

KALEDON

Legend of the Forgotten Reign

— Prologue —

Free preview

Alex Mele

Summer was slowly giving way to autumn in the lands of Kaledon. The fields that only a few months earlier had shone with deep green now wore shades of gold, and the farmers labored without rest to finish the harvest before the rains came. It was the busiest time of year, but also the one many preferred, for it was the moment when months of toil finally turned into something tangible. Montar leaned on the handle of his pitchfork and watched the sun sink slowly toward the horizon.

It had been a long day. One of the fences in the northern pasture had collapsed during the night, and much of the morning had been spent rebuilding it. On top of that, two oxen had wandered off and a cart had gotten stuck in the mud near the stream. Nothing extraordinary — just the ordinary hardships of country life. In fact, thinking about it, it was precisely that predictability he loved. He had never longed for adventure, riches, or glory.

It was enough for him to know that at the end of the day he would return home. Not far off, a few men were finishing loading the last of the hay onto their carts. Their voices mingled with the chirring of insects and the sound of the wind sweeping across the fields. It was a familiar sound, a reassuring one, that had accompanied life in that land for generations. Montar waved to a few neighbors and began gathering his tools.

Over the years he had learned that the land does not love those in a hurry. It demands patience, steadiness, and humility. In return it offers enough to live on, and a few satisfactions worth keeping among one's memories. As he loaded the last of his tools onto the cart, his thoughts drifted, as they so often did lately, to Skylar. It wasn't because she was far away. In fact, after so many years of marriage, the mere memory of her smile was enough to make any hardship feel lighter.

They had met at a harvest festival when they were little more than children. Montar still remembered perfectly the way the sun had lit up the young woman's golden hair, and the ease with which she put anyone she spoke to at their comfort. Many men in the village had been struck by her, yet somehow it was he who had won her heart. To this day he considered that the greatest stroke of fortune in his life. The horse plodded slowly along the path leading home as the sun finally vanished beyond the hills.

Shadows stretched across the countryside, and a cool evening breeze began to drift through the valleys. Montar breathed deeply. The air smelled of turned earth, of woodsmoke, of dry leaves. It was the smell of Kaledon. The smell of his life. It was at that moment that he saw a young family crossing a field not far off. A man walked holding a little girl's hand while a woman followed behind, smiling. The child was recounting something with great excitement, and her parents listened, amused.

Montar watched the scene for a moment before lowering his eyes to the reins. He felt no envy. That feeling had left him many years before. Instead he felt a gentle melancholy, the kind one feels thinking of a road never taken. He and Skylar had wanted a child. They had wanted one with all the strength that two people in love can summon. At first they had hoped. Then they had prayed. Finally they had learned to accept the silence with which fate had answered their pleas.

They rarely spoke of it anymore. Not because the pain had faded, but because some wounds become part of who we are. In time they stop bleeding, but they never truly disappear. Montar knew that Skylar still suffered more than she let on. He saw it when she smiled at the village children, or when she lingered a moment too long watching a young mother at the market. She never complained. She

never blamed the gods. She simply carried that weight in her heart with a dignity he had always admired.

When their house appeared among the trees, Montar felt the day's weariness lift at once. It was not a large or particularly handsome home. It was a simple stone building surrounded by a wooden fence, with a small vegetable garden out back and a chimney that smoked nearly all year round. And yet it represented everything he had built in his life. Every beam, every stone, every plank told part of his story. He was about to smile when something caught his attention.

In front of the entrance stood an object that had no business being there. Montar tugged gently on the reins and the horse slowed. At first he thought it might be a sack left by some neighbor, or a basket forgotten by a passing merchant. Yet the closer he drew, the more a feeling grew inside him that was hard to put into words. It wasn't fear. Nor worry. It was, rather, the sense that something important was about to happen.

When he reached the house, he climbed down from the cart without wasting a moment. The twilight made it hard to make out details, but he could see well enough that it was a wicker basket covered by an old wool blanket. He stood motionless for a few seconds, watching it in silence. There was no note. No mark. Nothing to explain why it had been left there of all places. Montar knelt slowly and reached a hand toward the fabric.

For some reason his heart had begun to pound faster. He lifted the blanket with the utmost care, and his breath caught in his throat. Inside the basket slept a child. Montar went still. For an instant he thought he must be mistaken. Perhaps the twilight was playing tricks on him. Perhaps the day's exhaustion was clouding his senses. And yet, even after blinking several times, the child was still there, asleep

in the basket as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world.

