

## OLD THIEVES MAKE A DISCOVERY

**A**uralia lay still as death, like a discarded doll, in a burgundy tangle of rushes and spinnweed on the bank of a bend in the River Throanscall, when she was discovered by an old man who did not know her name.

She bore no scars, no broken bones, just the stain of inkblack soil. Contentedly, she cooed, whispered, and babbled, learning the river's language, and focused her gaze on the stormy dance of evening sky—roiling purple clouds edged with blood red. The old man surmised she was waiting and listening for whoever, or whatever, had forsaken her there.

Those fevered moments of his discovery burnt into the old man's memory. In the years that followed, he would hold and turn them in his mind the way an explorer ponders relics he has found in the midst of ruin. But the mystery remained stubbornly opaque. No matter how often he exaggerated the story to impress his fireside listeners—"I dove into that ragin' river and caught her by the toe!" "I fought off that hungry river wyrm with my picker-staff just in time!"—he found no clue to her origins, no answers to questions of why or how.

The Gatherers, House Abascar, the Expanse—the whole world might have been different had he left her there with riverwater running from her hair. "The River Girl"—that was what the Gatherers came to call her until she grew old enough to set them straight. Without the River Girl, the four houses of the Expanse might have perished in their troubles. But then again, some say that without the River Girl those troubles might never have come at all.





This is how the spark was struck.

A ruckus of crows caught Krawg's attention as he groped for berries deep in a bramble. He and Warney, the conspirator with whom he had been caught thieving so many years ago, were laboring to pay their societal debts to House Abascar. The day had been long, but Krawg's spirits were high. No officers had come to reckon their work and berate them. Not yet. Tired of straining for late-summer apples high in the boughs of ancient trees, they had put down their picker-staffs and turned to plucking sourjuice and jewelweed bushes an apple-core's throw from the Throanscall.

Warney was preoccupied, trying to free his thorn-snagged sleeves and leg-gings. So Krawg smiled, dropped his harvesting sack, and crept away to investigate the cause of the birds' cacophony. He hoped to find them eying an injured animal, maybe a broad-antlered buck he could finish off and present to the duty officers. That would be a prize grand enough to deserve preparation in King Cal-marcus's kitchens. Such a discovery might bring Krawg closer to the king's grace and a pardon.

"Aw, will you look at that?" Krawg flexed his bony fingers. The feathered curmudgeons flapped at the air over the riverbank, their gaze fixed on a disturbance in the grass.

"Now, hold on!" called his even bonier friend. "Whatcha got there? Wait for me!" Twigs snapped and fabric ripped, but Warney made no progress. "Speak up now, what're them flappers squawkin' over? Are beastmen coming to kill us?"

"Stop spookin', fraidy-brain," Krawg growled, and then he gusted air through his nostrils. "There won't be no beastman savages out here in the afternoon."

"What is it then? Merchants?"

"No merchants."

"Is it a swarm of stingers?"

"Nope."



"A fangbear? River wyrms? Bramblepigs?"

"Don't think so."

"Some young buster sneakin' up behind us? Come on now. What's got them birds so bothered?"

According to his nature, Krawg tossed back a lie. "They're just fightin' over a mess of reekin' twister fish they snatched out of the shallows." Groundwater closed over his feet as he made his way through the reeds on the riverbank. Increasingly perturbed by the way Krawg was stalking their target, the crows descended to the branch of a stooping cottonbeard tree and pelted him with insults.

As Krawg combed the grasses for an answer, Warney at last emerged from the trees with worry in his one good eye, gripping as if it were a hunting spear the long, clawed picker-staff he had used all day to drag down the higher appleboughs. Warney seemed barely more than a skeleton wrapped in loose flesh and a rough burlap cloak. "What are they fussin' about now if they've gone and eaten their fill?"

Krawg's vulturebeak nose twitched in the middle of the few undisciplined whiskers that grew where a mustache did not. He leaned forward, apprehensive, and saw not a pile of fish bones but two tiny pink hands reaching into the air.

"One of the fish has got hands!" gasped Warney.

"Shush now! It isn't a pile of fish." Krawg took hold of the appleknife in his pocket. "Whatever it is, it's harmless, I'm sure."

Warney glanced back at the woods. "Don't forget to watch for you-know-who. Duty officers'll haul us in, bottom 'n' blockhead, if they catch us messin' with anything other than them berries. They'll ride their stinkin' lizards right through here soon. Come on now...there's a nice bramble just back here. You don't want the duty to string us up in the hangers, do ya?"

