomorrow and finish up cutting that wood and doing whatever else it is you want me to do.' As he stepped back into the streets of Candar, he rubbed his arms. They were still a little sore, but he was satisfied.

'If this keeps up I'll be as big as Victor in no time,' he thought off-handedly. Quickly shaking his head, he tried to purge the thoughts of his tormentor away. There was no benefit to remembering his past horrors, but so much of his life up until this point had revolved completely around Victor and how he treated Dalziel. On the good days he was left completely alone, didn't see Victor once as he received no injuries. But on the bad days, he was essentially kept by Victor's side, constantly receiving injuries large and small.

'It's time to move on! Can't let him dominate my life, I won't see him anymore!' Dalziel screamed at himself mentally.

In his morning trek of the city, he had made a point of remembering where the library was

located. It was towards the southwest corner of the city, but not along the main streets. It was about halfway between center of the city and the walls surrounding it. As he made his way over to the library, he passed the tailor, but with only two coppers to his name, he doubted he had enough to buy anything.

As he entered the library he was greeted by the librarian, an old, frail looking man, hunched over and soft spoken. 'How can I help you, sonny?' he asked.

'I'm just trying to find out what family this crest belongs to,' said Dalziel as he showed the man his handkerchief.

'Hmm... I've never seen that particular crest before, but there are some history books you're welcome to look through.' He led the way towards the back of the library. Dalziel was amazed to the sheer volume of books in the library. They had a handful of books available at the orphanage, but this library was stacked full. The bookshelves themselves were almost like another city. But more distinctly was the smell. The amount of paper and ink that it took for each book was astounding. Hours upon hours of transcribing the books that filled these shelves must have been the lifetime's work of a master scribe and his journeyman. 'Alright, here we are.

These five shelves here are all the history books we have. That crest you've got there looks like it could be from the Draconian Era. And those books are on this shelf right here,' said the man tapping on the largest book shelf. 'Careful when you're handling the books, a lot of work went into them. Let me know if you need anything else.'

And so began Dalziel's search of his beginnings. He sat there on the floor of that library, flipping through the various history books. He would stop to read a story here and there that piqued his interest. Though most of the stories were about great generals and the families that they had come from, the stories that really interested Dalziel were the stories about the saints.

One particular story was about one man who was highly trained in the medicine field. His name

was Saint Alcor Saldibar. He dedicated his life to helping those who could not afford good care. He used his vast knowledge of various herbs and remedies to cure everything. And near the end of his life the Great War had just started so he was never short of patients to care for. He was famous in both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms and both sides would let him freely travel to treat the injured. He was the only person who was truly neutral in the Great War, and he was revered for his skills. When he passed away, the day after his death was the only recorded time of peace since the beginning of the Great War. Both Kingdoms agreed to stop fighting for one day in honor of his life's work.

Dalziel had just finished reading the story, when his thoughts were cut short as the librarian asked, 'Did you find what you were looking for?'

Looking up, Dalziel noticed that it was getting dark. So much time had passed since he had started peering through the books, but he had not even found a single clue as to who he was.

'No. Not today. Is it alright if I come back tomorrow morning and continue my search?'

'I don't get too many visitors here now that everyone is off trying to make history in this war. I'd be glad to enjoy your company. But as you've probably noticed, it's getting to be that time of the day when I have to lock-up the building. And I'm sure there's a hot meal waiting for you at home.'

Dalziel gave a wry smile and replied, 'Certainly.' Here in the city, no one even knew he was an orphan. He was just an ordinary citizen just like everyone else. He liked that.

He made his way back to the Golden Goblet, and again the mess hall was full of the nightly patrons, all singing together loudly and having a grand time.

'Ah, there you are Dalziel! I was beginning to worry that you'd gone and gotten yourself lost!'

laughed Innkeeper Terry. 'Tallara would've been out looking for you if you hadn't returned!'

Dalziel quickly glanced towards Tallara who he'd seen walking in, but she quickly turned her

face away pretending to busy herself with a customer.

He smiled to himself, unable to contain the grin that spread across his face, and asked 'Can I still wash the dishes in exchange for a place to sleep?'

'Of course, you gotta earn your keep here.'

So Dalziel walked himself into the back and went out and filled the bucket with some water.

