

THE LAST WIZARD

AT THE END OF THE WORLD

An Arestus Adventure

MARK WALLACE MAGUIRE

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The Last Wizard
at The End of The World
An Arestus Adventure
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AUTHOR'S NOTES

This book is 'An Arestus Adventure,' and is a sequel to, 'In Pursuit of The Pale Prince.' However, it can be read on its own.

This book contains many words, phrases and sentence structure not in common use with English language speakers in the 20th century. The unique words and structure are intentional and culled from traditions such as Old English, Norse and Slendoc. That said, this book may not be suitable for less adventurous readers.

For those still interested, enjoy the journey.

Best,

Mark Wallace Maguire

Red Clay Country, June 2020

To my fellow magicians



1

I saw the man before he saw me.

I had seen him before. Plundering the crops. Plucking the fat cobs of corn. Yanking ripe carrots from the ground. But he had always scampered away before I could get to him. My horse's hooves thudding on the ground signaling my arrival.

This time, I crept on my feet into the field. Had left my horse stabled at Gresson.

Now, I was close enough to hear the crack of the corn being yanked from its green sheath, his feet padding on the rich ground. Could almost smell his onioned breath.

"You," I said, forcing iron into my voice the way I had learned from the soldiers. "Stop."

The man jerked his head up and eyed me with surprise.

"But, I, I - "

"Enough," I said. "Put your basket down and promise to never return and I won't take you to be prosecuted."

A look of fear spread across his speckled face. Then he broke out in a grin.

“You,” he said. “You?” and a harsh laugh. “You are just a boy.”

I felt anger rising in me, but pushed it down. I was 16 summers old. I was clad in fine mail and the shield slung across my back bore the white crown of The Pale Prince. I had experienced battle. Seen blood and the worst of men. I had even killed. One man. The man who betrayed my father. I was no boy.

There was the whisper of a late summer breeze shuffling through the stalks. The man stared at me unmoving. His mouth agape in a half-smile.

“It does not matter who I am or how old I am,” I said. “These crops are for the orphans and the widows. Not for thieves and not for free. Lay down your basket and leave.”

In the spring, The Pale Prince had given me this patch of field to guard. And only me. I had kept it from scavengers and thieves all summer until this man began stealing a few weeks ago.

“Or what?” and he laughed again. “What will you do boy? Fight me?”

I took a step and unleashed Coal Biter, my sword that had been given to me by my father. It was born from The Burned Lands and as it left its sheath, it gave a ring that broke the placid air of stalk and vine.

“Yes,” I said. “I will fight you.”

His fear was replaced by anger. He dropped the basket, the laden goods spilling on the ground. Reached to his back and drew out a cruel dagger.

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“Well, then, so be it.”

2

I let him make the first move. I had learned much studying under the warriors of Gresson since the war ended many summers before. I knew how to sidestep blows and to parry and lead. To aim for the weak spots and use my balance to keep my foe flailing. To stab instead of slash and to stay on my toes.

The man lunged at me. I sidestepped and as he stumbled past me, and gave him a thunk on the back of his head with the flat of my sword.

He fell to the ground and cursed.

“Now, that is enough,” I said.

He stood. The dagger still outstretched in his trembling hand.

“Enough? Boy, you are going to die over carrots and corn.”

He ran at me again. This time I stepped forward and darted Coal Biter in a swift strike that pierced his forearm. He howled. The dagger fell to the ground and a blood blossom spat fresh red on his sleeve.

I kicked the dagger away in the dirt and pointed Coal Biter at his heart.

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“No more of this. You can fight for justice at the hands of The Pale Prince, not me.”

Anger in his eyes, he lay a hand on his wound and I walked him to Gresson.

3

The next morning I was laying under the old oak outside of Gresson's walls.

The very tree where I slept the night before The Battle for The Valley. The tree's roots had become as familiar to me as the ridges of my hand, and I always found comfort there when I wanted to think. Soon high summer would be behind us and I could smell the first of the earthy rot from the leaves that lay around its trunk.

It had been six summers since the war when the kingdoms of The Pale Prince had been victorious in their defense against the Southwen. Since that day, I had grown in stature and mind and the kingdoms had grown in trade, stability and unity.

