

Chapter 14



Through the Azure Mountains

Elliott stood on a craggy shelf, well beneath the summit but just high enough to see the snow-dusted peaks rising in tier after tier behind him. He gazed across the vast range, trying to orient himself, and finally saw Mount Kalipharus, now a mere speck on the horizon. In the three weeks since escaping Harwelden, they had traveled far, and the mountain terrain seemed to grow wilder with every league of distance. With his breath forming plumes of fog before him, Elliott hugged himself for warmth, examining the endless expanse and wondering how much longer he would have to endure the cold, thin mountain air. Marvus and Jingo, standing beside him, rubbed their hands together, trying to ward off the icy breeze that whistled down the mountainside.

Peering down at the trail, Elliott said, "How long has he been gone? If we don't get going soon, we won't make it down to the valley before nightfall—we'll freeze to death up here."

"Right you are," Marvus said. "That loathsome susquat is going to be the death of us. I have really begun to question our judgment in traveling with him."

"He just went to look for food," Jingo insisted. "He's coming back."

Marvus scowled. "Every time he takes his leave, I fear we've seen the last of him. I do not trust that stinking beast."

From behind them, Elliott heard the horses snorting and stamping against the stony terrace. He wondered what had gotten into them, and hoped he had tied them well. But just as he got up to check on them, Hooks appeared on the trail, a strangled opilion over his shoulder.

"There he is," Jingo said, giving Marvus a reproachful glare. "I'll gather some kindling."

Hooks walked up, grinning, and dropped the opilion at their feet. "I don't know about you three," he said, "but I'm starving." He looked to Marvus, perhaps for a word of thanks, when a low growl came from the trail behind him.

Elliott tensed and jerked his head to the sound. "What was that! Did you guys hear that?"

"What was *what*?" said Marvus, looking hungrily at the opilion. "Jingo, strike a fire."

The horses, picketed in the clump of grass beside the trail, began to whinny and pull at their tethers. Elliott noticed that their ears were lying back, and an uneasy feeling settled over him.

Ignoring the horses, Jingo dropped his hastily collected armload of kindling at Marvus's feet and knelt, eyeing the fat opilion. "This is going to make a feast!" he said. "My mouth is watering already."

Hooks looked down the trail, cocking his head to the side and listening.

The growl came again—deep, gravelly, and ill-boding. Elliott scooted closer to Hooks. "What *was* that?" he whispered.

Hooks sniffed at the air. Staring ahead, he pushed Elliott behind him.

This time the gimlets had heard it, too. The opilion forgotten, they huddled around Hooks.

On the trailhead in front of them, an immense, snarling black wolf slunk into sight. Pulling back its lips, it gave a low,

guttural snarl and laid back its ears, holding its head low to the ground, watching them.

Elliott's breath caught in his throat. The wolf was the size of a full-grown jaguar—certainly too monstrous for any of them to tangle with.

"Don't move," Hooks whispered.

The wolf's eyes glowed with malice. It licked at its snout and raised its head.

Elliott had never felt more afraid. His mouth was as dry as cotton, and he began to breathe fast, as he often did when afraid. With his mind spinning, he stared ahead, scared to move a muscle, hoping somehow that the predator might lose interest and leave them alone.

Movement in the rocks and brush below the trail materialized into six more wolves, slinking up to join their leader.

Elliott glanced sideways and saw that his companions, like him, were frozen, though he rather wished someone looked as if he knew what to do next. Behind him, the horses whinnied frantically, and he heard the snap of a branch and more stamping of hooves. The horses were in such a furor that for a moment Elliott thought they might draw the wolves' attention.

Then, in a flash of dark fur and glistening fangs, the wolves came at them.

Jingo leaped into action. In the space of two heartbeats, he had unsheathed his dagger, spun to pluck Marvus's dagger from its sheath, and flung both, one in each hand. The blades hurtled end over end, and two of the wolves fell.

The others, unfazed, closed the remaining gap and leaped.

As Elliott stood paralyzed, the wolves slammed into his friends, knocking them to the ground. Dirt, grass, and spatters of blood flew, and his mind processed the vicious attack in successive images of dark fur, bright teeth, and snarls intermixed with the terrified shrieks of the gimlets and the

horses' frenzied stamping and snorting. Three of the wolves had Hooks pinned, and Marvus and Jingo were locked in a death struggle with the other two. In the lee of the mountain-side, the largest of the horses—a big chestnut gelding—reared up, finally snapping the branch he was tied to, and the other two yanked loose their picket stakes, and all three bolted in different directions.

Elliott stood amid the melee in stunned disbelief. He was breathing fast and felt dizzy, and his mind screamed at him to be anywhere but here. Deciding there was nothing he could do for his friends, he turned and ran.

Heart pounding in his temples, he fought a wave of nausea as he pelted down the steep, difficult trail. His instincts commanded him in simple terms, telling him only that things had gone horribly wrong and he needed to get away fast.

Something rustled in the vegetation behind him, and he looked over his shoulder, praying it was one of the horses, only to see a dark shape slinking toward him. He couldn't outrun the wolf, but he would not just wait for it, either. He sprinted away, with the growling, panting beast behind him.

Stepping on a tilted flat rock, his foot rolled over some bits of loose gravel to send him tumbling headlong into thick brush. Crashing through the thicket slowed him, and he skidded to a stop. He had wrenched his ankle, but somehow there seemed to be no time for pain. He looked back to find the hulking beast nearly on him, fangs bared and eyes glinting. Uphill, he heard a bloodcurdling scream from one of the gimlets.

He scrambled up and tried to run, but the ankle buckled beneath him. Falling again, he slid downhill once more, fetching up just before a gap between two massive stone outcroppings that jutted like plates from the mountainside. Frantic, he pulled himself between the huge stone flakes. If he could just slip deep enough into the narrow crevice . . . He was afraid to look back,

though the beast's rhythmic panting seemed to drown out all other sounds.

He scrambled at the rock, knowing he had only seconds, and worked his way into the gap. The growl came again, right behind him this time, and he knew the chase was over. The beast had his leather pant leg and was pulling and shaking its head, as if trying to rip meat from bone. Dropping its hindquarters to the ground, it yanked him backward, away from the sheltering crevice. Reaching for the edge of the rock, he kicked with all his might while the frenzied wolf pulled and ripped at his pants. It seemed to be gaining the upper hand.

In the space of an instant, myriad scenes flashed through Elliott's mind: the poor gimlets and Hooks being viciously mauled on the mountaintop, his mother in her bed, the boys in the streets of New Orleans, lovely Lisa Hastings, his father. His churning mind played out the scenes in rapid succession until darkness enveloped him.

