

ANDREW PETERSON

EDITOR

WINGFEATHER TALES

SNEAK
PEEK



SAMPLE
ONLY

UNCORRECTED
PROOF

SEVEN THRILLING STORIES
FROM THE WORLD OF AERWIAR

THIS BOOK IS
IN THE CARE OF

WINGFEATHER TALES

Edited by

ANDREW PETERSON



WATERBROOK

WINGFEATHER TALES

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

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*This book is lovingly dedicated to
Kenny Woodhull and his family.*

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Foreword

Are you going to write more Wingfeather books?”

“I certainly hope so” is my typical answer.

But if you’re asking whether I’ll write about what happened *after* the epilogue of *The Warden and the Wolf King*, the answer is a definite no. The canon is closed. I have my reasons, some of which are literary and some of which are theological, and they boil down to this: whatever hope or longing might have woken in you when you finished the book is far better than anything I might have written. If, however, you’re asking if there will be more stories in Aerwiar, then the book you hold in your hands is the answer.

It took about ten years to write the four books of the Wingfeather Saga. I grieved when it was over and not just because of the bittersweet ending. I grieved because I came to love the characters and knew them intimately—and also because the world of Aerwiar had become a pleasant place for my mind to wander. Taking a cue from Orson Scott Card’s helpful book *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, I spent a lot of time early on building the world—which is sort of like spreading compost in a garden, treating the soil where the story will grow. If the ground is fertile, then the characters will have strong roots. The tale itself will be more robust; its fruit will have deeper color, and its leaves a wider and wilder spread. No one did this better than J. R. R. Tolkien (and I doubt anyone ever will). Half the reason we read and reread the Lord of the Rings series is thanks to the vividness of Middle-earth. It reads like history, and the feeling that it all might have actually happened is part of the delight. Tolkien believed that the building of imaginary worlds is one of our highest callings as image-bearing children of God, and he bore that image well.

So I started with a map. I drew the coastlines and then let my imagination run wild, naming continents, rivers, oceans, mountain ranges, towns, forests, and plains. I felt like I was twelve again. Then I started to wonder

what sorts of creatures might inhabit those places, which of course led to toothy cows and sea dragons and thwaps. Then I realized that if Janner were to buy a sugarberry bun at the Dragon Day Festival, then he'd have to pay with *something*. Gold? Jewels? Coins? And if he used coins, then that meant there was a mint somewhere, and it also meant that the coin probably bore someone's likeness. Whose? A governor's? A king's? And if there were bad guys named Fangs, then where did they come from? What did they want? If the villain is named Gnag the Nameless, then why? (I had to sit on the answer to that question for almost a decade before I had the immense satisfaction of revealing it.) World building isn't just part of the fun (and it *is* fun); it's crucial to writing fantasy. One of the surest ways for a tale to run out of steam is to skimp on the setting. When book four was complete, I knew I wasn't finished with Aerwiar because there were castle ruins and cities and jungles full of trolls that I hadn't yet explored. Young Safiki, for example, in my story "The Prince of Yorsha Doon" (illustrated by the great Cory Godbey, Nicholas Kole, and Hein Zaayman), gave me a firsthand tour of a city that I ached to visit while writing the saga but never quite reached. There are more ideas knocking around that I hope to write about when I get the time. The garden, after all, is already fertilized, and all these unexpected seeds keep sprouting.

So when my brother had the idea for a volume of Wingfeather short stories by some of the authors in the Rabbit Room community, I had no idea it would lead to a book this expansive or varied. I expected a few fun little stories and worried it wouldn't be long enough. I'm so glad I was wrong.

The first tale I read in this collection was by Jennifer Trafton, author of *Henry and the Chalk Dragon* and *The Rise and Fall of Mount Majestic*. One of the best compliments I can pay Jennifer came by way of my daughter. When we finished reading George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*, little Skye said, "He writes like Aunt Jennifer." Her writing is full of whimsy and warmth, and there are sentences and words in her story "The Wooing of Sophelia Stupe" that crackle like sparklers on the Fourth of July. (*Besqueebled* comes to mind.) Her tale features an illustration by one of the finest artists in the world, the great John Hendrix, whose work you can see in

everything from *Sports Illustrated* to *Paste* to *Books and Culture*, to his own books, such as *Drawing Is Magic* and *Miracle Man*.

Next came A. S. “Pete” Peterson’s epic and heart-wrenching “From the Depths of the Dragon King,” in which we see what it was like for a younger Podo Helmer to actually hunt a sea dragon. *Epic* and *heart-wrenching*, come to think of it, are two adjectives that pretty well sum up what I love about Pete’s Revolutionary War novels *The Fiddler’s Gun* and *Fiddler’s Green*, as well as his stage play *The Battle of Franklin*. Not only is Pete a former US Marine, but he also spent quite a bit of time on a ship in the Adriatic Sea, has built boats, and can even now be found sailing with his wife from time to time. It’s no surprise that he wanted to write about a pirate who hunts sea dragons. Illustrator Doug TenNapel, whom we have to thank for Earthworm Jim and graphic novels *Cardboard* and *Ghostopolis*, contributed an epic and heart-wrenching (of course) illustration of a dragon hunt.

N. D. Wilson, storyteller *extraordinaire*, took time out of his crazy writing and filmmaking schedule to write yet another story about young Podo Helmer—and it’s a story that helps explain Ollister Pembrick’s somewhat mysterious entry in *Creaturepedia* about his encounter with a raggant. If you’ve never heard of a raggant, it’s time you read Wilson’s wonderful 100 Cupboards series. Joe Sutphin, whose illustrations in *The Warden and the Wolf King* elevated and inspired my own writing of that book, offered up two timeless illustrations for this story. You’ll recognize Sutphin’s work from *Dr. Critchlore’s School for Minions* by Sheila Grau and *Word of Mouse* by James Patterson.

As you may know, I grew up on comics. I loved them so much, in fact, that I drew them constantly and even intended to pursue a career as a Batman penciller—before I realized two things: first, I wasn’t a very good penciller, and second, that I loved music more. All these years later, it was such a joy to dip my toe in that medium to write the script for the first-ever Wingfeather comic: *Shadowblade and the Florid Sword*. But as they say in Dugtown, “A script a comic doth not make.” Enter Jay Myers, a wonderful artist who showed up at one of my concerts years ago and slipped an original drawing

of his into my green room. I became an instant fan. He worked for months on this comic, and you can tell by the plethora of Easter eggs (there's a toothy cow weather vane, for goodness' sake!) that he knows Aerwiar well, and he did an amazing job of showing us what life for Maraly and Gammon was like in Skree after the war.

