

The End of the Road

‘Is this it?’ Sayesta sounded mildly curious.

Toko and Lesh weren’t fooled. This past half-year, they’d seen plenty of people relax, thinking they were safe when they heard that casual tone from the swordswoman. That was generally an instant before the poor fools learned how very wrong they could be. The boys exchanged a glance. They could do that safely since they were riding ten paces or more behind her, looking after the pack mules.

‘Well, there’s no more map left, so it must be.’ Riding beside Sayesta, Evrine waved the grimy sheaf of paper in her many-ringed hand.

Toko and Lesh had seen that long, long, painstakingly inked strip unfolded, studied, marked up and refolded so often that it was a wonder the winding route could still be read. The map was barely in one piece, splitting along so many of its creases. The brothers exchanged another grimace.

‘There’s no need for you two to look like that.’ Evrine turned in her saddle to grin at them. ‘Exciting, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, mistress,’ Toko assured her.

Lesh nodded vigorously. When they had some privacy, fetching water or fodder for the mules or grooming the horses, he and Toko debated long and hard whether Evrine was a mage as well as the scholar she undoubtedly was. Lesh argued she must be a mage. She seemed to know what they were thinking or doing so often. Surely there was no way that she could have any idea without using magic to read their minds. Toko had pointed out how often Mam had known exactly what they were up to, when nobody could have told her, and they knew for a certainty that Mam was no mage.

Lesh looked at the map Evrine was stuffing into the pocket of her cloak. She had promised they could have it when she was done with this journey. He and Toko would need the map to get home, checking off the villages, bridges, crossroads, notable trees and hills that would confirm they were on the right road. More than once on their way here, the lack of such faithfully recorded landmarks had proved they were on the wrong road. They’d been forced to retrace their steps to the last place they were sure of and try again. The journey back would surely be easier, going in the other direction.

Now there was no more road. They had arrived, barely halfway through the mild afternoon, with the branches on the trees greening with the first touch of spring and a few clusters of blossom in the thickets perfuming the breeze.

But what was this place? They were looking at a solid, wide stone building with three rows of windows below its shallow tiled roof and stubby chimneys. In the centre, three stone steps led up to a double door. It looked as if it belonged in a prosperous town’s main square. It reminded Lesh of the halls where landowners and merchants met to agree the season’s prices for wool or wheat or wine or whatever else their particular district produced in enough surplus to sell. Evrine had explained how such deals were done, that first time Lesh and Toko had gaped in astonishment at the imposing surroundings when they had first arrived in a prosperous town.

He looked at the topmost windows and wondered if there were bedrooms up there. That had been another revelation on this journey. Rooms with separate beds raised up off the floor, and sometimes even rooms with just one bed for only one person. No house they had ever set foot in before had more than a sleeping loft crammed with straw-stuffed mattresses, above the long room where everybody lived, and reached by a ladder.

No one in their village was interested in building upwards. Luxury was a house wide enough for everyone to get close to the hearth in winter, and long enough to get away from the cooking fire in summer. No one was fool enough to have big windows squandering precious heat in the bitter cold, or letting in the scorching harvest sun.

This building was no merchants’ exchange though. It stood alone in this hollow below the

rising swell of a tree-covered hill. The last hamlet worth the name was eight days ride behind them, and no one there had ever heard tell of anyone living out this way.

Lesh had been about to ask the matron who brewed the hamlet's ale, where did she think the road went then? Who would go to the trouble of clearing this broad path and laying down cartloads of gravel, however long ago that had been done? But Evrine had caught his eye and she had shaken her head, not much, but just enough to make Lesh bite his tongue. Toko could say what he liked. Lesh still thought Evrine was a mage.

'So how do we get inside to find this treasure of yours?' Sayesta studied the windows and the entrance with keen interest. She was always alert and energetic, no matter how long the day's ride might have been. No matter how old she might be. That was something else the brothers had debated without coming to any conclusions. The swordswoman's short-cropped hair was more white than grey, and her face was deeply lined. That reminded them both of Gammer, who only moved from her chair by the fire for meals at the long table, to visit the privy, or to go to her bed behind the screen Da had made when she couldn't climb the ladder to the loft any more. But Sayesta could climb a tall tree or scale a wall around a yard as easily as Toko. They had seen her do both and more besides on this journey.