My friend Cirin, a mighty warrior, had helped the Pale Prince win the battle and in the summers since had helped him rebuild the kingdoms. He not only strengthened the might of the armies and the forts, but negotiated fair trade and hunting laws. He was The Pale Prince's second in command.

All the while, I followed Cirin and learned from him. I learned by listening. I learned by asking questions. My fearlessness in seeking answers gained me strong knowledge, for I was unafraid to look ignorant. I knew later, I would be smarter for it.

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Some thought he was my father, or an older brother. Most just called me his shadow. I never argued with the name but took pride in it. His shadow.

Six summers. I could not believe how the seasons had passed. I twiddled a broken leaf with my fingers.

A stick crunched behind me and I heard footfalls.

I turned. It was Cirin. Always clad in armor that shimmered beneath his gray eyes as he looked like one of the sky gods.

“It is time for me to leave, Arestus,” he said, and I saw a glint of a tear in his eye.

What was wrong?

I wondered.

4

“Time to leave?”

“Yes. West. Don’t you remember?”

I did remember. We promised his friends, Iris and Gerlund, we would sail west and find them in the new lands after we found The Pale Prince. I had wondered why we had not pursued them after Cirin healed from his wounds. But we were so busy helping The Pale Prince rebuild and over time, I thought about leaving less and less.

I found a good life in Gresson. When I was not by Cirin’s side, I studied with the healers and trained with the warriors. I had a small room to myself and I ate in the great hall at night with the other warriors. I studied the stars and the seasons.

The past was frozen.

My parents were dead. There was nothing for me left to go back to my home in The Wood.

I did not want to think about the future that stretched like an empty sea. Like the leaf that fell from the tree, I let myself be carried along, neither fighting nor questioning where fate would take me. But, I never completely forgot. I never forgot Cirin’s promise to

sail west on the unknown seas and find the lost tribes. I never forgot the mystery beyond the western waves. I never forgot the girl named Gerlund, her moss green eyes and hair the color of pale winter sunshine.

“Yes,” I said, shaking my head from a half daze. “I have wondered why we waited to sail. I thought you decided to stay here...forever.”

“And you have not asked me why?” and the look of merriment danced on his face. “Of course, you haven’t. You are loyal, Arestus. A loyal shadow. Yes, I stayed here. My friendship with The Pale Prince and his family bound me, and I’ve found joy in helping him rebuild. But now autumn is coming...again. The last of the fair winds will be leaving the seas soon, and I cannot wait another winter before searching for Iris and Gerlund. My soul itches. It is telling me to move. My work here is done. The time to sail is now.”

“What of The Prince?”

Cirin smiled.

“Oh, he understands. He said he is surprised I stayed this long. He is a good friend, but he knows. He knows where my heart lies,” he said. “Before we came here together, I swore I would never lift a spear except to stab a fish or slay a deer, yet this changed everything. I am who I am, Arestus. I am Cirin the Sailor and Cirin the Slayer and though I do not seek to fight, I know now that when I venture west I must go armed and wary and not with a dulled mind. It is true, I spent too much time on the waves living away from conflict until we came here and I had to embrace who I was,” and he motioned around with his head. “Ah, Arestus, I had grown

too soft on the waves. I fell into the still comfort and rhythm of the seas and forgot how cunning men could be and what devilment we could wreak upon each other. This time here has been good for me. It has made me know that I am who I am, and the best way to change the world is not to run away from it, but to confront it with your eyes raised to the sky and a sword in your hand...Now it is time for me to move on.”

I nodded.

“But what of you, Arestus? You said you would come with me. You would sail west with me. Do you remember that? You said that here under this very tree. Promised me. But, that was then. What will you do now? Will you sail with me or you stay with the Prince? He said you would make a fine captain one day or a healer. Like all of us, he sees your father in you. The hands that can heal and harm. What is your choice?”

“You know my choice. I will sail with you,” and I was almost angry. How could he ask such a question after all the time we had spent together? He had become my best friend. He was my only real friend. I was his shadow.

He grinned.

“I know and I knew, but I had to ask, Arestus. I wouldn’t want to bind your future to words you said after the war when your heart was full and your blood hot and fed on glory.”