My dear friend Jonathan Rogers—author of the Wilderking Trilogy; *The Charlatan's Boy*; and my personal favorite, Flannery O'Connor biography *The Terrible Speed of Mercy*; along with a host of other books—put on his comedic bard hat and wrote “The Ballad of Lanric and Rube,” which you may remember from a footnote in *On the Edge of the Dark Sea of Darkness*. The poem is illustrated by Justin Gerard, one of the finest fantasy artists in the world.

Douglas Kaine McKelvey is a man of mystery. He's the author of *The Angel Knew Papa and the Dog* and *The Wishes of the Fish King*, two hauntingly beautiful books for families. He (along with artist Jonathan Richter) created the utterly unique mash-up of art and poetic captioning called *Subjects with Objects*, and he wrote a Rabbit Room Press book of everyday liturgies called *Every Moment Holy*. So when he agreed to write one of these short stories, I knew it would be prosaic and meaningful. I had no idea (and neither did he) that “The Places Beyond the Maps” would be a novella that's almost as long as the first *Wingfeather* book. I marveled at Doug's towering prose, his deft use of archaic words, and his vast imagination, sensing as I read that he was exploring not just Aerwiar but some deep and broken part of his own heart. Then came Aedan Peterson's gritty and mournful illustrations—his finest work yet, in my humble opinion. Aedan was fourteen or fifteen when he drew most of the beasts in *Pembrick's Creaturepedia*, and it's apparent with these illustrations that he's on his way to becoming a master of his craft.

By the time I read all five of these stories, I realized that *Wingfeather Tales* was more than just a nostalgic romp through Aerwiar. This was a legitimate collection, the imaginative and heartfelt expression of a group of excellent writers and illustrators, as much a part of the mythos of the *Wingfeather* world as anything I had written.

I wish I could say that you'll enjoy reading these as much as I did, but that wouldn't be true. No one else on earth will experience these stories the way I did, and here's why: Imagine building a big, rambling mansion from the ground up. Imagine drawing up the architectural plans, overseeing the construction, living in it for years and years, giving people regular tours of every nook and cranny. Now imagine inviting a group of writers and illustrators over for dinner. One at a time, they politely take your hand and lead you down hallways you didn't know existed. They open magic doors that lead to secret passages that lead to cavernous chambers or hidden cellars or castle towers that you would have sworn weren't there before. These friends give you the gift of their own magic—magic that cost them a great deal of time and creative energy—and they turn the house you built into an enchanted palace. As I read these stories, *Aerwiar* became more real, more mysterious, more dangerous, and more beautiful than I ever would have dreamed. And that is a rare gift.

So it is with my deepest gratitude to you, Jennifer, John, Pete, Doug, Nate, Joe, Douglas, Aedan, Jonathan, Justin, Nicholas, Hein, and Cory—and to you, dear readers—that I beckon you down this dusty hallway, remove a portrait of an oddly beautiful woman who might have once been a tree, and reveal a secret door on which is written the words *Wingfeather Tales*. To open it, all you have to do is turn the page.

Andrew Peterson

The Prince of Yorsha Doon

Written by Andrew Peterson

*Illustrations by Cory Godbey, Nicholas Kole,
and Hein Zaayman*

South of the Killridge Mountains, west of the Chasm, north of the Jungles of Plontst, and east of the Dark Sea of Darkness lay the broad and blighted wasteland of white stone and red sand called the Woes of Shreve. The Woes were lethal. Humans couldn't survive there because the blistering sunlight would sizzle their skin and bake their bones in a matter of minutes—none, that is, except those who managed to slather themselves with bloodrock dye, which was very expensive and very hard to come by. Hard to come by, unless of course you owned one of the few bloodrock mines that were well guarded by all manner of deadly things like assassins and mad Fangs (who survived the war) and packs of slider vipes whose needle teeth could skin a tahala whole in the time one could say, “Oh my, I'm all out of bloodrock dye and we're hours from shelter. It was nice knowing you.”

But there was no need to venture into the Woes of Shreve if you had the sense enough to live in Yorsha Doon. West of the Woes, on the edge of the Dark Sea of Darkness, the sprawling city of Yorsha Doon adorned the desert with bright spires and the blues and greens and purples of flags fluttering and robes billowing and turbans bobbing along the thousands of narrow streets. *Butaar* music played, tahalum gruttled, merchants shouted, and children laughed in the streets, while in the nearby maze of piers, hundreds of ships creaked as waves slapped hulls and gullbirds squawked and eels shrieked. Historian and basket critic Hodar von Voodicum described Yorsha Doon

as “that chaotically exquisite collision of the Doonlands.”¹ It was hot and sandy, but close as it was to the sea, no bloodrock was needed there, and so the city was quite safe. Safe, that is, except for the clandestine guilds of thieves and assassins, the constant crush of traffic, the danger of being trampled by a tahala or lost in the labyrinth of passages and alleyways and high rope bridges slung between windows. A dagger, a steady hand, and a quick eye were quite useful in Yorsha Doon, though it must be said that not every one of the millions of people, trolls, and occasional ridgerunners was a wicked thief—some of the thieves were, in fact, quite friendly.

There in the heart of Yorsha Doon, somewhere south of Prince Majah’s palace, a boy in black leggings and a billowy blue patchwork shirt climbed barefoot through the second story window of a pleasant white building and woke a wrinkled old woman from her midday nap.

“It’s me,” whispered the boy.

“Safiki,” the old woman said as she stirred. “Where have you been?”

The boy glanced out the window at the dusty city and the spires of the palace. He wouldn’t know where to begin, and he didn’t want to worry her. “All over,” he said, grateful that today she remembered who he was. Some days she greeted him as a total stranger.

“You would tell your grandmother if you were in trouble, wouldn’t you?” She lifted her trembling hand and touched his face. Her white eyes looked in his direction, but he knew they couldn’t see a thing. “Have you bathed?”