Lesh looked at Toko again. Every window they could see was tightly shuttered and the iron-studded door at the top of those three broad steps looked equally secure.

Evrine wasn't concerned. 'Let's look around the back.'

Nothing bothered Evrine. At least nothing had so far on this journey. Well, not while Lesh and Toko had been travelling with the two women. They had no idea how long the women had been on the road before they had taken a wrong turn and arrived at the village way out in the wheat lands that was all the world Lesh and Toko had ever known.

All they had known until Da had agreed to let them go on this journey, when he had finished putting new shoes on the four horses and two mules that the women had been trying trying to manage between them, ever since their previous grooms had got bored and run away. At least, that's what Evrine had said, while they were waiting for Ma's medicine to work on the light-coated mule which had eaten something it shouldn't.

Talking it over later, Toko and Lesh had decided those slackwits, whoever they might have been, had run off because they were scared of Sayesta. To be fair, they had soon learned she could be terrifying without even raising her voice.

The swordswoman looked around at the boys and grinned. 'Come on, you two.'

Toko looked at Lesh. They shared a shrug. As Evrine and Sayesta nudged their horses into a walk, the boys did the same, tugging on the leading reins to get the mules moving.

As they went around to the back, the building turned out to make three sides of a hollow square surrounding a paved yard. Thick drifts of wind-blown dead leaves were piled high in the corners. Those must be from last autumn and any number of autumns before that, judging by the dark stains on the paving. There were three doors; one in the centre of each wing on both sides, and another one straight ahead which must be opposite that main entrance where the road arrived.

Another building ran across the fourth side of the paved square, separated from the main whatever-it-was by a broad path. Half of it had two rows of windows as securely shuttered as the rest, and a solid oak door. The other half was as welcome as it was familiar.

'Stables,' Toko said, relieved.

He didn't have to be a mage to know that. Those doors and that hatch for the hayloft were unmistakable, even if the walls were masonry as finely crafted as the main – house? Who would want to live all the way out here? What did they eat? They were several days ride beyond the last tilled fields and pastures. Lesh shook his head, bemused.

Sayesta snapped her fingers to get his attention. She jerked her head at the stables. 'You two see what's in there while we look for a way to find the treasure.'

She dismounted with her usual ease. She never seemed to get stiff in the saddle. Evrine took

her time, more or less sliding off her horse. Her boots hit the ground with a thud that ruffled her layers of skirts and petticoats. Where Sayesta was lithe and lean, Evrine was comfortably plump with long braids framing her cheerful round face. Her hair was as blue as a harvest season sky, and that was something else that made Lesh think she must be a mage. As to whether she was older or younger than Sayesta, he couldn't possibly guess.

He dismounted and gathered up the women's reins to lead their horses to the stable, as well as his own mount and the dark-coated mule. Toko had already got the doors open without any difficulty.

'This place wasn't locked?' Lesh was surprised, as he led the animals inside. One of the first things he'd learned on this journey was how much folk who lived along the road feared people they didn't know getting into their homes and stealing their things. No one bothered with locks at home. There wasn't much of anything to steal, and anyone who tried would soon be found out, since everyone knew everyone else.

'No, just bolted top and bottom.' Toko had already led his horse and the light-coated mule into the dimness. 'Open that door at the end, will you?'

Lesh left the animals to their own devices and did as Toko asked. Throwing open this second door shed more light on the spacious, clean-swept stalls along the back wall. There were hooks for harness opposite, above rests for saddles, and benches for sitting and working, as well as bins that had surely once held grain. The mules and the horses made satisfied noises as they recognised such surroundings.

Toko sniffed like a hound searching for a trail. 'No one's had horses in here for a dog's age.'

Lesh agreed. All he could smell was dry stone and dust. He opened one of the grain bins. 'There's nothing in here. No sign of rats though.'

Hopefully it would be a good long while before it occurred to any local vermin that things hereabouts might have changed. If rats did turn up, they would have to find a cat. If they were going to be staying here long enough for that to matter.

