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BREAKHEART

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

Breakheart

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BREAKHEART

Even the wolves were starving that winter. The wind screaming out of the north cut with a knife's edge, and only desperate men made the journey to Breakheart. For the first time in the memory of even the oldest men of Brennan's rath, the River Cador was a ribbon of black ice. Serpent-like, it wound down from Spelling High Water, in the cleft of the Ostrand Mountains, and the ice did not even begin to break up until it reached the city of Moorkind, which was once my home. In spring the lowlands would surely be flooded, one did not need to be a member of the Guild of Seers to know this.

I had been at Brennan's rath — Breakheart, as all who lived there soon came to know it — for a month under two years, and I would be there five years more. The time stretched before me like a field of desolation and I had begun to feel the weight of the fetters that bound me. They were not physical fetters, but they were shackles nonetheless. I was bound to Breakheart as surely as if I were chained like a bear. Only fools tried to leave alone, and no one would take me out.

The afternoon sky was a pall of gray as I turned back toward the rath. I let my horse pick her own way, since the trail was fetlock-deep in snow and beneath, strewn with stones. On either side the mountains reared, forbidding as fortress walls, and the trees, dense thickets of owl-pines, were like the hackles of a great animal slumbering in the earth.

As I reached the old stone circle on the shoulder of the hill above the rath I heard the wolves, and I touched my heels to the mare's sides. There was no game left in the woods, and if those wolves were hunting, they were about to set upon a traveler. Over my shoulder I carried a shortbow and a quiver of barb-tipped arrows. I was the lowest form of life at Breakheart, yet even I was not permitted to ride out unarmed on an errand.

The sky was black as a funeral shroud, but a shaft of sunlight somehow probed through the overcast and picked out the standing stones, the Nine Sisters, like a finger of gold. The wolves were beyond, marching a perimeter, intent on their quarry. I reined back, nocked an arrow and swore quietly as I saw what they were after.

Crouched against one of the stones was the figure of a man. He was cloaked and hooded against the striking cold, and across his knees was a naked sword. The blade was already red, and two of the wolves were limping. I had no chance to wonder how he came to be on foot, or what kind of man would tempt fate in these mountains at midwinter. The wolves were coming in again, and at a glance I knew the man was exhausted and hurt.

He was halfway to his feet, and I raised my voice over the rush of the wind. "Get down!" His head turned, he saw me and bobbed back behind the stone. I released that arrow, and several more.

I am always impressed by the intelligence of wolves. I never knew if it is an animal cunning or a cleverness to rival Man's, but these creatures needed only the one warning. They were already slinking back into the woods as I took my horse into the circle and slid to the ground.

The traveler got to his feet, cleaned his sword with a handful of snow and sheathed it. He leaned heavily on the stone and studied me from beneath the cowl of his cloak. His garments were sapphire blue, embroidered in silver and trimmed in white fox. Perhaps I should have realized then that he was no common traveler, but I was cold and tired, and if I am honest, I was dazzled by the beauty I saw as he shook back his hood, and my thoughts were muddled.

He was as dark as the Patai people, the tribes from Sakand, but his eyes were so blue, they seemed luminous. The last of his summer brown made his skin the same pale tan as my little horse, and though he was smudged with weariness, still I was beguiled. He held out his hand and without thinking I took it.

"Is Brennan's rath near here?" he asked, in the accent of Moorkind. He was born there, or had lived there long enough to pick up their way of speaking. "Do you know the way, boy?"

"I should," I said bitterly. "I work at Breakheart. Let me help you, I can see you're hurt. What happened to your horse?"

He gestured eastwards, back toward Vilhaven. "I ran into a company of brigands, last evening. I was lucky to escape with my life. They took the horse and everything I had, save one or two things they missed. Since then I've walked, and you're right." He slapped his leg. "I fell heavily and I'm half frozen. Is there a healer at the rath?"

"There's a farrier who doctors the horses," I said dubiously as I gave him my shoulder to lean on. "You'd fare better if I treated you myself!"

"You know the healing arts?" His face was pinched as he looked down at me. He was much taller than me, broader, and the weight across my shoulders

was heavy. Close to him, I smelt fur and leathers, sandalwood and a musky scent that was him. "If you've the healing touch," he told me, "you can care for this leg. I've no desire to trust myself to the farrier!"