“Yes, *Mamada*,” he said. What he didn’t say was that he’d done so four days ago and only because he had been hiding from the port warden. *Surely*, he thought, *leaping from the deck of a ship and swimming under the pier with my pockets stuffed with plumyums counted as bathing*. He had at least entertained a passing thought about his grandmother’s insistence on cleanliness after he had climbed out of the sea and spread out on the roof of the warden’s *badaan*, listening to the gullbirds and the shouts of the shipmates as

1. *Why the Sorry Weave? A Musing of Basketry*, Hodar von Voodicum (Ban Rugan, Green Hollows: Laxfirth Press, 3/245).

they searched hopelessly for him among the many ships. The plumyums had been delicious. “That reminds me,” Safiki said. “I have something for you.”

His grandmother grinned, revealing her single tooth and her wonderful rumple of tanned wrinkles made deep and soft after years of smiling.

“I brought you this.” He removed a plumyum from one of the folds in his shirt and offered it to her with a bow of his head.

“Safiki, my dear one, you are so kind to your mamada!” She took the fruit and smelled it rapturously. “These *umamri* only feed me soup,” she grumbled with a glance in the direction of the door. “What they don’t know is that I have the most fearsome tooth in all of Yorsha Doon.” She winked a blind eye at Safiki and reached into her mouth, wrenching the old yellow tooth to and fro a few times before removing it altogether with a crunch that made the boy wince even as he stifled a laugh. She wiped the false tooth on her sheets and held it up to Safiki as if he had never seen it before. The bottom end of the tooth had been ground to a point, and its edge was sharpened like a blade. “Ha!” she crowed, and then she clapped a hand over her mouth and lowered her voice to a whisper. “Your mamada could eat a flank of charred tahala rump if she wanted!”

“Then next time I will hide a whole rump of tahala in my shirt.” Safiki laughed as he sat on the edge of the bed and watched her arthritic hands make deft work of the plumyum, slicing it into tiny pieces with the tooth and popping them into her mouth. “Will one be enough?”

“Yes, my boy.” She sucked noisily on the fruity chunks. “Whatever you bring me is always enough.”

“The *umamri* are treating you well?”

“Well enough,” she said between slurps. “They are good people. But they don’t give me plumyums.” She finished eating, replaced her tooth, folded her hands, and faced him as if she could study his features.

Safiki adjusted her pillow and stood to leave.

“What will happen to you, my boy?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Why don’t you stay here? The *umamri* will give you a home.”

Safiki sighed. "You know what I'll say."

"That you don't want to spend your life in a robe, caring for old women like me?"

"I care for you, Mamada. But I would go crazy here. All they do is sing and read. My *papada* was the same. You said so."

"Ah, your *papada* was a fool."

"But you loved him."

"I loved a fool." Her face softened and she looked with unseeing eyes out the window toward the spires of Yorsha Doon. "A wonderful old fool. All he did was talk about everywhere else. The Killridge Mountains, the troll kingdoms, the Chasm. He never stood still long enough to see the beauty under his boots." She closed her eyes and flexed her fingers. Safiki's heart swelled for her. How many sarongs, how many turbans, how many draperies and quilts and pillow fringes had she fashioned with those hands—how many tunics and leggings for Safiki?—while her wonderful fool of a husband peddled them day after day at the markets, always returning home with rumors of the faraway, always with another map or sea chart? Now, her memory was fading and her sight was gone. She was too feeble to work, her husband was dead, and Safiki's parents were dead—and all she had left was this boy who only came to see her when the noise of his conscience was too loud to bear.

"Mamada, will you tell me about my parents?"

She worked her jaw and squinted her eyes for a moment, then shook her head. "I'm sorry, dear boy. I have tried and tried to remember. But my mind is like a broken mirror. I cannot see their faces anymore. Sometimes I dream that I remember who they were, what they were like, how they died, but when I wake, the memories vanish. I was already very old when you were born, and that part of my memory is gone. That is why the *umamri* must care for me."

She took his hand, and they sat for a while without speaking. The silence was broken by the sound of voices on the other side of the door.

"Go!" said the old woman, shooing him away and brushing the sheets

to be sure there were no remnants of the plumyum. “And be *safe*, Safiki. Find a home. Maker knows I won’t always be here to love you.”

Safiki hopped to the window and perched on the sill.

“I’ll be back soon, Mamada,” he said.

The door opened. A man and woman in white robes entered with a pitcher of water and a bowl of soup, and with a flutter of the drapes, the boy was gone.

Safiki dropped from the sill to a ledge, edged along it to the end of the white-stone building, then dropped two stories and landed on a canvas awning. He grabbed the supporting pole and spun down to the ground just as a tahala pulling a cart lumbered past. He had done it a hundred times before, but he was beginning to think he was getting too big for such acrobatics. In the last few months, he had found himself thinking twice before making leaps that used to come easily. He didn’t want to get any bigger. Half the fun of swiping fruit and bread and whatever else he could lay his hands on was the thrill of scrambling up the sides of buildings or leaping from one wagon to another or creeping under the tables at the market without being seen. But he couldn’t think about that now. Now he had to think about food. He had just given his grandmother his last plumyum, and his stomach was already muttering.

“Safiki,” said a familiar voice.

The boy dusted off his knees and turned to face the entrance of the umamri house. A man stood in the doorway in a white robe. His face was leathery but kind and clean shaven, and his dark eyes watched the boy with amusement.

“How is she?”

Safiki took a step backward. “I think she is doing well, *umam* Falam.”

“Did she like the fruit?”

Safiki decided a lie would be pointless. “Yes, *salah*. She’s getting tired of soup.” He stepped out of the way as a tahala cart rumbled between them, followed by a short woman herding an annoyance of gambloats.

“She worries about you,” said the man as the bleating faded.

“She has no need to worry. And neither do you, salah.”

“Why don’t you stay here with us? We don’t eat like princes, but we eat. Every man needs a home.”

“You forget,” Safiki said, standing up straight and spreading his arms, “I am not yet a man. And Yorsha Doon is my home. All of it.”

Falam smiled, but there was sadness in his eyes. “You will be a man before you know it. I am here if you need me, Safiki. Maker keep you.”