“There was no glory then for me, but my heart was full. I am ready. I am your friend and will always be.”

5

The linen shirt was light against my skin and a relief to the harsh winds that sang across the land. The shirt had been woven from the cotton trees by the women of Digby and was one of my goodbye gifts from The Prince. He also gave me a piece of chain mail that clung to my chest, new wool breeches and supple leather boots that hugged my feet.

Most of all, he presented me with a new shield crafted from thin, but tough iron.

“I hope it will be a mighty friend for Coal Biter,” he told me as he placed it in my hands. “A strong sword deserves a fine shield. I know you have heard me thank you a hundred times for bringing us the Crown of Ellesund to win the war, but I will say it again. Thank you, my friend. You changed more than the course of a war; you changed me. You always have a home here.”

That was a day ago in a great wooden hall in the coolth of the evening. Now, Cirin and I, along with four soldiers, were trudging across The Western Wastes, the dreary brown and sand land that stretched with only a few spindly trees and was roamed by wolves and bandits. On the other side of the Wastes waited the city of Silverton and beyond that, the sea.

I did not think we needed the extra protection of soldiers, but The Prince had insisted. Cirin and I rode ahead of them. A comfortable silence between us, each of us in our thoughts as we left our old lives behind.

As much as I was ready to explore the lands to the West, my heart was confused. I felt like a bird returned too early for spring when the winter teased between sticky days and frost-bitten nights. I had grown up so much in Gresson. I was not the same person I was when I entered its gates.

I tried not to think of the past or let anxiety punish me for a future yet to come, so I focused on the blank land before us and heard nothing but the plod of hooves on sand and the occasional grunt of man or beast.

6

She came at my favorite time of day, when dusk reigns and shadow and starlight intermingle like the salt and fresh waters of the brackish streams. That thin time of day when it is neither day nor night, when the last of the golden burnt clouds sink to grey and the sky yields its scalded orange to periwinkled blue.

Cirin and I built our fire and were eating in the half-stupor of tired men when we heard the twang of an arrow loosed followed by a low curse.

Cirin sprang to his feet.

“No,” he said. “Lower your bow.”

“But my lord, don’t you see? There is a huge wolf circling us. It is the largest I have ever seen, it is - ”

“Enough. No more,” said Cirin.

I squinted and could see the outline of a wolf looming in the distance skittering back and forth.

“Put your bows away,” Cirin said. “She knows I am here. She knew I would come.”

I looked at him and he stood straighter. His nostrils flared and his eyes were bright. He lifted a hand over his eyes and a smile crossed his lips.

7

It was the She Wolf.

The wolf we had fought with as we crossed The Western Wastes the first time. The wolf with the yellow blaze on her snout that had led a pack and attacked Cirin and I and our friend Hendelf just before dawn. It was a brutal night filled with fire and yelps. The smell of burnt fur and the eerie red eyes of the wolves still haunted me in my dreams. Yet, we had survived that night. The three of us had killed most of her pack. Afterward, as dawn bled its blueness across the horizon, the great She Wolf skirted just out of bow range circling. Almost waiting.

Cirin had laid down his spear and cautiously approached her. There was no malice between them that morning. An easy truce was forged and soon he was rubbing her behind her ears and whispered her stories and gods knew what secrets of his and theirs of battle and pitches and murmurs of regret.

He had bid her farewell and she rushed toward the horizon before the sun was up. The two had made a strange pair in the eerie light.

But, how could she remember us? That was a long time ago. How did Cirin remember her? What had they shared? A bond? A nameless magic?

I jumped to my feet and watched them now in what seemed like a dream.

Cirin walked to greet her, his form black against the setting sun. Small puffs of dust rising from his feet. The soldiers muttering in disbelief.

He extended his hand.

The sniff from a snout.

Cirin bent on one knee and began speaking softly to her, his mouth close to her ears.

The tail began to twitch and I knew our fortunes were changing yet again.

8

She came back to the camp with him.

