

CHAPTER ONE

“He Wants to See You”

Beau Brumsfeld thought he sat alone at his usual table in a back corner of Dunn’s Tavern. Lost in the latest edition of the *Farmers’ Chronicles*, it took an unfamiliar voice to bring him into the present.

“He wants to see you,” was all the voice said.

Beau looked up to see a man sitting across the table looking directly into his eyes. Long and lean, pointed beard reaching down to the table, this one, Beau knew, did not come from the Dale. He wore a dull brown coat with a hood that fell over his forehead to the top of his eyebrows.

“Uh, hello?”

“I will come for you in the morning. Be ready for a journey.” The voice carried only information, no expression.

“What journey? Who wants to see me?”

“All will be explained. Be ready in the morning.”

The stranger rose, turned, then walked through the swinging doors of the tavern. Beau looked around, as if some-

one might explain what just happened. But all he saw were the regulars, none of whom seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary.

He turned his attention back to the *Farmers' Chronicles*. He felt lucky whenever he was able to get one of the hand-lettered editions of the *Chronicles*, which told of the latest events around the Dale and the latest thoughts on the recent troublesome weather. He started to read about Kitty Renn, who was about to marry a lad from the north part of the Dale. He had known Kitty since she was a little girl, but he was soon just staring at the page. His interest in the two-headed calf born on Thoms Dingle's farm faded after the first few sentences.

After the curious message from the stranger, he could not concentrate on weather or local happenings.

He was probably an Old One, he thought. Beau had seen a few over the years traveling through the Dale. People thought them mysterious, probably because they kept to themselves.

Beau tried again to concentrate on the *Chronicles*, but he couldn't get the Old One's cryptic message out of his head. Leaving his unfinished glass on the table, he rose and left Dunn's through the same doors.

The trees that lined the path from Dunn's to Beau's home always gave him a feeling of shelter. The branches from each side reached up and across to meet overhead, making an archway for the traveler. Early fall started to bring color to the leaves. Most were still green, while a few showed various hues of yellow, gold, and red. Occasionally a leaf fell gently to the ground. Thin clouds, common of late, let faint sunlight pass through. Further softened by the leaves, the light carpeted the path with dappled spots.

On this familiar path, Beau thought about his comfortable life on an apple farm. He thought of all the parts of the Land and the peoples who lived there, including the Old Ones. He had on occasion seen some of these people traveling through the Dale, either singly or in twos or threes. They never paid much attention to the people in the Dale, and Beau never paid much attention to them. Until now, when one of them turned up at his table in his favorite tavern with a strange message.

Absorbed in his thoughts, Beau almost bumped into the door of his own cabin. With log sides and a thatched roof, the cabin seemed to be a natural part of the surrounding woods. It had been in his family for generations, as had the apple orchard. The small abode had always been his home.

Beau entered, hung his coat on a hook fastened to the inside of the door, and settled into the cushions in his favorite chair, an old, sturdy rocker with a footstool. The rest of the furniture consisted of two more chairs, a small couch, and a few oil lamps. A few paintings of local scenery hung on the walls. Across from the rocker stood a stone fireplace.

As Beau put his feet on the footstool, his thoughts returned to the strange Old One. What nerve. Telling him someone wanted to see him. Be ready for a journey. As if he were supposed to suddenly jump up and go someplace just because some stranger said he should.

“Well, not a bad time for a journey,” he said aloud to no one. “It’s fall, the apples are stored. Nothing has to be done for awhile.”

What a ridiculous idea, he thought. Why would he want to go anywhere?

He walked past the fireplace and paused, as he sometimes did, to gaze at a painting on the mantle. A woman

looked out at him. Her smile and green eyes were framed by blond hair that flowed down the sides of her face and over her shoulders. She held a harp as gently as if she were holding a baby.

He remembered the first time he saw her face. It was at a dance. Suddenly, she was the only person in the room. She looked at him, and he thought he saw an added sparkle in her eyes. They danced that night. Beau felt she fit right into his arms.

Soon they were spending time together. Beau had been happy. Then . . . well . . . then.

Beau continued past the fireplace.

"I think I've still got that pack," Beau muttered. He went into the bedroom and looked behind his wardrobe. There it sat; a tan, leather backpack now covered with dust. Beau had used it for trips to the outskirts of the Dale.

He brushed off the dust and looked carefully at the pack, making sure that it was still in good shape. He laid it on his bed, opened it up, and began filling it with traveling clothes. As he closed the pack, he thought of the strange Old One in Dunn's. Even if he were to go on some journey, that one would be the last person he would go with.