“And you,” Safiki shouted over his shoulder as he slipped into an alley and ran, relishing the wild freedom of the city. He wound through passageways and hopped over henbirds, pausing only to swipe an apple from a passing cart. Ignoring the shouts of the fruit merchant behind him, he ducked under a lumbering cart, dashed into an alley, climbed the rocky face of an old sandstone building, and huddled in the shade of the roof ledge to catch his breath and munch the apple. When he was finished eating—core and seeds and stem—he shielded his eyes and looked out over the rooftops of the city. The sun was dipping toward the glittering sea in the west, and the white-stone buildings had begun to deepen to a buttery yellow.

This was when he loved Yorsha Doon the best, when the haze of the heat faded and the bustle of the streets gradually lazed into the living silence of the sleeping city, like some great dozing sea dragon on whose back Safiki would climb all night. By sundown there would be no more merchants and therefore no food to swipe so easily, but neither would there be the constant danger of kidnapping, of port wardens, of angry merchants ready to stab the hands of swipers like Safiki. Under the cover of night, he could walk the streets in safety until he found a district he had never haunted. There he would do as he had always done. He would find a secluded corner on a *havala* roof or a forgotten alleyway or a pile of splintered boatwood and would make a nest until he sensed it was time to move on—which was usually when people began to recognize him. Safiki liked to be invisible. He liked to be anonymous. As soon as he lost his anonymity, he lost his freedom. He could be days or weeks in one place, and then he would migrate. The city was large enough that he figured he could live the rest of his life this way and never run out of

nests or food and never need a soul other than himself. No one but his grandmother and a few of the *umamri* knew his name. He had no friends. He saw no need for them. As soon as you had friends, he reasoned, things got complicated—you had to make hard choices, you had to find food for more than just yourself, and, worst of all, you were *visible*. Safiki had his grandmother, and that was enough.

Safiki's eyes grew heavy, as they usually did before sundown, and he surveyed the rooftop to be sure he was safe and alone. *Alone*, he thought, *is safe*. He stretched out in the lengthening shade of one of the distant palace spires, locked his fingers behind his head, and drifted into dreams.

When he woke, the streets of Yorsha Doon were fast asleep.

Safiki sat up and peered over the edge of the roof. The city lay blue and cool under a gibbous moon and a spray of stars—like a reflection of the lights of the million lanterns glowing in the city's windows. Faint clouds feathered the east where the southern edge of the Killridge Mountains descended for fathoms into the mystery of the Chasm. The mountains were a jagged but indistinct blackness on the horizon, like the memory of a bad dream. Safiki heard the echo of someone mumbling drunkenly to himself in the streets below, probably a husband who had lingered too long at the *bibery* after his day's work. The palace towers to the north stabbed at the moon, and along the palace wall he spied the turbaned silhouettes of the guards as they moved to and fro, their spear tips glinting in the torchlight.

What were they guarding? Safiki wondered, as he often did. The palace was the heart of the city, and it was a mystery. No one was ever allowed in. No one was certain how Prince Majah and his court ate because the gates had never been raised as far as Safiki knew. It was rumored that there were secret passages, entrances that had been kept hidden for epochs, and for a thousand years the kings had gathered their treasure hordes and lived in splendor. If the gleaming spires that sprouted into the heavens beyond the wall were any indication, the treasure was vast. The prince was only ever seen from a great distance, standing on a balcony of the center spire and waving at the masses who gathered to glimpse him. Still, the city loved him. Whenever there was

a drought, the prince provided food by lowering it in baskets over the wall. Whenever there was an attack by the Symian Pirates, Prince Majah's warriors appeared in the streets as if from nowhere to fight back. The palace was a city within a city, and as long as the prince was safe, so was Yorsha Doon.

When Safiki was certain the way was clear, he hopped over the ledge, scrambled down the way he had come (past an open window where he heard a family's murmured conversation and smelled their dinner), and landed without a sound on the sandstone cobbles, his back to the wall. He looked to his left and right, and saw in both directions shadowy doorways, canvas awnings rolled up tight, and piles of tahala dung speckling the silent streets.

"Which way tonight, Maker?" he whispered with a glance at the stars.

"Right," a woman said, and Safiki almost jumped out of his shirt. Her voice had come from inside the house.

"I am telling you, Reela," said a man, "the shiptain made me stay until I was finished with every last rope." The man burped, and Safiki thought his words sounded a little slurred.

"Right," the woman repeated. "You say that every night, Damolek."

"Please believe me, my love," the man said with another burp, and the woman stomped up the stairs with the man stumbling after her.

"Right it is, then." Safiki smiled up at the stars. "I thank you for your direction, Maker."

He wandered along streets he didn't know, though he wasn't far from the district where his grandmother had raised him. Every turn brought more of the same, yet everything was different, like new verses to an old song. Ancient buildings that he could tell by the rugged stone at the foundations were as old as the city itself; newer buildings that stood as many as eight stories tall, made of stone so smooth and polished he could see his moonlit reflection when he passed; shacks built of driftwood and the planks of decommissioned ships. The carvings of stone faces, worn smooth and nearly featureless by hundreds of years of sandstorms, grimaced or grinned or looked on stoically from archways and pillars. Rope bridges spanned the

high windows where laundry swayed in the night breeze. After a while he came upon an empty square with a round stone well pool at the center and realized he was terribly thirsty.

Safiki stopped at the edge of the square and listened. Where there was water, there were usually people, and where there were people, there was danger. When he heard nothing, Safiki crept as silent as the moon to the pool, sat on the edge, and dipped his hands into the cool water. He drank with his eyes wide open, scanning the four corners of the square for movement.

He didn't think to look in the water itself.

A hand shot out and pulled him under. Safiki struggled, and though the assailant's hands weren't strong, they were quick enough to keep him busy. He sputtered and gasped and kicked until he was free, then jumped out of the pool and backed away, shaking the water from his eyes. All he saw was a shadow—a small shape, dripping and motionless, hiding under a ledge formed by the flat rim of the pool. Safiki knew better than to investigate. He turned to run.

“Wait!” the shadow said in a loud whisper.

Safiki took a few steps and stopped. “What do you want?”

“They're coming!”

“Who's coming?”

“The palace guard. And worse.”

“Why?”

“Shh! Listen!”