He looked to be a few months old, perhaps less than a year. A worn blanket wrapped him almost completely, leaving only his face and one small hand uncovered. He seemed to be sleeping peacefully, unaware that his presence was about to upend the calm of a household and, though no one could have imagined it, the very course of destiny. Montar looked around at once. The path was deserted. The hills surrounding the property lay steeped in the shadows of evening, and no sound but the wind seemed to rise from the countryside.

Whoever had left that child there was already gone.

“Is anyone there?” he called out. His voice carried across the fields and faded into silence. No answer. He waited a few seconds, then tried again.

“Hey!” Still nothing. The child stirred slightly. A small hand emerged from the blanket and closed on empty air. Then, slowly, his eyes opened. Montar could never have explained why that moment stayed etched in his memory. Perhaps it was the calm he saw in that gaze. Perhaps because he had expected crying and found only curiosity instead. The child looked at him — he did not seem frightened, did not seem confused. He simply watched him, then smiled.

It was a small smile, almost imperceptible, yet enough to utterly disarm the farmer.

“By all the gods...” he murmured. At that very instant the door of the house opened behind him.

“Montar?” Skylar’s voice carried that quiet familiarity that comes from many years of marriage.

“Is that you? I thought I heard you calling.” Montar turned slightly.

“Skylar... come here.” The woman stepped out onto the threshold, drying her hands on her apron. She had probably been preparing dinner. She took a few steps toward him, at first seeming annoyed by his expression. Then she saw the basket. The change on her face was immediate — curiosity gave way to astonishment, astonishment to confusion, and finally confusion to something far deeper. Skylar approached slowly and knelt beside her husband.

For a few seconds she said nothing. The child kept watching her, then reached a hand toward her. The woman instinctively raised a hand to her mouth.

“Oh...” It was little more than a whisper, “Oh, gods...” Montar saw his wife’s eyes fill with tears — they were not tears of sorrow. Not yet! They were tears born of something she herself likely could not have explained. The child waved his hand again. Skylar hesitated for a moment, then offered him a finger. The tiny fingers seized it at once. The woman held her breath. Montar saw her shoulders tremble. He knew that look. He had seen it only a few times in his life.

The first, on their wedding day. The second, when they had finished building the house. Now he was seeing it for the third time. It was the look of someone who feels their heart opening before something unexpected.

“Who could have done such a thing?” she whispered.

“I don’t know.”

“He’s here all alone.”

“Yes.” Skylar looked back down the path again, as though expecting someone to appear at any moment. But there was no one. Only the wind, only the evening advancing slowly over the fields of Kaledon.

“We have to bring him inside.” Montar nodded. This time he had no doubt at all. Whatever the child’s story might be, leaving him there was not an option. He carefully lifted the basket, and together they went into the house. The warmth of the hearth welcomed them at once. The smell of freshly baked bread filled the air, and a pot simmered over the fire. It was a familiar scene, ordinary, almost mundane. And yet that evening everything felt different.

As if the house itself sensed that something was changing. Skylar quickly cleared the table and set the basket upon it. Then she sat beside the child without taking her eyes off him. Montar removed his cloak and hung it beside the door. Ordinarily, after a day’s work, his first thought turned to dinner. That evening, instead, the smell of freshly baked bread and the stew simmering on the fire seemed to belong to another life entirely.

All his attention was fixed on their small guest.

“He must be hungry,” Skylar said after a few minutes. It wasn’t a particularly difficult guess. The child’s cheeks were slightly hollow, his hands too thin for his age. Whoever had left him at their door certainly hadn’t been feeding him well of late. The woman rose and went to the fire. She took a small pot and poured milk into it. While she waited for it to warm, she kept turning back toward the table to check that the child was well.

That small gesture brought an involuntary smile to Montar’s lips. It was like watching a part of Skylar that he had always known was there but had never had the chance to truly show itself. When the milk was ready, the woman returned to the table and sat beside the basket. With the utmost care she lifted the child into her arms. He let her, offering no resistance at all. If anything, he seemed to seek out the contact on his own, resting his head against her chest as though the gesture came naturally to him.

Skylar held her breath. Montar noticed at once. He said nothing. There was no need to. After so many years together he had learned to recognize every one of his wife's emotions long before she found the words to express it. The child began to drink eagerly. It was not the behavior of a spoiled child, nor simply a hungry one. It looked, rather, like the desperate gesture of someone afraid of losing what had just been given to him.