"Good creepin' Cragavar forest, of all the bloody wonders I ever seen... Looky!" The braver Gatherer flipped his black hood back from his hairless head and bent to examine the child.

Warney remained where he was. "Krawg, you're givin' me the shut-mouth again. What is it, old boy?"



“Just a creepin’, crawlin’ baby, it is.” Krawg massaged the flab beneath his chin. “Mercy, Warney, look at her.”

“It’s a her? How do you know?”

“Well, howdaya think I know?” Krawg reached for the child, then thought better of it. “Warney, this must mean somethin’. You and me. . .findin’ this.” He scanned the spaces between trees on both sides of the mist-shrouded river and confirmed that the only witnesses were crows and a tailwitcher that clung upside down to the trunk of a birch.

Warney splashed into the river shallows and prodded the submerged ground with his picker-staff before each step. The weeds around his ankles whispered *bushhh. . .bushhh. . .bushhh.*

The child convulsed twice. She coughed up droplets of water. And then she made a sound that might have been a laugh.

“Now that’s odd.” Krawg gestured to the child’s tiny head. “She got brown and silver hairs. She’s seen at least two seasons, I’d say. Probably born before that hard freeze we had awhile back.”

“Yeah, gotta ’gree with ya there.” Warney’s eye was white as a sparrow’s egg in the shadows of his hood.

“And she’s not the spawn of those beastmen. Everything about her seems like a good baby girl, not some accursed cross between person and critter. Looks like she’s been fed and looked after too. . .well, until she got tossed into the river, I suppose.”

“Gotta ’gree with ya there.” Warney now leaned over the child, swaying like a scarecrow in the wind. “She’s better fed than any of us Gatherers. . .or crows, for that matter.”

The crows were quiet, watching, picking at their sharp toes.

Krawg knelt and took to picking at his toes as well, poking at yellow places, which meant he was thinking hard. “We’re too far east of House Bel Amica for her to belong to them proud and greedy folk. But how could she be from our good House Abascar? Folk from Abascar only step out of the house walls if King Cal-marcus tells ’em to. Too scared of beastmen, they are. . .these days.”



"Gotta 'gree with ya there."

"Do you always gotta 'gree with me there?!" Krawg snatched the picker-staff from Warney's hands and clubbed his hooded head. Warney jumped away, growled, and bared his teeth. Krawg tossed the staff aside and rose up like a bear answering the challenge of a rat. Warney, like a rat realizing he has awakened a bear, fled back toward the quiet woods.

"Now don't you get it in your head to leave me here with this orphan," Krawg called, "or I'll rip that patch off your dead eye!"

"Have ya thought..." Warney paused, turned, and clasped his head with both hands, as if trying to stretch his mind to accommodate a significant thought. "Has it occurred to ya that... Do ya think..."

"Speak, you rangy crook!"

"Oh ballyworms, Krawg! What if she's a Northchild?"

Krawg stumbled back a step and narrowed his eyes at the infant.

The tailwitcher, the crows, and even the river seemed to quiet at Warney's question.

But Krawg at last shook off worry. "Don't shovel that vawn pile my way, Warney. You been eatin' too much of Yawny's stew, and your dreams are gettin' to you. Only crazies think Northchildren are actual. There's no such thing."

They watched the baby's hands sculpt shapes in the air.

"And anyway," Krawg continued, glancing northward at the sky purpling over the jagged mountains of the Forbidding Wall, "everybody knows Northchildren are taller, and they drape blankets over themselves."

Nearby, branches broke with sharp echoes as something moved in the woods.

"Grab for a weapon," hissed Warney, "because I smell prowling beastmen!"

"Doubtful," said Krawg, but he bent his knees and sank into the grass.

"Duty officers then!"

In case their overseers were, in fact, looking for them, Krawg shouted, "We better get back to the patches, Warney! I sure don't see any berries out here." He lifted Warney's picker-staff and marched to join his friend in the trees.

But Warney seemed stuck, as though the girl had tossed a rope and snared his



ankle. “You know what they say. If a man leaves a good deed undone, Northchildren will come creepin’ at night and drag him off into the curse of the—”

“I’m not scared of you, butt-guster,” Krawg whispered. “Now hush before anybody hears you!”

The girl, aware that she was alone again, began to murmur as if talking with someone they could not see. The Gatherers watched her clap her tiny hands.