Safiki heard movement to the north and saw the glow of torchlight down one of the streets. It was getting brighter. Then he heard footsteps. He spun around and saw that down two of the other streets more torchlight approached. He thought about sprinting for the other street, the only dark one, but he doubted he would cross the open square before the nearest of the guard—or worse, whatever that meant—emerged. It didn't matter that he wasn't the one they were hunting. He would be chased, perhaps caught and interrogated—and likely thrown into a workhouse with the rest of the orphans too slow to survive on the streets. Safiki knew exactly how to hide

in a crowd, but now he felt exposed, so he slipped into the pool as quietly as he could and pressed himself against the side, his face just above the water, hoping he was as invisible as the well's other occupant had been.

"My name is Saana," the shadow whispered.

A girl? "Why are they after you?"

"I escaped the palace."

Safiki forgot he was hiding and whispered, too loudly, "The *palace*?" He had never spoken to anyone who had seen the inside. "What's in there? Is it as lovely as they say?"

"Yes. Well, it used to be. Before Roduin came."

"Roduin the Bloodbrute? From the Woes?"

"Keep your voice down!" Saana whispered.

It sounded as if the guards were in the square now, searching the perimeter. Torchlight illuminated the faces of the buildings, but the girl was still just a vague shadow on the opposite side of the pool. "Listen. I need to tell you this now, in case they catch me. A year ago, Roduin and his mercenaries found a way into the palace and captured Prince Majah."

"Why?"

"For the treasure. Roduin's hoarding it in one of his bloodrock mines somewhere in the Woes. The prince and his whole court have been in the dungeon ever since. My father is the kitchener, which is the only reason we're not in the dungeon too. Our family prepares the food."

"But what about all the palace guards? I see them on the wall every day."

"The *real* guards are in the dungeons. The prince's personal guard was killed. I'm telling you, the palace is overrun with Roduin's men. And his Fangs."

Safiki's stared at her. "You're lying."

"Why would I lie?"

Safiki couldn't see her face, but he could feel her eyes. The guards were getting closer.

This, Safiki thought, is why I like to be alone. As soon as you know someone's name, things get complicated.

“I can’t help you,” Safiki said. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t even know what to do.”

“You can hide me. You can help me find someone who is brave enough to do something.”

Safiki pretended he didn’t hear her. The voices of the guards drew ever nearer until they stood in a circle around the pool. He could see, just above where Saana hid, the bearded faces of the guards glowing in the torchlight—and for the first time he could see her. Her eyes were wide with panic, and her dark hair clung to her cheeks. She was trembling. Then it occurred to Safiki that if he could see the girl by the glow of the torches, then she could see him—and so could the guards. He tried not to move. He tried not to breathe. All the guards had to do was look in the right place.

“Nothing?” asked a man with a long black beard. The guards shifted their weight and shook their heads. The man with the beard spat into the fountain. “Do you smell anything, dog?”

Just above Safiki’s head a rasping voice said, “She passed this way.” There was a sniffing sound, followed by a ragged cough. “Not long ago.”

Safiki sensed with dread the slow realization that was dawning on the guards, which was dawning on him too: the girl was about to be caught. He wondered for a wild moment if he should do something to help her, but his instinct for survival triumphed, and he merely pressed himself hard against the wet stone of the well and prayed that he wouldn’t be seen. Then the awful silence was broken by an even more awful growl. Something leaped into the pool. In the explosion of water and screams, Safiki saw a Grey Fang, its hairy tail whipping the surface as it wrenched the girl from her hiding place and lifted her by one leg. She flailed and screamed as the wolf bared its long yellow teeth in her face, and Safiki thought for a horrible moment that it would gobble her up. But the leader of the guard cracked a whip, and the Fang whimpered, tucked its tail between its legs, and climbed out of the pool. Safiki had seen Fangs before but never up close. This beast was as wretched as a mangy dog, with pale and splotchy skin glistening where there was no fur, and its ribs heaved with each of its ragged breaths. It handed

Saana to one of the guards and slunk away. She no longer struggled but merely wept as they carried her off. Just before she was borne out of sight, her eyes met Safiki's.

It was a look that would haunt him for weeks.



The next day Safiki found an abandoned alleyway near the eastern edge of the city and spent hours constructing a cozy nest out of boat planks and crate wood, taking great care to make it look like a pile of trash on the outside while the inside was clean and comfortable. He scavenged some old torn sheets from a trash pile behind a seamery and lined the floor and walls of the nest, thinking as he did so that his grandmother would be pleased.

He struggled to forget the girl. Every time he remembered the look on her face, it seemed to be less a look of terror and more a look of accusation, so he spent more time on the nest than he needed to, trying to distract himself from her (he refused to call her Saana) and her story. A part of him wished he were as forgetful as his grandmother so he could get on with his day of carefree swiping. Besides, how could he be sure she was telling the truth? He heard many things on the streets of Yorsha Doon and had never caught the slightest hint that the situation at the palace was anything but ordinary. He had seen the prince with his own eyes, waving from the distant turret. Nothing seemed amiss. The guards looked the same as they always did: sentries posted on the wall and companies of guards marching through the city to keep peace or to announce the prince's appearance from time to time. It seemed impossible that a year could pass with Roduin in control without anyone noticing.

But why would she lie?

In an effort to quiet his doubts, Safiki slipped out of his nest, inspected it from the outside to be sure it looked inconspicuous, then struck out into the city. He wandered aimlessly, sneaking food whenever he wanted it, exploring districts he'd never seen, riding secretly on the roof of tahala carts into

undiscovered markets and neighborhoods, creeping through deserted ruins. He was happy—except that he wasn't. He couldn't get the girl's name out of his mind. Saana. *You could help me*, she had said. Toward noon, without exactly meaning to, he found himself in a river of traffic at the foot of the palace wall. He told himself that since he was there anyway he might as well investigate. He crossed through the ever-moving crowd, stepped over fly-ridden piles of dung, clambered onto a wagon parked opposite the palace wall, and hopped up to a second-story window. He crouched there, looking over the heads of the crowd at the high wall and the sentries posted there, watching for several minutes and trying to imagine that the guards were impostors, that they were Roduin's cronies pretending to be guards. How would he even know the difference? They were all big men with big beards and black turbans. They all held spears. They all looked fierce as they scanned the crowds below. Something about it did, in fact, seem odd, but he couldn't imagine what.

"I'm a fool, just like Papada," he said under his breath. Then he climbed the rest of the way up the building to the roof where he could better see the palace itself. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Just more guards here and there on the turrets, all watching the streets below. "Roduin the Bloodbrute, in the palace," Safiki said, rolling his eyes. "I'm not the fool—*she* is, for thinking I'd believe such nonsense."