Skylar lowered her eyes and slowly stroked the boy's dark hair.

"Poor thing," she murmured. Montar remained silent. He had spent most of his life believing the world was, at bottom, a simple place. Men sowed, they harvested, they built families and tried to live honestly. Of course suffering and injustice existed, but somehow everything seemed to follow an order one could understand. That evening, though, he found himself facing something that defied all logic. Who was this child? Where had he come from?

Why had he been left right at their door? The more he thought about it, the less he could find a satisfying answer. When the child finished the milk, he let out a soft sigh and closed his eyes for a few seconds. He seemed finally at ease. Skylar smiled — a different smile from the ones Montar was used to seeing. Brighter. Deeper. Almost painful. The woman kept watching him for a long while before noticing that dinner had gone cold on the table.

"We should eat," she said.

"Probably." Neither of them moved. For some reason both feared that stepping away, even for a moment, might break the spell that had settled over the room. In the end it was Skylar who took the initiative. She settled the child back in the basket and joined her husband at the table. They ate almost in silence, exchanging only a few words. Every so often one of them would glance over to check on the child, as if afraid of seeing him vanish.

It was only once dinner was finished and the fire had been fed with fresh wood that the conversation took a different turn. Montar watched the flames for a while before speaking.

“We’ll have to tell the village tomorrow.” Skylar lowered her eyes. It was an inevitable conclusion.

“I know.”

“Someone might be looking for him.” The woman didn’t answer right away. She simply watched the sleeping child.

“Do you really think someone will come?” Montar hesitated. It was a simple question, but the answer was anything but.

“I don’t know.” And that was the truth. Because deep in his heart, a troubling suspicion was beginning to take shape. Perhaps no one would come. Perhaps whoever had left that child at their door had already made a final decision. Perhaps that little creature had been entrusted to fate. Or to them. The thought unsettled him more than he was willing to admit. As night wrapped around the fields of Kaledon outside and the wind set the shadows dancing beyond the windows, Montar and Skylar sat on beside the fire.

Neither of them could yet imagine that this would be the most important night of their lives — a night destined to mark the beginning of a story that, many years later, would change the fate of kings, heroes, and entire kingdoms. But for now there existed only a quiet house, the crackle of the hearth, and a child asleep in a wicker basket. And, for the first time in many years, the emptiness that had haunted that house seemed just a little less deep.

Skylar remained silent for a long while after those words. The firelight was reflected in her eyes, and for a moment Montar had the feeling his wife was no longer watching the sleeping child in the basket, but something far more distant. A memory, perhaps. Or perhaps one of the many lives she had imagined but never had the

chance to live. After so many years together, he had learned to recognize such moments. No explanations were needed.

One simply had to wait.

“Do you know what frightens me most?” she asked at last, without looking away from the fire. Montar shook his head slowly.

“That tomorrow someone will knock on that door.” The man didn’t answer right away. It was a fear he shared. In fact, the more the hours passed, the more real that possibility seemed to him. It would take only the arrival of a traveler, a desperate woman, or a man searching for a lost son to shatter the fragile balance that had settled over the room. And yet something about it kept striking him as strange. Someone who abandons a child at a doorstep does not act on impulse.

It is a decision. A painful one, perhaps. A desperate one. But a decision all the same.

“If someone is looking for him, they’ll come,” he said finally. Skylar nodded, but it was clear the answer brought her no comfort. For a few seconds she watched the boy sleeping deeply, then rose and went to the basket. She adjusted the blanket over his shoulders and gently brushed a cheek with her fingers. The child stirred slightly without waking. Montar watched the scene without intervening. In that moment he understood something he had until then only sensed.

It was not the child who needed them. At least, not only him. Skylar needed him too. The realization struck him with unexpected force. For years he had watched, helpless, the silent pain his wife carried. Not a loud or violent pain, but something harder to face. An emptiness. A void that had crept slowly into their life and never truly left. They had learned to live with it, to ignore it on the better days and accept it on the worse ones.

And yet it had never disappeared. Now, for the first time in a very long while, that emptiness felt a little less deep.

“Do you remember when we built this house?” Skylar asked, sitting back down. Montar smiled.

“How could I forget?”

“We were sure we knew everything.”

“We were sure we were clever.”

“We were sure we were young.” That observation drew a laugh from them both.

“We were right about that one,” he replied.