Though this time, before he started washing, he helped himself to whatever stew was boiling in the pot. He couldn't quite make out what it was tonight, but there was definitely a hint of yesterday's beef stew still in the mix. When he finished eating, he finally realized exactly how tired he was. His whole body was aching for rest. The morning of splitting logs and an afternoon full of reading had left his body and his mind screaming for sleep, but he still had to wash the towering pile of dishes. He forced himself to stand and wash the dishes. His actions were sluggish, and he could barely stay standing, but he had to wash those dishes. As jovial as a man Terry was, Dalziel had no doubt in his mind that if those dishes weren't washed, he'd be sleeping in the street.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, they were finally clean. He was about to head back to the stable and collapse in his loft when Tallara walked in. She looked a little flushed and she walked over to Dalziel. Biting her lip and looking at the floor, she said, 'About what Innkeeper Terry said... It is true, you know? I just met you yesterday, and we've only exchanged a few words, but after I saw you fall yesterday, I couldn't stop thinking about you. I mean, you're covered in scars and I'm sure you have an interesting story. I just want to know more of who you are.'

Dalziel was at a loss for words. Was this because he had accidentally brushed her arm while falling yesterday? Could this be the same reason for why he felt a connection to Victor? He had no way to be certain and he was determined to find out who he was and exactly what his power

meant, but all that would have to come later. Right now he had to deal with the situation in front of him. He was unsure of what to say, a million thoughts were pouring through his head. He had no experience with girls and all he could utter was 'Thanks.'

Even so, that seemed to be enough. Tallara's face instantly lit up and huge smile spread across her face. 'Oh that's such a relief! I've never done or said anything like that. It's so nerve-wracking. Anyways, you look really tired, must've had a pretty exhausting day, huh?'

Dalziel could only nod his head in agreement. His eyelids were already starting to droop as he just thought about lying down; right now even the hard wooden loft and the itchy hay would be welcome. 'Well, I'll let you get some rest, but we definitely have to talk tomorrow, okay?'

'Yes'm,' Dalziel muttered before he trudged out to the stable and gratefully collapsed onto his hay loft.

Months passed and Dalziel grew accustomed to his new daily life. His days were spent between the smith and the library. Back and forth depending on which days Master Northrop wanted him in. Some days he even spent the whole day at the smith as necessary. His arms had gained considerable strength with each passing day at the smithy. When he was not manning the bellows for Northrop, he was buried in the library searching for clues to his past. He had made little progress in his research and was beginning to lose hope that he would ever find out who he was and where he came from.

In addition to his seemingly fruitless search, news of the Great War was growing grimmer in the Southern Kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom was slowly gaining ground on the South. When Dalziel had first entered Candar, the front lines were a good two-hundred miles north, almost a full week's travel for an army, but now, the front lines were a mere twenty-five miles away.

Despite all the feelings of hopelessness in Dalziel's new life, one thing only kept getting better. He was getting to know Tallara better. Every evening after he got back from his day's excursion,

he could always come back to the inn and look forward to chatting with her. He learned about her past. How she had grown up in Candar, but her father had gone to die in the war when she was thirteen. How her mother had been forced to serve a Lord because she had no sons. Fortunately for Tallara, her father had been good friends with Innkeeper Terry and he had agreed to look over her. That was how she had come to be a waitress at the Golden Goblet. It was a sad story, but Dalziel could relate. He also shared his story with her, but he did not share about his ability. It was the only secret that he kept from her because he was not quite that comfortable around her yet. He definitely did enjoy spending time with her, flirting back and forth and learning more about her, but it was more wishful thinking on his part. How could a scar-ridden orphan ever dream of being with a beautiful woman like Tallara? But the signs were there. Every evening when he walked in the front door, Tallara would cheerfully greet him with a smile and occasionally a quick hug.

He spent many afternoons daydreaming about different scenarios of how his life would be if he did end up with Tallara. The thought of having a normal life was an enticing thought for Dalziel. He had spent so much of his life clearly labeled as different. He could take full time apprenticeship with Master Northrop and eventually become a master himself and take over. He and Tallara would have a comfortable life.

Then one afternoon, Dalziel sat half-daydreaming half-researching in the library, mindlessly flipping through the pages, when suddenly there it sat, the exact same crest as the one on his handkerchief, staring at him in the middle of the page. Dalziel fumbled into his pocket, hands shaking with excitement, and pulled out his beloved handkerchief. He placed it on the page adjacent to the picture. He now saw the crest in its full glory; instead of a faded grey, the full golden crest of his family lay beaming up at him, the intricate twists and bends of the leaves astounded him. He had finally found his family. He had found the key to his past!

“The Medicaeus Family” the book listed. Dalziel’s eyes opened even wider. He had chosen the correct name for himself. With a smile slowly creeping its way across his amazed face, he read on. “The Medicaeus were a small family of great power that kept mostly to themselves.

Everyone in this family had the power to transfer injuries from someone else onto themselves through direct skin contact. They were a well-respected family and often took upon themselves life-threatening injuries to save those a doctor could not. In 1186 their family complex burned down, killing all remaining members of the Medicaeus family. No existing members are known to have survived.”

The swing of emotions hit Dalziel hard. He was the last existing member of his family.

‘Or am I?’ he thought. ‘I survived the fire. Someone else could have survived as well.’