At last, Safiki's conscience cleared. The girl was crazy. Or she had stolen something important and probably deserved to be caught. Safiki shook the previous night's events from his mind, took a deep breath, and smiled. The city seemed normal again, a teeming cluster of endless adventure, just the way he liked it. He got a running start, jumped from one rooftop to another, then climbed a stony wall to a rope bridge that led to a balcony, which happened to open to a kitchen. He waited until the woman inside wasn't looking, and then he slipped in and silently snatched a fried plonkfish from a tray. He held it in his teeth as he climbed higher, stole across another high bridge, and lost himself among the rooftops till late afternoon.

He was happy to find that his nest was undisturbed. Safiki climbed into

the cool dark, lay on his back, and settled in to sleep until the night was deep. Just before he drifted away, he sat up. “They didn’t look bored,” he said aloud. The palace guards ordinarily looked like they’d rather be anywhere else, especially in the heat of the day. But these had all been scanning the crowd, as if looking for trouble. Safiki lay back down slowly and closed his eyes. It was too late, anyway. Even if the girl—*Saana*—had been telling the truth, there was nothing Safiki could do for her. *Saana*. He couldn’t singlehandedly invade the palace and rescue the prince or the girl—*Saana*—or anyone else. He was Safiki, which meant everything he did was singlehanded.

Saana.

It took a long time for Safiki to drift into a fitful sleep.

After several days of roaming Yorsha Doon, Safiki slept as well as he ever did, and he managed to forget everything about the girl.

Except her name.



Three weeks later, Safiki decided it was time to visit his grandmother again, and he didn’t want to show up at the umamri house without a gift. He peeked out of an alleyway into the harsh, dusty sunlight as a stenchulous grobble of trolls thudded through the chattering, churning mass of people. Doonlanders were glad for the trolls because they brought massive shipments of fruit and meat and the finest oversized cookware in all of Dang, but the trolls also brought with them an odor that lingered for hours—weeks if someone actually touched one, Maker forbid. The throngs held their noses or covered their faces with the bright cloth of their robes and waved with pained smiles as the trolls waded the thoroughfare.

When Safiki was sure that all those watering eyes were on the trolls, he slipped into an empty basket next to one of the finest food stalls he had ever seen. The table was heavy with strips of dried slider vipe meat, dried apples, dried plumyums, and dried herbs, all of which were carefully arranged into little mountains of deliciousness. The display was so appealing that Safiki

almost hated to swipe from it. His mouth watered as the market regained its pleasant bustle. Soon merchants were once again shouting prices at passersby and passersby were shouting at merchants as birds squawked and butaar music played and beasts grunted, and Safiki listened to it all, relishing the secrecy of his hiding place. Another moment of distraction for the merchant, and Safiki would be free to swipe as many delicacies for his grandmother as he could carry.

“Where did you say you were from?” asked the merchant. He had a perfectly curled mustache and wore a bright blue turban. Safiki couldn’t see the customer’s face through the cracks in the basket, but he could tell by his boots and breeches that this fellow was new to Yorsha Doon. “Forgive me, salah, where did you say you were from?”

“Ban Rona,” the customer answered with a nervous chuckle. Safiki’s curiosity overcame his prudence, and he shifted his weight and eased the wicker basket to one side to get a glimpse of the stranger’s face. It was useless. All he saw was a belly. But what a belly! No wonder the merchant was being so friendly.

“Ban Rona!” said the merchant. “You have come very far, salah. That is in the Green Hollows, no?”

“Indeed! In the words of Doyle the Funeralist, ‘It’s a long way from here to there.’ Have you been to the Hollows?”

Safiki had heard of the Green Hollows. They sold fruit, of course, but they also sold soil. Their ships arrived in the port from time to time, and the sacks of rich dark earth were always gone before the crew had even debarked. Someone made a lot of money on that dirt.

“No, salah,” the merchant said. “I have never seen the Green Hollows. My wife—Maker bless her with a thousand robes of meepish fur!—would never allow it. If I am late for dinner by even seven beats of her heart, she refuses to feed me. Ban Rona, I am afraid, is a place only known to me in books.”

At the word “books,” the large man loosed an excited chortle that sounded like a tahala retching on a nettle. “But what a magnificent way to

know a place! I have never set foot in the Jungles of Plontst, but Grillby's most excellent *Somewhat Approximate Troll Atlas* fills me with the most exquisite jiggles. I daresay that I'd prefer to visit Plontst from my armchair at the Great Library with the aid of Grillby's volume than to sweat and bug-smack my way through the darkest jungle in Aerwiar." He added in a teacherly voice, "If I may quote my own incomplete history of the Wingfeather War, 'Reading books is neatest of all.'"

"Of course, of course," said the merchant with a wave of his hand. "What can I offer you from my humble stall, salah?"

"Goodness gravy," murmured the large stranger, and Safiki heard, over the racket of the crowds, the rumble of the man's stomach.

Safiki's sense of swifery told him that his moment was fast approaching. As soon as the fruit was handed over and the merchant was paid, he would turn to place the coins in his safe box, and Safiki's hand would slip out of the basket as quick as a whip and snatch a bellyful of food. The tips of his fingers tingled.

"I think I'd like one of everything," said the large man. "No, make that three. Three of everything."

The merchant gleefully gathered the items on the table. The large man hummed to himself, and Safiki saw his chubby hand reach down to the satchel at his side and flip open the cover. The musical sound of coins jingled from within, and the tingle in Safiki's fingers increased. *Perhaps there is a better prize to be had than a few plumyums*, he thought. The stranger clearly had no idea how treacherous the streets of Yorsha Doon were, and it would be an easy thing to swipe the satchel—assuming Safiki got to it before any of the other thieves did.

"And what brings you to Yorsha Doon, salah?" asked the merchant as he counted the items.

"I'm here to trade books with Prince Majah!" said the man in a loud whisper. "But you mustn't tell *anyone*. He's giving me his first edition of *Tales of the Battles of the Wars of the Woes of Shreve of Dang of Aerwiar* in

exchange for the only known copy of Amagri the Wise's famous recipe book, *Feasting in the Woes*."

Safiki's grin vanished.