“Only that one.” For a while they let themselves drift into memory. They saw again the days spent hauling stones, cutting beams, fixing the roof under the summer sun. They remembered the mistakes made, the arguments, even the small disasters that at the time had seemed enormous. With the years, those memories had lost their sting, becoming simply part of their story.

“Do you remember the room at the end of the hall?” Skylar asked. Montar nodded slowly. Of course he remembered it. When they had planned the house, that room had had a very clear purpose. Neither of them had ever said it aloud, because it had seemed too obvious to need explaining. It was meant to be a nursery. For years they had kept calling it that, even after it became clear that no child would ever sleep within those walls.

“I rarely go in,” the woman confessed.

“Sometimes I open the door, look inside, then close it again. It’s foolish, I know.”

“It’s not foolish.”

“Maybe it is.” Montar shook his head.

“Some things don’t stop hurting just because time passes.” Skylar lowered her eyes. For the first time that evening she made no

attempt to hide her sadness. She simply sat listening to the crackle of the fire. It was then that a small sound came from the basket. Both of them turned. The child had turned over in his sleep and one hand had slipped free of the blanket. Nothing more. And yet it was enough to interrupt every thought.

Skylar smiled instinctively. Montar noticed, and for some reason that smile moved him more than anything else that had happened that evening. Because it was not the smile of a woman who had found a solution to her problems. It was the smile of a woman who had found hope again. And hope, he knew well, could be as wonderful as it was dangerous. He kept watching the child as the shadows of night stretched across the walls of the house.

Somewhere beyond the hills, the world went on. Other men dined with their families. Other children were put to bed. Other travelers made their way down roads swallowed by darkness. And yet, in that small house at the edge of Kaledon, something had changed. Not suddenly. Not visibly. But for good. Neither Montar nor Skylar was ready to admit it yet. And yet a part of them had already made the decision that, come morning, they would try desperately to justify with reason.

Their hearts, in fact, had chosen long before their minds. The house slowly sank into silence. It was not an empty silence, but the kind that forms when two people no longer need to fill every moment with words. The crackle of the hearth, the wind brushing the outer walls, and the child's steady breathing seemed enough to fill the space around them. Montar rose to add another log to the fire. The flames flared up at once, casting new shadows across the ceiling.

For a moment he stood watching the burning wood. He often found a strange peace in watching fire. There was something ancient

and reassuring in that light. As a boy he had spent whole evenings listening to his father's stories beside the hearth. Tales of extraordinary harvests, of terrible winters, of men who had crossed half a continent seeking their fortune. None of those stories spoke of kings or heroes. They were the stories of ordinary people.

Perhaps that was why they had always felt more true to him.

"What are you thinking about?" Skylar asked.

"My father." The woman smiled.

"It's been a long time since you last mentioned him."

"I know." Montar sat back down. For a few seconds he said nothing, as if searching through his memories for something he didn't want to lose.

"He always used to say that men spend half their lives making plans and the other half realizing that the things that truly matter arrive when you least expect them." Skylar looked at the child.

"Maybe he was right."

"Probably." The woman lowered her eyes and absently ran her fingers along the edge of the basket.

"Do you think there's a reason he was left right here?" It was a question both of them had asked themselves at least a dozen times that evening. Montar breathed slowly.

"I don't know."

"But you've thought about it."

"Yes."

"And?" The man hesitated. Not because he feared the answer, but because it seemed absurd to him.

"I think whoever left him here knew exactly what they were doing." Skylar said nothing.

"There are other houses closer to the village. Other families. People wealthier than us. People living in better conditions. And yet

someone walked all this way to get here.”

“Are you saying he was chosen on purpose?”

“I’m saying I don’t believe it was chance.” The woman fell into thought. It was, in fact, hard to dismiss that possibility. Their house did not sit along any well-traveled road. Whoever had abandoned the child could have left him in dozens of places far easier to reach. In front of the village inn. Near the temple. Even before the mayor’s residence. And yet he had been left here. At their door. The realization hung between them, and neither found the courage to explore it further.

The child stirred slightly in his sleep. This time he opened his eyes for an instant, looked around the room, and closed them again almost immediately. He seemed calm. Calmer than an abandoned child had any right to be.

“It’s strange,” Skylar said.

“What is?” Montar looked at the boy.

“He isn’t afraid.”

“Maybe he’s too exhausted.”