Lesh swallowed a lump in his throat. He still missed the cats back home. More than he missed his little brothers and sisters, truth be told. He reminded himself what Da had said, back when the fields had bristled with stubble and the thickets were turning gold. Him and Toko, they were doing their duty by the little ones, going on this journey. Mam and Da would have two less mouths to feed through the coldest months, and when they came home, they'd bring two horses back with them as well as a purse of silver. Along with the coin Sayesta had already given Da, everyone would feel the benefit for the rest of the year and likely longer.

Neither Toko nor Lesh had argued. This had to be better way to spend the winter than labouring on local farms when extra hands were needed for some freezing and filthy task. The cold meant calls on the blacksmith's time and skills came fewer and further between, so Da seldom had need of them in the forge.

Sudden clanking startled him out of those recollections. At the other end of the building, Toko had found a pump. He was working the handle up and down. As water gushed from the spout to fill the basin, he cheered. 'Well, we don't need to go hunting for a stream.'

'They'll still need some fodder, and some sort of bedding, if we can find it.' Lesh grabbed the dark-coated mule's halter as she headed for the pump. She knew her own mind and was often inclined to try getting her own way.

This time, she decided to follow Lesh to the closest stall. He and Toko tied up the patient beasts and stripped off their harness and saddles. Toko found an iron-bound bucket and used it to fill the stone water troughs from the pump. By the time he had finished, the dried-out wooden staves had swelled enough to stop the bucket leaking, more or less.

While he was doing that, Lesh went outside, around to the back of the stables. He found a broad stretch of tussocky grass running away up the long slope to the trees. There was enough fresh green to give the horses and mules a treat, as well as yellowed growth to cut and heap in the stalls in

place of wheat straw. If he could find a scythe. He remembered there were tools on pegs on the wall by the pump.

Toko was way ahead of him, as was so often the case. Sitting on the stone mounting block by the stable door, he looked up as Lesh rounded the corner of the building. He'd found a scythe and a sickle, and he was putting a fresh edge on their blades with his whetstone.

'Can you believe no one's been in here to help themselves to good tools like these?'

'Maybe they had good reason to stay away.' Lesh looked at the other building. 'So they never discussed coming here. So no one who came after them even knew where this place was to be found.'

'Until Evrine found her map.' Toko handed Lesh the sickle. 'Right, let's get to work.'

Toko was like that, like Da, always focused on what needed doing next. Maybe that was because he was the eldest, even if there wasn't even a full year between them. Lesh tried to do the same, but he couldn't help his mind wandering as he worked. Where had Evrine found that map? How far had she and Sayesta travelled? He wondered what the map would show him, if he unfolded whatever was left, after they had followed the route back home.

None of this stopped him doing his fair share of the work. He'd learned long ago how to let his mind roam free while his muscles were toiling. Soon he and Toko were gathering up armfuls of fodder for the horses and mules. As they came back around to the stables, they found Sayesta by the open door to the other half of the stable building.

'How did you open that?' Lesh really hoped she would say she had used magic, now they had reached their journey's end.

The swordswoman grinned and held up a handful of what looked like keys that had been through a famine. 'Lock picks.'

Toko was already peering through the door into the gloom. 'It's a kitchen. Huge.'

'Open the shutters and let in some air,' Sayesta ordered. 'See what you can find by way of firewood, and let me know what provisions we have left.'

'Right.' Toko went through the door, looking around with interest.

Lesh was still staring at the other building. 'Why isn't the kitchen in there?'

Sayesta chuckled. 'Go and see. Go on.' She gestured at the closest door when he hesitated. 'That's open.'

He didn't need telling a third time. 'I'll be quick,' he called out to Toko.

He hurried over, but when he got to the door, he hesitated. His stomach was as hollow as that dried-out, empty old bucket. Lesh clenched his fists to stop his hands shaking. He was a grown man, as good as anyway. Next year would be his fourteenth summer so he'd have a voice in village meetings, when he and Toko got home. His nostrils flared as he drew a deep, determined breath.