He had never read a single book, but even he had heard of Amagri's *Feasting in the Woes*. Everyone had. It was more than just a collection of recipes—legend had it the book contained a secret map of the palace, including all the hidden passageways, escape routes, and long-lost treasure hordes. If it fell into the wrong hands (or the right ones, depending on how one saw it), the palace could be infiltrated.

Saana.

"But you mustn't tell a soul, my friend! The prince insisted on the utmost secrecy. His letter warned that the wrong chef would make a botchery of the meals therein!"

"Of course, salah!" the merchant said with barely concealed eagerness. "I would never tell a soul. That will be twenty *renn*, if you please."

As the stranger rummaged in his satchel, Safiki glimpsed the book. The leather cover was ornate and bejeweled, and in flowing *renari* script were the words "Feasting in the Woes." Whoever this man was, he had no business traveling to Yorsha Doon alone with such a treasure. Then Safiki heard the familiar whisper of a dagger drawn from its sheath and watched with mounting horror as the merchant stepped casually from behind his table, concealing the blade beneath the sack of food.

"Let me help you," said the merchant kindly.

"Ah! Thank you, friend," said the old man, with an obliviousness that Safiki found infuriating. Half of him wanted to stay hidden, but the other half couldn't get the girl out of his head—the girl and the terrible feeling in his gut when he had stood by and watched as she was snatched up by the Grey Fang.

Before he could stop himself, Safiki burst from the basket and shouted, "Stop!"

The stranger yelped and jumped so violently that several *renn* coins

slipped from his fingers and clinked onto the sandstone cobbles. His face was large and kind, and a swath of white hair peeked out from a red turban that was soaked with sweat. His spectacles were fogged and had slipped to the end of his nose.

“Why, hello there, young man,” he said with a smile, turning his back to the merchant. “My name is Oskar.”

Just as the merchant thrust the dagger, the old man bent over to retrieve the coins. The knife stabbed the air and Oskar’s rump bumped the table, spilling several of the dried plummyums to the ground. The merchant stepped forward for another jab, but he stepped on the fruit and wheeled his arms before thudding to the ground. The knife clattered away as the old man, once again as oblivious as a digtoad, apologized to the merchant and straightened, holding the coins triumphantly in one hand.

“Come on, you fool!” shouted Safiki as he toppled out of the basket. He grabbed Oskar’s hand and tugged him away.

“Whatever is the matter?” Oskar said as he rubbed the condensation from his spectacles with the back of one hand.

“Run!” Safiki shouted as the merchant retrieved his dagger and spun around with a snarl.

Oskar’s wide eyes went from the knife to the merchant’s leering face to the satchel, then back to the knife, and at last he seemed to understand. He clutched the satchel to his chest and gasped. With a speed Safiki would have thought impossible, the old man turned and ran, shrieking through the crowd and knocking down people and carts and tables of wares. Safiki, dumbstruck by the man’s thundering velocity, slowly realized that the merchant’s sinister gaze had settled on him.

“You wretched little thief,” the man growled, apparently untroubled by the fact that he himself was a thief or was about to become one. “That book would have bought me a herd of tahalum!”

The merchant lunged, but Safiki rolled between his legs and raced after Oskar in the wake of his destruction. The old man’s turban had come undone and trailed behind him like a flag, which made him easy to follow.

The boy darted between people and under tahala legs and around trolls and over upturned crates until he at last was sprinting with Oskar's jelliful girth beside him.

"Do you know where you're going?" Safiki asked, panting.

"Away!" Oskar still clutched the satchel to his chest. "Away!"

Safiki had seen galloping tahalum, and he had seen racing trolls, but he had never seen anyone—or anything—so large move with such power. The old man's head didn't bob but remained more or less level with the ground, while the rest of him moved with dizzying speed. His meaty legs pumped up and down with uncanny agility; his magnificent belly sloshed in five different directions at once, slapping the tops of Oskar's knees one moment and folding itself momentarily over the satchel the next. His jowls were splotchy red and they trembled with each magnificent step, the way a bowl of soup might if someone were pounding the table with a hammer. But it was the face that delighted Safiki the most. Oskar's eyebrows were raised so high that they seemed to rest on the top of his pate, and his eyes, floating above the rattling spectacles, were open wide enough that Safiki could almost see the man's brains.

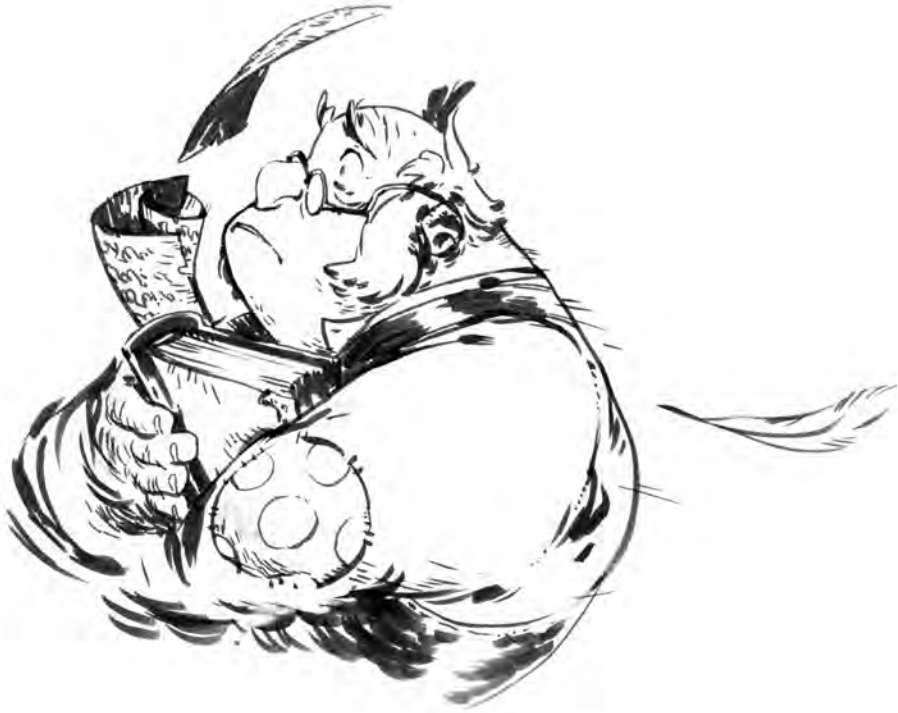
By now the cacophony of shouts behind them had warned the crowds ahead, so the center of the main market street was clear, and the people watched in confusion as the unlikely pair hurried by. "You're going to want to turn left at the next alleyway," Safiki said between breaths. The boy was fast, but even he was running out of air.