“Maybe.” But neither of them looked truly convinced. For some reason that child radiated a serenity hard to explain. It wasn’t the manner of someone left alone in the world. It looked, instead, like the demeanor of someone who had finally reached the place he was meant to be. The thought crossed Skylar’s mind and nearly made her smile. It was absurd. And yet she couldn’t shake it. The hours went on slipping by. At a certain point the moon reached its highest point in the sky, and silvery light began filtering through the window.

The village, the countryside, and the surrounding woods now lay deep in sleep. Montar noticed his wife was fighting off exhaustion.

“You should rest.”

“In a little while.”

“You’ve been saying that for an hour.”

“In a little while.” The man smiled. Some things never changed. Skylar still had the same stubbornness that had made him fall in love with her so many years before.

“You’re impossible.”

“And yet you married me.”

“That was my first great mistake.” The woman shot him an indignant look that lasted less than a second before dissolving into laughter. Montar laughed too. The child stirred slightly but did not wake. For a few minutes they simply sat there, letting themselves be lulled by that unexpected peace. Neither of them could know that this would be the last night of their lives before destiny truly began to move. For now, though, the future did not exist.

Only the present existed. A modest house. A blazing hearth. Two people who had learned to love each other despite life’s wounds. And a child who had arrived out of nowhere and who, without saying a single word, had already begun to change everything. Time seemed to slow. The conversation grew sparser and the silences longer, though no less meaningful for it. Montar had always believed silence was a simple thing. Only with the passing years had he come to understand that there were many kinds of silence.

There was the silence of loneliness, which weighs on the chest like a stone. There was the silence of anger, which separates people more than any distance ever could. And then there was the one he was sharing with Skylar in that moment: a silence made of understanding, of thoughts that needed no words to be understood. The woman had drifted back toward the basket once again. She hardly seemed to notice she was doing it. Every time she stepped away, she inevitably found herself drawn back to the child’s side.

She watched him sleep, straightened his blanket, brushed his hair with her fingertips. They were spontaneous gestures, free of any deliberation — gestures born from some deep part of her that had perhaps waited years for the chance to reveal itself. Montar watched her without saying a word. In that moment he understood that the woman sitting before him had not changed. She had always been this person. The years had not created that tenderness, nor that desire to protect someone.

They were qualities she had always possessed. They simply had never found someone to receive them. It was then that Skylar spoke.

“Do you think he’ll remember this night?” The question caught Montar by surprise.

“When he’s grown?” She nodded. The man looked at the child and smiled.

“No. He’s too little.”

“I thought as much.” Skylar fell silent for a moment before adding, “It’s strange.”

“What is?”

“For him, this night will mean nothing. He probably won’t keep any memory of it at all. And yet for us it will be impossible to forget.” Montar turned her words over in his mind. It was true. For that child, it would be just one of the countless nights of his childhood — a night time would erase without a trace. For them, on the other hand, everything had already changed. Whatever happened the following day, they would never be the same people again.

The farmer rose and went to the window. Outside, the sky was clear. Thousands of stars shone above the fields of Kaledon. The hills seemed asleep, and even the wind had grown still. In that utter quiet the world appeared unchanging, eternal. And yet Montar knew that nothing stays the same forever. It was a lesson life had taught

him many times. The seasons change. People grow old. Children become men. Joys come and go. Even pain, sooner or later, turns into something else.

As he studied the horizon, he realized that for years he had believed he knew the course his life would take. He had thought the future already written: he would go on working the land, living beside Skylar, and one day he would leave this world exactly as he had found it. A simple life. A dignified life. An ordinary life. Now he was no longer so sure. Not because he imagined grand adventures or extraordinary events, but because the simple fact that this child had appeared at his door proved that fate still had the power to surprise him.

“Montar.” Skylar’s voice pulled him back to the present. When he turned, he saw that she was holding the child in her arms. He had woken up. He wasn’t crying. He didn’t look frightened. He was simply studying the room with the seriousness of someone trying to make sense of an entirely new world. Skylar smiled.

“Look.” The little one had reached a hand toward the fire, fascinated by the light of the flames.

“I think he likes the hearth.”

“Let’s hope he only likes looking at it.” She laughed.

“Already worried he’ll get into trouble?”

“He’s a child. It’s practically his job.” For a few seconds they simply watched him. It was then that something insignificant happened — and yet, years later, they would both still remember it. The child laid his head against Skylar’s chest and slowly closed his eyes. That was all. A simple gesture. Natural. Instinctive. But in that exact moment, something inside the woman broke for good. Or perhaps mended. Montar could not have said which.