He went in and saw that Evrine had opened the windows on the far wall in order to unfasten the shutters. Dust motes stirred by the breeze sparkled in the shafts of sunlight. Lesh looked around, open-mouthed. Every bit of wall that wasn't windows was shelves filled with books. All sorts of books, from weighty volumes that would need two strong hands to lift, to small, squat ones like the handful that Evrine kept in her saddlebag.

Those weren't the same books she'd had with her, when him and Toko had started travelling with the women. Lesh had seen Evrine trading the ones she had read for something new whenever she got the chance. She haggled ruthlessly with the balding, bearded men who answered her summons to whatever inn they were staying in. Mam would have admired her skills.

Lesh wondered who could possibly have bargained and bartered for all these books. This room ended in an archway cutting through a wall covered with still more shelves, and he could see another room just the same as this one. How long had it taken to fill this huge building? For whatever reason, he had no doubt all the rooms and shelves were full. He sniffed the dusty air. There was no hint of damp or rot. Had master builders made sure these walls and this roof were proof against years of storms? Or was there some magic at work?

‘Isn’t this marvellous?’ Evrine was beaming with delight.

She stood by one of the long, leather-topped tables that ran down the centre of the room, flanked by high-backed chairs. Every table had books neatly stacked at either end. Evrine caressed the shiny-edged pages of the one lying open in front of her.

So this was the treasure she and Sayesta had been seeking. Lesh knew better than to protest there was no silver to be seen. He would have done just that, of course, when they set out on this journey. He’d learned a lot since then. Sayesta had told him and Toko that knowledge had a value beyond mere coin.

They’d already known that, of course. Da’s word was respected and his opinions carried weight because he knew the secrets of working metals. He could see the exact colour that told him to strike as iron cooled from white-hot to red. He could hear the quality of brass in the note that rang out when the metal was struck. Ma knew more about dosing beasts and people than anyone within five days’ walk. The smell of leaves rubbed between her fingertips told her when to gather herbs at their most potent. The precise shade of a tincture or an infusion showed her when it was ready for use. No one ever refused Mam a favour.

But Lesh hadn’t realised that knowledge could be written down and traded. Now he knew that, he could see this really was a treasure house. No wonder whoever had built it hadn’t wanted to risk a kitchen fire spreading through these rooms. He walked over to the closest table and opened the closest book to a random page.

‘Oh.’ He couldn’t hide his surprise.

Evrine looked up. ‘What is it?’

‘I can’t read this. I mean, I can, but I can’t.’ Lesh recognised the letters neatly written – no, he realised, neatly printed – on the page. Evrine had taught him and Toko both to read, when bad weather had kept them in an inn for five days, when she realised that neither of them knew more than their own names. But the words in this book made no sense to him.

Evrine came around the table to see what he was looking at. ‘Ah.’ She nodded as if she had solved a mystery. ‘That’s Taspian.’

Lesh looked at her for an explanation. Evrine liked explaining things.

‘Taspia is to the north and west of Astamy. It’s a mountainous realm beyond a mighty river, where the Astamini never gained a foothold. To this day, the Taspian keep to their own language when they write things down, even though they use Astamy script.’

Lesh nodded. Even out in the wheat lands, most folk learned a few words of Astamy alongside their mother tongue, in case they had dealings with travellers along the road when they took their harvest to market. When he and Toko got back home, they’d be the most fluent trade speakers in the whole district. He’d never heard of Taspia though.

Evrine flipped back the pages to see the front of the book. ‘Oh,’ she said with interest. ‘This is a study of the marsh flowers and trees in Elbry.’

Lesh had never heard of Elbry either. Come to that, he hadn’t known he had been born in a realm called Hukell, until Evrine had told him and Toko the river they were crossing marked the border between Hukell and Pritin.

He realised Evrine was already reading the first page of the Taspian writing. Once she got deep into a book, she could ignore a tavernful of folk complete with a performing troubadour or a spreading fist-fight. He spoke loudly to make sure she heard him.

‘What do I do now, Mistress?’

‘What?’ As Evrine looked up from the book, her eyes were distant. She focused on Lesh and smiled. ‘Whatever Sayesta tells you.’