"Why?" Oskar shrieked.

"Because this . . . is a dead end," Safiki huffed. The dead end was actually a long way off, but Safiki needed a break. "And . . . that merchant . . . will have . . . gathered his friends . . . by now. We need . . . to lose him."

Without warning, Oskar veered left—nearly trampling the boy—and entered a narrow alley. He probably would have kept running for another five days if Safiki hadn't shouted, "Stop! For the Maker's sake, stop running!"

It took a full arrowshot for Oskar to slow himself down to a halt near an empty wagon. The old man doubled over and wheezed. Sweat cascaded



from every pore and speckled the dusty cobbles. Safiki found enough breath to laugh, and he paced the alleyway, shaking his head with wonder. “Who *are* you?”

“My name is Oskar N. Reteep,” he said, wheezing, “appreciator of the strange, neat, and/or the yummy.” He looked up at Safiki and smiled. “Also, an appreciator of friendly help when it’s needed.” He straightened and dabbed his glistening forehead with a handkerchief that was immediately soaked through. “In the words of Namulus Croddle-Norton in his seminal treatise on wagon sculptures, ‘Please don’t steal my book, young fellow. It doesn’t become you.’”

“Don’t worry,” Safiki said with a wave of his hands. “I only swipe things that no one will miss after a few hours. That thing is dangerous. But I won’t protest if you offer me a few renn.”

“I would be delighted, young man. On one condition.”

“What would you like?”

“I’d like to know your name. It’s hard to be your friend if I don’t know your name.”

“I don’t have friends, salah. Friends are as dangerous as that book.”

Oskar looked at the boy over his spectacles. “I know we just met, but I must say that you are greatly mistaken. I would likely be dead right now if not for your kindness. A friend is one of the Maker’s finest gifts.”

Safiki folded his arms. “Ah, but if we had never met, I would be eating plumyums in the sun right now, happy as a meep.”

“But instead, you have a friend.”

“No, instead I am out of breath and must avoid this market for many months because that merchant knows my face. Imagine how much worse it would be if he knew my name.”

“You’re a sharp lad. Names indeed have power. Where I come from that is widely known.” Oskar patted his belly and thought for a moment. “Then what if I swore to tell no one? After all, I’m leaving the Doonlands as soon as I get the book to the prince. Whom would I tell?”

Safiki paused. “You would tell no one?”

“I swear it. I only want you to see what it feels like to trust someone.”

The truth was, Safiki liked the old man and felt a strange inner compulsion to break his own rule. He looked up and down the alley, then back at the strange man. “Very well.” He bowed and said, “My name is Safiki.”

Oskar put a hand over his heart. “I am truly honored, Safiki, to make your acquaintance. I wonder if you might help me with just one more thing?”

Safiki sighed. Of course. There was always just one more thing. He was already annoyed with himself. “What is it?”

“I wonder if you would help me escape those men.”

Safiki spun around. The alleyway was blocked by seven men—quickly turning to ten and then twelve. They all held scimitars or daggers or clubs, and they all looked ready to use them. The merchant shouldered his way to the front and smiled wickedly while he curled his mustache. “Yes, Mufalu,” he said. “That is the one.”

“And you say he has the book?” asked the tallest of them in a deep voice.

His dark beard was braided, and he wore a black turban with a blue gulp-swallow feather pinned to the front.

“Would your cousin lie to you?”

Mufalu nodded and raised his sabre. The others did likewise, and the alleyway became a small forest of blades. “Stranger, if you want to leave Yorsha Doon alive,” Mufalu said, “drop the book and sail home.”

Safiki ducked behind Oskar. He had no intention of getting sliced into little pieces over a book—or a stranger, for that matter, even if he knew his name. Yet, even as he inched deeper into the alley, his mind raced to think of a way to help the old man. He felt bound to him somehow. The alley was littered with empty crates. All the doors—back entrances to shops and dwellings—were closed and probably locked. Above were plenty of windows, but all were shuttered. Their only hope lay beyond the deep end of the alley where a small archway led to a labyrinth of narrow streets called the Heshibal District.² It was possible for Safiki to escape, but it would require a great deal more agility than the big man had, however fast he could run.

Mufalu pointed his sabre at Oskar and stepped forward, and his small army followed. Oskar let out a whimper and tightened his grip on the satchel.

“Give me the book,” Safiki whispered.

“What?” Oskar said out of the side of his mouth.

“Give it to me.” He placed his hand on Oskar’s sweaty back. “They want the book, not you. There is an umamri house near the south gate of the city, next to a bloodrock stall. Ask for Falam, and tell him I sent you. I will meet you there at sunset.” Safiki paused. “You can trust me, salah.”

“Old man,” Mufalu snarled as he moved closer, “you and the boy—Safiki, was it?—do not need to die today. Give me the book.”

Safiki closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. They had heard. *What had I been thinking? Why had I given in?*

2. Known to Doonlanders as the “Wormway” because, in a city of densely clustered buildings, its buildings were even more so. Believed to be the oldest part of Yorsha Doon, it was an intricate, twisting, and all but impenetrable maze. Some older citizens claimed to have lived their whole lives in Heshibal because they’d never managed to figure out how to leave.

Oskar lifted the strap over his head and clutched the satchel in both hands. He looked at it longingly, then back at the advancing men.

“Good,” Mufalu said. “Now put it on the ground and be gone. Don’t try to run. Word travels fast in the Wormway, so I swear we will find you.”

Oskar bent over with an involuntary grunt and placed the satchel gingerly on the sandstone cobbles. “I trust you, my friend,” he whispered to Safiki, and the boy’s heart kicked in his chest. He had never heard those words before. In one swift motion, Oskar slid the satchel backward between his legs and charged the men with an earsplitting squeal. Safiki snatched up the satchel and ran. As he passed through the archway, he saw Mufalu and the merchant and the rest of the swordsmen slam into the walls as the largest, strangest man Safiki had ever met barreled past them into the crowded streets of Yorsha Doon.