He only saw Skylar's eyes fill with tears. Not tears of sadness. Not tears of grief. They were tears born of an emotion too large to be contained. She lowered her eyes to the child and held him gently, as though afraid the world might snatch him away. As though she had waited her whole life for that instant. Montar understood then that there was no turning back anymore. It didn't matter what would happen the next day. It didn't matter who that child was.

It didn't matter where he had come from. For Skylar he had already become something far more important than a stranger found in a basket. He had become a hope. And hope, once it takes root in a person's heart, cannot simply be set aside. He kept watching the scene without interrupting it. Outside, far in the distance, the horizon had only just begun to lighten. Dawn was still far off, but the night had already begun giving way to the new day.

And unbeknownst to anyone present, destiny too was beginning to rise. Slowly, almost without their noticing, the conversation died away. Not because they had run out of things to say, but because some nights reach a point where words are no longer needed. Only thoughts remain, and the breathing of people who love each other, and time going on with the patience of one who knows nothing can stop it. Skylar had settled into the old armchair by the hearth.

The child rested in her arms and finally seemed completely at peace. His small hands had relaxed, and his face had lost the faint, almost imperceptible tension that had marked him through the early hours of the evening. For the first time since they had found him, he truly looked safe. Montar watched the scene and felt a strange tightness in his chest. It wasn't pain. It wasn't happiness either. It was something more complicated — the awareness that some moments have the power to split a life into two parts: what came before, and what comes after.

Perhaps that was exactly what was happening. Perhaps that night would become one of those memories that stay with a man into old age. He sat back down by the fire and let his gaze wander around the room. Every object was familiar to him. The table his father had built. The cupboard Skylar had received as a wedding gift. The shelves lined with tools. The hand-sewn curtains. Everything told part of their story. For years he had believed that story was already complete — not finished, but settled, like a book that has already found its tone and its path.

Now he realized he had been wrong. Life never truly stops surprising those willing to receive it — even when one is convinced there are no more surprises left to expect. The fire burned lower. Montar added another log and the flames rose again. The glow lit Skylar's sleeping face. She too, in the end, had given in to exhaustion. Her head tilted slightly to one side, an expression of peace smoothing her features. Montar could not remember the last time he had seen her sleep with that smile.

Perhaps it had never happened before. For years he had watched his wife face her sorrow with dignity, without complaint, never letting bitterness change who she was. And yet he had always known that some part of her kept waiting for something. Now that part seemed, at last, to have found an answer. He rose carefully and took a blanket. He laid it over Skylar's shoulders, taking care not to wake her. Then he stood still for a moment, watching the woman and the child.

They seemed to belong to one another. It was an irrational feeling. And yet it was impossible to ignore. The little one stirred slightly in his sleep and instinctively sought the warmth of the body holding him close. Skylar, without waking, drew him even closer. Montar smiled. In that moment he understood the decision had

already been made. Not in words. Not through reason. But through something far deeper. If no one came the next morning to claim that child, there would be no debate.

No discussion. No doubt. He would stay with them. The man went back to the window. The horizon had begun to change color. The fainter stars were vanishing, and a thin silver band stretched above the eastern hills. Dawn was drawing near. With it would come the time for questions. The village. The explanations. The official decisions. Everything the night had been able to postpone. But not yet. For a few minutes the world seemed to hold its breath.

Then something simple happened — something probably no one else would have thought important. The child opened his eyes. He didn't cry. He didn't stir. He looked at the room. He looked at the fire. He looked at Skylar. Finally he looked at Montar. Their eyes met for a brief instant. And the little one smiled. Once again — the same smile he had shown in the basket. The same smile that seemed to appear every time he met one of their gazes.

Montar felt something loosen inside him. He would never have admitted such a thing in front of anyone else. But in that precise instant he stopped seeing an unknown child. He began to see a son. Not his own son. Not yet. But the possibility of becoming one. And that was an enormous difference. It was then that the first rays of sun crested the hills. Light poured through the window and moved slowly across the room, brushing the table, the floor, and finally the child's face.

Skylar opened her eyes at almost the same moment. For a few seconds she seemed confused. Then she remembered. She lowered her eyes to the little one and smiled — a smile full of wonder, as though she feared it might all vanish at any moment. The child answered with a brief laugh. A small sound. Crystalline. Pure. And

yet it was enough to fill the house more than any words could have. Montar turned toward the window. The sun was rising over Kaledon.