The men fell back and crowded around their fire to sleep by themselves near the horses. They did not trust the beast. I heard low murmurings of black magic or sorcery. I stayed standing. My hand on Coal Biter. I cannot tell you I was fearless of the She Wolf. But I trusted Cirin. I knew my place and it was in our camp, at our fire with my friend. I would not leave his side.

As she walked closer to the fire, I could see the details of her coat. A fine, rich coat that was all black except for the brazen yellow blaze on her snout.

She circled me a few times, each time coming closer. Perhaps she could smell my fear. Perhaps she could sense my reluctance.

“Go on, Arestus,” Cirin spoke softly. “Extend your fist. Let go of your sword. Let her smell you. Tell her your stories. She is strong, but has sorrow and maybe is as curious as you. Do not be afraid.”

I put my fist stiffly into the air between us. Our eyes met and we held each other’s gaze. She padded closer to my fist. A strange earthy scent emanated from her. Then suddenly, her thick tongue was out and she licked my fingers.

I let loose a laugh that I tried to stifle. The wolf licked my fist again and rubbed her snout against my forearm. Cirin laughed. I reached behind her ear and gave her a quick rub. A deep groan of satisfaction whinnied from somewhere inside of her and I rubbed her ears again.

“See, Arestus, I told you not to be afraid. I think we have a new friend. She may become very hard to get rid of, and that is a good problem to have in this world, where friends can often fade at the first sign of misfortune or hint of an ill wind.”

9

I slept fitfully that night. Rolling over and over on the hard ground. Every time opening my eyes to make sure the She Wolf was there and not baring her fangs or preparing to attack us. She lay by Cirin's feet and slept. Her thick paws on his legs. Her nose nuzzled in his blanket.

When dawn came, our new friend was still with us. Standing guard by Cirin's feet. Her black eyes sparkling. Her ears pricked up and her eyes scoured the land. Cirin was still sleeping and the men who had slept by the horses were groaning, talking in small voices.

I stared at the wolf. Stuck my fist out again. She lowered her head and padded over. Licked my fist. I rubbed her behind the ears and brought my mouth close to them.

"Good morning, wolf," I whispered. "What are you doing up so early? Were you just watching the stars disappear before the sun arrived? I like to watch the stars. They look like sand scattered on a piece of wood. My father told me they were all of our friends' and family's spirits watching over us."

Her tail began to wag and I wondered if Cirin was right. Did she understand me? Did she like hearing my stories?

A rustle of blankets behind me. Cirin spoke.

“Ah, Arestus. You are up and so is our new friend.”

The wolf trotted over to Cirin, who extended his hands and patted her on the side.

“Are you ready for an adventure? You can stay here if you wish, but we are going far away, my new friend. We are sailing. Sailing west to find the lost tribes. I hope you will be with us, but if you abandon us when you see the fullness of the sea, I will not be angry at you. Even I, once a fine sailor, find the sea a beautiful, yet quarrelsome and unpredictable thing. One to be reckoned with and always respected. If you don't fear it, you don't respect it, and if you don't respect it you have no means to be on its mighty waves.”

The wolf stared at Cirin.

“Well, there's only one way to find out. Let's get riding,” and he turned to me. “I think we can make it through the rest of this accursed land by nightfall and find a crossing over the River Orth. But, we must ride fast.”

So we did.

10

We left the dust from The Western Wastes behind us and crossed over into the verdant lands just south of Silverton. Cirin had forsaken traveling back through the city and found a boatman who could take us across the River Orth for a small price.

The Prince's men who accompanied us were civil, but I could sense in their stilted words and stiff praise, they were ready to be rid of our strange party. What a sight we had to be to them. A warrior as tall as a grizzly bear on its hind legs. A young man with shaggy hair clothed in fine armor and garments and a huge untamed wolf.

Our boatman took no notice of such things. I thought him daft or ignorant, but only summers later realized his manner was of one who had seen enough in this world that nothing surprised him anymore and all that mattered was the glint of the silver coin that was our fare.

The river crossing was short and as soon as our horses' hooves landed on the other side, Cirin bucked his horse and they went sprinting across the field. The wolf behind them and me straining to keep up. We were miles inland with hills and dales and woods ahead, yet I swear Cirin could already smell the scent of salt and sand and knew we would be on the waves soon.