He ducked his head obediently and went back out into the yard. Sayesta was nowhere to be seen so he headed for the kitchen. Toko had got the shutters open and checked that the pump in there worked too. Lesh marvelled at the notion of having a pump – having more than one pump – inside a building instead of in the village square for everyone to use.

Tesh was using a wet rag to wipe the dust off the table. That was salt-scrubbed wood, just like at home, with plain stools set around it. The pots and pans on the shelves, the cooking tools hung on the walls, and the fireplace with its iron hooks and roasting spit were equally reassuringly familiar. Doors around the walls promised store cupboards.

Toko looked up as Lesh came through the door.

‘Let’s bring the food in here.’

‘Right.’

Stacking everything on the table didn’t take long. The bread and fresh greens they’d bought in the hamlet were long gone, but they still had plenty of cheese, some lard, leathery dried venison, slices of dried apple and plums, the hard travel bread that Sayesta called biscuit, a fair supply of flour and the sack of dried pease that Evrine replenished at every opportunity. They wouldn’t go hungry, not for a while at least. Sayesta’s little chest of fragrant herbs would give them something more interesting to drink than water.

Toko started searching the shelves for some particular size of pot. ‘Get some firewood, will you?’

‘Right.’ Lesh went outside and headed for the woods at the top of the slope behind the building. There hadn’t been much rain for the past few days, so the odds were good he’d find dead wood that was dry enough to burn. He studied the grass for signs of rabbit paths or hares’ nests. If they were going to be here for more than a few days, he would set some snares. They would need to save enough food to get them back to the hamlet without tightening their belts too far.

He reached the edge of the woodland and started looking through the leaf litter and tangles of last year’s undergrowth. Gathering an armful of suitable sticks, he dumped them in the shelter of a jagged stump where a storm had snapped the crown off a mighty tree. That would give them more than enough fuel for the kitchen, if he and Toko could find the tools to hack off the branches and split the dead length of trunk. For now though, he’d settle for easier rewards.

As he went deeper into the woods gathering more sticks, he heard something strange. It sounded like a storm thrashing through a forest’s branches, but there was barely a breath of wind. Looking up, he saw something else strange ahead. Sunlight was streaming through the trees at the top of the hill. He could see the sky. This wasn’t the start of a forest at all.

So what was on the other side, if this was as far as the road went? Lesh dropped his sticks and struggled up the increasingly steep slope. When he got to the top, he was glad he was out of breath. If he hadn’t been, he might have been running. If he’d done that, where would he be now, as Da so often said.

He’d be down on those rocks, smashed to a bloody pulp. Lesh dropped to his hands and knees and edged forward to the broken edge of the turf. The land was as ragged as piecrust or a torn loaf of bread, hanging over a drop of half a furrow length, maybe more. Down below, he saw water frothing white around the jagged rocks, and darker green where the pools were calmer. That was what was making the noise.

Lesh had never seen so much water. He sat back on his heels and gazed at the vast expanse shading to from green to blue until it finally met the sky at some unimaginably distant horizon.

Sayesta dropped to the ground beside him. ‘I’m guessing you’ve never seen the ocean.’

Lesh had never even heard that word. He managed to find his voice. ‘I guess that explains why the road stops here.’

Sayesta laughed as if he’d made some splendid joke. ‘True enough.’

Lesh stared at the water some more. Sayesta sat beside him in companionable silence. Eventually he forced himself to look away from the – the ocean. Inside his head, he heard the sound the water made on the rocks woven into the word.

‘So what are you going to do here, you and Evrine?’ Him and Toko, they hadn’t had the nerve to ask where they were going before, but what harm could curiosity do now?

‘We’re staying,’ Sayesta said easily. ‘It’s time we settled in one place to write the last verse of

our ballad.’

‘On your own?’ Startled, Lesh spoke without thinking. ‘How will you manage?’

Sayesta laughed. ‘We won’t be on our own for long. We’ll give you two plenty of letters to pass on when you head back along the road. A whole host of scholars will seek permission to come and see what Evrine’s found. I plan to make it known that I’m setting up a sword school, in case anyone thinks they can turn up and help themselves to the books.’