My horse was standing with her head down and her nostrils flared as she scented the wind. No doubt she could smell the wolves, probably also the snow which had been threatening since morning. Animals can always sense a storm's approach, and even I had seen the soft yellow woolliness of the sky. I caught the reins and tugged her toward me.

"You'd better ride. It's not far to the rath but if you try to walk, it'll be dark before we're there. The wolves won't be far away, and it'll snow again soon."

I could have added that I would be fortunate to escape a whipping, since I had been sent on a morning's errand and I had taken all day about it. Brennan's temper was notorious, I often felt the sting of the strap.

"Then I shall ride," the stranger said with a certain wry humor at his own expense, "lest it be the bloody death of us both!"

"Let me help you." I cupped my gloved hands for his boot and he hauled himself into the saddle with a grimace, a grunt of discomfort. I took the mare's bridle and gave her a tug, out of the stone circle and southward, along the bank of the stream.

From spring to autumn the foothills of the Osrand Mountains are very beautiful, but in winter they are dangerous. The passes are narrow, the trails confusing. It is easy even for one who knows them well to lose his way. Every spring, trappers bring down the frozen, mummified bodies of travelers who had taken the wrong path, or turned the wrong way in a blizzard.

The wind picked up, blowing a plume of snow off the crown of Mount Idris, and I hurried the mare as my feet began to freeze. The trail led down steeply from the Nine Sisters, curled around a granite outcropping, ducked through the trees and approached the rath from the rear.

I smelt smoke and heard the dogs barking before we left the trees, and looked up at the stranger. "Do you have money?" I asked dubiously. "Brennan won't extend his hospitality if you can't pay."

His brows arched. "I'd be tossed back out into the snow?"

"No. But you'd have to work for your supper," I warned. "Brennan isn't a generous man. The brigands stole your purse?"

"Yes, but not these." He pulled off his left gauntlet and turned his hand to show me several rings. "The stones are fine, the gold thick and heavy. Will he trade?"

I grinned. "He'd be glad to. In spring the merchants pass through on their

way to Valdenheim. Just one of those rings would fill Brennan's pantry, and his wine cellar, right through till summer."

We had reached the rear wall of the rath and old Elbrin opened the posterngate for us. Breakheart is a town held captive by its own stockade. The wall is three times the height of a man, and made of whole tree trunks. Brennan liked to say it was built by his grandfather, and perhaps it was, but to me it looked much older. The thatched roofs were heavy with snow, but in spring they would be repaired with fresh heather, and the banners of the Epidai would flutter, bright as wildflowers, at the gate.

A boy called Jedda, bonded like myself, ran from the stable to take my horse as I helped the stranger dismount. He leaned heavily on me again while he caught his breath, and I turned him toward the nearest of the three taverns, The Wayfarer, which was Brennan's own. The chieftain's house stood to one side, with his stable at the rear, and before the tavern were the forecourt and main gate. Breakheart was all gray and white, slush and snow, but I heard music and laughter from the tavern, and urged my companion inside.

Eyes turned toward us as the door closed. Weighted deerskins swept back into place to hold out the drafts and the minstrels paused. The traveler took his weight on both feet and pushed back his hood. I had not realized how tall he was until then, nor that his hair was uncut and smooth as silk. It was like a cape on his shoulders, and as he stood straight in the yellow lamplight I saw the glitter of silver on his breast. He wore the hawk's head emblem, and I was taken aback.

Brennan saw all this as he left the hearth. Though he challenged most strangers who limped into the rath, he inclined his head before this one. Brennan was past his youth, big bellied and bearded, but he was still strong, still commanding. As always, he dismissed me without a glance and I stepped back into the shadows to watch. Brennan hooked his hands into the broad leather belt at his massive waist and cocked his head at my companion. The master of Breakheart dressed himself like a chieftain in velvets and fur, tunic and leggings, but his manners would never have passed muster in Moorkind.

"Well met, stranger," he offered amiably enough. "You came to grief on the road? Brigands or wolves?"

"Both." Blue-gray eyes flickered to me. "If this lad hadn't found me, I was done for the next time the wolves came in." He offered his hand and Brennan had the grace to take it. "I am Richard Leon ... and I need lodgings, a meal, and a decent horse, if you have one for sale."

For a time Brennan studied him, thoughtful or suspicious, which was his

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