A new day had begun. Neither of them could know what roads that child would walk, what friendships he would form, what choices he would make, or what mark he would leave upon the world. For now there existed only that house. There existed only the three of them. And for the first time in many years, the future no longer looked like a road already mapped out, but like something new. Something to discover. Something that, silently, had knocked at their door in the dead of night, hidden inside a simple wicker basket.

Montar lingered a while longer at the window. The sun continued its slow climb through the sky, and the morning light spread across the countryside with an almost unreal gentleness. Dew glistened on the grass, and the first birds were beginning to fill the air with their song. It was a morning like any other. And yet, for him, it was nothing of the sort. When he turned, he found Skylar still sitting in the armchair. The child was awake, studying the room with the attentiveness of someone trying to fix every detail in memory.

Every so often his gaze paused on the hearth, then on the furniture, then on the faces of the two adults. He showed no fear at all. If anything, he seemed perfectly at ease.

“He’s hungry,” Skylar observed.

“How do you know?”

“Because he’s looking at me like I’m a pantry.” Montar laughed.

“Then I fear you’re right.” The woman rose and went back to the fire. For the first time in many hours, the house came alive again with the ordinary motions of daily life. Bread was cut, water warmed, breakfast prepared. And yet even those actions felt different. Every movement was accompanied by the child’s presence, as if he had always been there. As they ate, Montar noticed

something that had until then escaped him. The house hadn't changed.

The walls were the same. The furniture was the same. The hearth was the same. And yet everything felt more alive, as though a room shut up for years had suddenly been thrown open, letting in fresh air. The realization struck him with unexpected force. For a long time he had believed that he and Skylar had fully accepted their fate. He had thought they'd learned to live alongside that emptiness. Perhaps that was true. But living alongside an absence does not mean one stops feeling it.

He looked at his wife as she held the child in her arms. She was smiling — not the polite smile she gave to others, not the courteous one she wore at village festivals. It was a genuine smile, the kind that rises from deep within. Montar understood he would do anything to see it again. The morning wore on slowly. As the hours passed, the first sounds of the countryside began to reach them. A cart in the distance. The voices of a few farmers.

The world was picking up its rhythm again. And with it came the return of responsibilities.

"We'll have to go to the village," Montar said at last. Skylar nodded. She didn't look surprised. Both of them knew that moment would come.

"I know."

"They'll need to know we found a child."

"I know."

"Someone might recognize him." The woman lowered her eyes. For the first time since the sun had risen, the shadow of worry returned to her face.

"And what if no one recognizes him?" Montar didn't answer right away. He looked at the little one. The child was playing with a

corner of the blanket, entirely unaware of the conversation.

“Then we’ll have to make a decision.” Skylar stared at him. For an instant neither spoke. There was no need to. The decision had already been made many hours before — in the night, before the fire, when the child had gripped Skylar’s finger, when he had slept in her arms, when the silence of the house had stopped feeling empty. They both knew it. They both pretended not to. Because making it real meant also accepting the risk of losing him.

It was then that the child let out a short laugh. Montar and Skylar turned at the same instant. The little one was watching them, smiling, as though he understood something they still couldn’t bring themselves to admit. Montar burst out laughing. Skylar did the same. And for a few seconds every fear, every doubt, every uncertainty vanished. There existed only the three of them: a man, a woman, and a child who had come out of nowhere.

Many years later, when events would turn that child into a figure destined to leave his mark on the history of Kaledon, no one would remember that morning. No one would speak of the bread shared around a table, of the laughter, of the light filtering through the windows, of the smell of wood burning in the hearth. And yet it was exactly there that everything had begun. Not in wars. Not in prophecies. Not in the great events that storytellers would pass down through the centuries.

But in a small country house, where two ordinary people had opened their hearts to an abandoned child. Because the stories that change the world almost always begin this way. In silence. Before anyone notices how much they matter. Skylar was the first to rise from the table. She did it reluctantly, almost as though she feared that stepping away from the child for a few minutes might change something. It was an irrational feeling, and she knew it well, but she

couldn't shake it.

Ever since she had seen that small face peering out of the basket, part of her lived in constant fear that everything might vanish at any moment.

"I'm going to set up the room at the end of the hall," she said. Montar looked up. No explanation was needed. They both knew which room she meant. For an instant neither spoke. Then the man nodded slowly.