She sounded as confident as always. Lesh wondered what she would do if a whole gang of marauders turned up to loot and burn this place before her allies arrived. He’d heard tell of such raiders storming up and down the road, ever since he was old enough to ask Da why he was making swords and spearheads for the boys who would be acknowledged as men of the village at midsummer. Did Sayesta think she could hold off such fearsome thieves on her own?

Her thoughts were elsewhere. ‘I’ll be interested to see what sword manuals and military treatises are on those shelves. There’s no telling what we might find.’

Lesh had no idea what a treatise might be, and he didn’t bother asking. The fascinating view of the water had drawn his eyes again.

‘Will there be books about the – the ocean?’ He pronounced the unfamiliar word with care.

‘Of course.’ Sayesta didn’t doubt it. ‘And travellers’ tales about the lands beyond, I’ll wager.’

‘Beyond?’ Lesh choked on his disbelief. ‘There’s—?’

‘You didn’t think this shore was the end of the world, did you?’ Sayesta was surprised, but she wasn’t mocking Lesh. She never did, any more than Evrine made him or Toko feel small when something the brothers didn’t know came up in conversation. ‘No, there are strings of islands out there, and another great land beyond them. People along this coast build boats – they call them ships – big enough to carry folk with their beasts and supplies from one shore to another.’

Lesh stared at the vast expanse of water with its complete absence of landmarks and wondered how anyone could ever find their way across it.

Sayesta got to her feet. ‘Come on, lad. Toko will be wanting his firewood.’

Lesh followed the swordswoman down the slope, away from the ocean. They picked up sticks as they walked through the trees. When they got back to the kitchen, they found Toko had gathered enough wood to get a small fire started in the hearth. A griddle was warming on the hook above it, and a pot of pease was soaking for tomorrow to one side. Lesh took the sticks and fed the fire until it was blazing. He stacked the rest in the chimney corner. Sayesta pulled out a stool and sat down at the table.

‘There’s rooms with beds and chairs above here. No mattresses though, or blankets.’ Toko looked up from the batter he was mixing and nodded at an open door. There was a twisting staircase behind it, not a cupboard.

‘Excellent.’ Evrine walked in just in time to hear him. She found a stool and sat down as well. ‘We can manage for the moment. We’ll draw up a list of the things we need, and some letters of credit. You can take those back along the road with you, to give to merchants we know and trust.’

Toko paused in his stirring to drop dried apple into the bowl. ‘Won’t someone dispute your right to claim this place for your own?’

That was the thing about Toko, Lesh reflected. He didn’t say much, but when he did, he could be as subtle as a smack in the mouth. To his relief, Evrine laughed.

‘This is my great-grandfather’s library. How else do you think I knew it was here to be found?’ She waved that away. ‘We won’t have any problems.’

‘Can I come back?’ Lesh burst out. ‘Can I bring your supplies? You’ll still need someone to look after your mules and the horses.’

Toko looked at him, open-mouthed. ‘Don’t you want to go home? What do I tell Mam and Da?’

‘I’ll come home with you, of course I will, but—’ Lesh struggled to find the right words. ‘But not to stay. Not now I’ve seen – everything we’ve seen. Now I know there’s so much more to be

seen.'

'You'll always be welcome here,' Sayesta glanced at Toko. 'Both of you, for however long you like.'

'Absolutely,' Evrine agreed. 'Now, how soon will those griddle cakes be ready?'

'Any moment.' Toko went over to the fireplace and carefully greased the hot iron with a scrap of lard on the point of his knife.

'Let's heat some water for tea.' Evrine stood up.

Sayesta rose to her feet as well. Lesh wasn't sure exactly what happened, but somehow between them, they jarred the table. Toko had left the bowl of batter too close to the edge. It teetered and fell to smash on the flagstones. At least, it would have smashed, only Sayesta flicked her hand. The bowl righted itself and sprang up to sit safely in the middle of the table.

Lesh stared, gaping. Then he closed his mouth and squared his shoulders. Now he knew he had made the right decision. The only question could be how many more wonders he might see. They might have reached the end of this road. This might be where Evrine and Sayesta chose to end their tale. Lesh knew beyond all doubt that his story was just beginning.