A crow took wing from the cottonbeard tree and made a wide circle over the child’s bed.

“They want that fresh meat,” Krawg observed.

Warney nodded. “Gotta ’gree with ya. . .” His mouth snapped shut, and he winced.

Krawg loosed a weary sigh, waved a scornful gesture at the birds, and returned to kneel beside the baby.

Warney hopped back to peer over Krawg’s shoulder. “What’s that she’s lyin’ in? That isn’t a sinkhole.”

“No, somebody carved out this hole with their hands.”

“Not with their hands, no. Look, Krawg. . . *toes*. This Northchild’s lyin’ in a footprint!” Warney’s grin signified a victory. “Gotta *disagree* with ya there!”

The child had gone quiet and still. And that was what Krawg would remember for the rest of his troubled life—the moment when her eyes gathered sunset’s burning hues and flickered with some element he had never seen; the way she rested, as though commanded to surrender by some voice only she could hear; the way he clenched his jaw, made his decision.

A wave of wind carried a few slow leaves, a shower of twirling seedpods from the violet trees, spiders on newly flung strands, and a hint of distant music—the Early Evening Verse sung by the watchman of House Abascar to mark the dusk of the day.

“Oh, our backs are strapped now. They’ll string us upside down for certain. It’s late, and we’re bound to be found missin’.” Warney’s eye rolled to fix on the sun’s fading beacons. “Let’s turn the baby over to the first officer we see, and maybe—”



“What do you think a duty officer sees when he looks at us, Warney? I’m the Midnight Swindler, and you’re the One-Eyed Bandit! They’ll say we swiped this baby from somewhere. We already been punished for our thievin’. They made us live outside the walls as Gatherers, and there’s only one shelf in the pantry lower than that: *the dungeons*.” Krawg threw the picker-staff down—*splack!*—against the wet ground. “I can’t hand her over, but I can’t leave her either. If I do, some officer’ll ride through here and stomp her into the ground. We’ve got to take her. And hide her.”

“Ballyworms!” Warney shuddered. “You ’n’ me ’n a Northchild ’n’ all!”

A commotion erupted just south of the marsh. First came a three-toned bellow, which the Gatherers recognized as the complaint of a vawn, one of the duty officers’ reptilian steeds. Then came the din of crushed bracken and shaken trees. It was certainly an officer come to measure their progress.

Krawg bent low and lifted the naked child by the arms. “She’s harmless. Didn’t cast no spell on me. Didn’t drag me off into darkness. She isn’t a Northchild! There’s no such thing.”

“Well, let’s hurry it up then,” said Warney, grinning in spite of his fear.

A few minutes later Krawg and Warney reached the shelter of thatched grass roofs and crooked mud walls in the woods just outside House Abascar’s boundary. There, the kinder sort among the Gatherers would tend to the River Girl’s needs and protect her from the dangerous sort.

Warney clapped a hand over his mouth, muffling a laugh. “Don’t it bring back memories, Krawg? Sneakin’ off with treasure like this?”

“Warney,” Krawg replied, “we’ve never, never lifted treasure like this.”



Krawg and Warney weren’t punished for carrying back the child. But they were “strung up in the hangers” and dangled from their ankles there a full day, scraping the filthy gutters of their vocabulary, when it was discovered they had returned without their designated picker-staffs.



Meanwhile, at the river's edge, water seeped from the soil into the footprint, turned to mud, and solidified. A mist rose, hovered over the place, then wisped away without wind to carry it. It would remain a mystery and a memory to the three men who had found it there—the two troubled Gatherers and one other.

Just after Krawg and Warney had absconded with the child, a solitary rider emerged from the trees and sighted that damp impression in the grass.

The young rider, small and eager, dismounted and studied the outline even as it began to fade. He pulled from the earth a riverstone and touched the face of it with his fingertips, where a dull magic blurred. The stone's color warmed, and it softened to clay under his touch.

Sensing the magic, the crows on the cottonbeard branch shrieked and scattered.

The boy etched a mark in the stone as similar to the contours of the footprint as he could—a sculpture, an equivalent.

Then he walked up and down the banks awhile, surveying the soil. When the vawn snorted impatiently, he returned and climbed back into his ornate saddle. The two-legged steed stomped off, happy to head away from the water and into the trees.

No one knew of the rider's visit to the river. No one saw the record of his discovery, which he kept like a clue to a riddle. And he locked his questions up tight for fear of troubling the volatile storms within the heart of his father, the king.





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