Beau left the bedroom carrying the pack, which he laid by the door. Then he began his evening routine: He went to the kitchen, started a fire in the woodstove, and set a pot of water on a burner. When the water was hot, he poured it over loose tea leaves in his mug and made himself a sandwich of bread and meat.

He returned to the rocking chair to eat his sandwich and sip his tea. After he finished the small meal, he looked at the door and the pack. He leaned back in the chair and, in a short time, fell asleep.

He woke the next morning and looked around. It took a few moments for him to realize he had fallen asleep in his chair. Then he noticed what had wakened him—rapid knocking at his door. He shook off the last of a groggy feeling and walked to the door. He opened it to find the strange Old One looking down at him. He wore the same clothes, but looked very different. He had pulled the hood back over his head, exposing his face. His eyes had a twinkle, and his mouth had a smile. Beau could only repeat his previous greeting.

“Uh, hello?”

“Hello,” said the stranger. Wrinkles formed at the corners of his mouth as his smile widened. “You look surprised.”

“Well, I didn’t . . .”

“I said I’d come in the morning, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did. But I couldn’t make much sense of what you were saying.”

“Still, I see you made ready for a journey.” He pointed to the pack Beau had set by the door.

“It seems I did.”

The Old One chuckled for a few moments. “I’m sorry, Beau. I’m afraid I had to be a little mysterious yesterday. I’m also sorry I had to put a little spell on you. Don’t worry. It’s a harmless spell and it has already worn off. I left quickly because I had to rest after the spell. Also, I couldn’t say much with others around. I should introduce myself. My name is Carlan. I am a Shaman’s Squire. May I come in?”

“Well, yes. I guess so.” Beau backed away from the door. Carlan entered and found a chair. Beau sat in the rocker.

“How do you know my name?”

“I made a few inquiries. The ones I asked do not remember.” He cocked an eyebrow and smiled. “A Shaman’s Squire has some powers.”

“I have heard about a Shaman, sort of a legendary wizard type.”

“Oh, more than a legend, Beau. The Shami are the keepers of the wisdom of those you call the Old Ones. And wielders of great power, when they want to. But you will learn more of them later. For now, I owe you some explanation. As I said, I made some inquiries. I found out who in the Dale would be best for a very important job. Since our actions must be kept secret, I caused them to forget that I was even here. I also put a spell on you to prepare for a journey, even though you had every reason to consider the whole idea ridiculous.” The smile left as his lips straightened and he leaned forward to look into Beau’s eyes. “Sorry, but the matter is more important than you can imagine.”

Beau looked back into the stranger’s eyes. “What in the Land can be so important?”

“Goron will tell you the whole story.”

“Goron?”

“Goron is the Shaman I’m Squire to. He’s camped at the edge of the forest waiting for us.”

“He’s waiting for us, is he? So, what am I supposed to do? Go off with a stranger to meet another stranger to go on a journey to somewhere I don’t even know for some supposedly important reason I also don’t know?” Beau settled back in his rocker.

Carlan gazed once more into the Daleman’s eyes. “I know this seems foolish. You have, up to now, led a comfortable life here in the Dale. You have no reason to think that you can’t just keep living that life till you die. But, Beau, things are about to change. You’ve probably noticed the clouds. They’re omens.”

Beau straightened up in the rocker. “You know what’s bringing these damn clouds?”

“The clouds are just omens. They’re the least of the problems.”

“Not if you grow apples for a living.”

“The changes that are coming threaten everyone. Look, I’ll use no more spells or tricks. You need to make this decision on your own. Come with me and talk with Goron. After you’ve heard the story, choose for yourself if you want to join us. I think you will.”

“Why doesn’t this Goron come here and talk to me?”

Carlan’s smile returned. “As I said, we must keep what we are doing in secret. There are spies around. A Shaman would draw too much attention. What do you say, Beau? Ready to take a break from your comfortable life?”

Beau’s eyes stared straight ahead, but were not focused on a thing. He didn’t move. Eventually, Carlan asked, “What are you thinking?”

Beau lifted his head and looked at the Old One who had so mysteriously appeared in his life. “I’ve been trying to think of reasons to stay. And, frankly, I can’t find any. The few apples I managed to grow this year are sold. If this weather continues, I don’t know if I’ll be able to grow any next year. I can’t see any reason I shouldn’t go on a journey.”

“So?”

“So I’ll go with you.”

“Good!” Carlan said, rising from his chair. “You’re already packed, so let’s get going.”

Carlan opened the door and held it open for Beau. Beau lifted his pack, put it on his back, and walked out. After Carlan stepped out, Beau closed the door. They started down the path in the direction of the forest that bordered the Dale. As he walked away from all that he had ever known to an unknown journey, he never looked back.