But had that been the case, why had he been brought to the orphanage? If there were any surviving members, why hadn’t they found him? Why didn’t they end up at the same orphanage? The devastating truth of this realization sunk Dalziel deeper into despair. He had no hope left of meeting any distant relatives and finding out what kind of people his parents were.

Dalziel looked at the burn scar on his left hand. Tracing the outline of the scar tissue, a tear slowly welled up in the corner of his eye. Blinking the tears back, he smiled grimly.

‘At least now I know where this scar is from.’

His thoughts were violently interrupted. Bells were chiming outside and as he went outside to look, the whole city seemed to be in chaos. People were running everywhere. The normally orderly streets were now strewn with people scurrying every which way, quickly trying to get to where they had to be. Women and children were running into buildings and all the men were running towards the corners of the city. It had finally happened. The war had reach Candar.

Dalziel knew he was obligated to also take part in the defense of the city, but he was reluctant to throw his life away. He had just found out who he was and where he came from and now he had

to do the thing he hated the most? It wasn't that he didn't know how to handle himself in a battle. He did, but he had no desire to fight. Regardless of his wants, he did, however, feel a sense of duty to help protect the city that he could now call his own. The months he had spent living in Candar had grown on him. He recognized many faces as he walked the streets and he would often roam around and enjoy being just another normal citizen. So he slowly made his way into the stream of men making their way to the southwest corner of the city.

He grabbed the supplies that were handed to him and donned the armor. He had not touched a sword since his days at the orphanage, but his arms were definitely much stronger than before. He remembered swords being much heavier, but thought nothing of it as he rushed out to the barricades around the city. He could see the cloud of smoke rising from the north as the northern army approached. Stroking his scarred forehead, he felt the adrenaline beginning to course through his veins as he stood waiting in anticipation.

The northern forces appeared on the horizon. The two armies gathered, staring each other down until finally, the Northern forces let out a fearsome cry and started charging. Dalziel had never been in real combat before and the battle raging around him was chaotic. Men were falling left and right, and the smell of freshly spilled blood and sweat was strong in the air. Dalziel fearlessly fought and stood his ground, parrying blows left and right. He was fighting back to defend Candar, but more importantly, himself. But then, something hit him hard in the back of his head and he blacked out.

When he awoke, the battle was over. Candar had been successfully defended. He stood up, holding his head as a sharp stabbing pain emanated from where he had been struck. He surveyed the destruction that was the battlefield. The stench of death lay surrounded him. Freshly spilt blood covered the ground and made mud with the dirt. He felt his stomach rumbling and he bent over and vomited. Scattered around the battlefield were some healers that had

been brought out from the city to treat the wounded. Dalziel started to head back into the city, but he was stopped when a body from the ground grabbed hold of his ankle. Looking down at the man who had grabbed him, he saw that there was a sword protruding out of his stomach. It ran all the way through the body and the man was sure to die a long, painful death.

Dalziel bent down, propped the man up, and removed his helmet. To his dismay, there staring back at him with eyes full of pain and now fear was Victor. What had once been pity, now turned into a fierce rage. All the memories of pain that had haunted him from the orphanage returned to him. All the scars that were from this man that now lay dying on the ground covered his body.

Dalziel had never expected to see Victor again, and now that he was standing before him, Dalziel didn't know what to do.

Part of him wanted to just leave him there to die a slow painful death, to feel the pain that he had inflicted on Dalziel all those years, but another part of him hated violence and would not want someone to go through the pain that he had endured. He had to do something, but what? Then as if a weight had been dropped on his chest, it hit him. This was something that only he could do. He could save Victor. He and only he could take the injury upon himself and save Victor's life.

He thought of Tallara, and the tears she would shed over his death, of Innkeeper Terry, who was the closest to a father as he had ever had, and of Smith Northrop, who had grown reliant on the extra set of hands to help. What would they do without him? Was he willing to give up his hope and dreams of being an average citizen of Candar? But at the same time, he thought of Victor. What had he done in his life? Had he found the glory that he sought? Would he ever be able to let go of his hatred, his thirst for vengeance? Would anyone in Malovia be able to? That's what the Great War was all about. No one was willing to sacrifice to help end the war. Only Saint Alcor had been able to do such a thing. Who else was willing to spend themselves so that

others would hopefully see the light and stop fighting?

Dalziel knew it was a small action that only this one man would witness, but he had to start somewhere. Someone had to end the cycle of hatred with forgiveness, with love. He slowly knelt down beside Victor. Took off his gloves and said to Victor, whose eyes were wide in amazement, 'Don't forget what I'm doing here for you. I am Dalziel of the Medicaeus family. You carry on what I am starting here. End the Great War and let both our names make history. Tell my story.' And with that Dalziel pressed his hand against Victor's forehead.