"All right." Skylar paused at the threshold, as if only then realizing what she had just said. The room at the end of the hall. Not the storeroom. Not the empty room. The room — the one that for years had gone on existing in their thoughts even though neither of them had ever again found the courage to name it. The woman lowered her eyes and smiled faintly. Then she walked off. Montar followed her with his gaze until she disappeared around the corner of the hallway.

A few moments later he heard a door open. Then silence. He remained seated at the table with the child before him. For the first time since they had found him, he found himself alone with the boy. The little one watched him for a few seconds, seeming to study him. Montar laughed to himself.

"What is it?" The child tilted his head slightly.

"Are you planning to interrogate me?" Naturally he received no answer. And yet he kept talking. Perhaps because it felt natural. Perhaps because he felt the need to fill the moment with something.

"Fair warning, I'm not good with children." The little one banged his hands on the table. Montar burst out laughing.

"I'll take that as a poor review." A few minutes passed. Outside, the sun kept climbing the sky. Life resumed its course. Somewhere came the sound of an axe striking wood. Farther off still, the calls of

animals from a neighboring farm. Everything looked normal. And yet Montar kept having the feeling that something had changed forever. He couldn't explain it. He had known this child for less than a day. He knew nothing about him.

He didn't know his name. He didn't know his family. He didn't know his past. And yet it was already hard to imagine the house without his presence. The thought frightened him. Far more than he was willing to admit. He rose and lifted the little one into his arms. It was the first time he had done so. His movements were clumsy. Uncertain. The child, though, didn't seem to mind. He simply rested a hand on Montar's tunic and looked around.

"I think your mother would worry if she saw me." The expression on Montar's face changed almost at once. He had spoken the words without thinking. Your mother. Not a mother. Not your real mother. Your mother. He went still. The child kept studying the room, unaware. Montar lowered his eyes and felt something tighten in his chest. He understood, in that instant, that a line had been crossed. He didn't know when it had happened. He didn't know how.

But it had happened. Not long after, he heard footsteps coming from the hallway. Skylar returned to the room, her face lightly dusted, a few cobwebs caught in her hair. She looked tired. And happy — happy in a way that was almost painful to look at.

"How did it go?" Montar asked.

"There's a lot to clean."

"I imagined as much."

"The windows are dirty. The bed is covered in dust. A few pieces of furniture need fixing." Montar nodded. Skylar paused. Then she added, "But it's still a lovely room." The man understood at once what she truly meant. She wasn't talking about the furniture.

Or the windows. Or the dust. She was talking about the future. For years that room had been the symbol of a broken dream. Now, for the first time, it had stopped representing an absence.

It had begun representing a possibility again. Montar looked at the child. Then he looked at his wife. And for the first time since this whole incredible affair had begun, he realized that he too had started to hope. It was a dangerous feeling. He knew that. Hope could bring happiness. But it could also destroy. And yet, as the sun lit the room and the child laughed for no apparent reason, that fear seemed to drift away. At least for a moment.

At least until the outside world came knocking at their door again. Montar wished that moment could last forever. It was a naive thought, almost childish, but he couldn't help it. For years his life had followed a predictable rhythm. The seasons had followed one another, the work in the fields had marked out his days, and the future had looked like a road already walked a hundred times over. Now, though, everything felt different.

Not better or worse. Simply different. As though a door long kept shut had suddenly swung open, letting something new come in. Skylar sat back down at the table and the child immediately stretched his arms toward her. The gesture was so spontaneous it left them both speechless. It didn't seem possible that so small a creature could have already learned to trust them, and yet that was exactly what was happening. The woman took him into her arms and the little one settled against her chest with the ease of someone who had found a safe place.

"I think he's already decided," Montar said. Skylar looked at him.

"Decided what?"

"Which of us he likes better." The woman laughed.

“Don’t be jealous. You’ve only had one night to make friends with him.”

“Apparently that was one night too few.” The child let out a happy sound and clapped his hands, as though he wanted to join the conversation. For a few seconds they simply watched him. Every movement of his seemed to fill the room with life. It was such a new feeling it was almost frightening. The sound of a cart on the path interrupted the moment. Montar turned at once toward the window. His heart quickened. For an instant he feared someone had come to claim the child.

He rose and went to the glass. A farmer was simply crossing the road that led to the village. Nothing more. And yet that brief jolt of tension was enough to remind him of a truth he had tried to ignore all morning. They couldn’t stay hidden inside that house forever. Sooner or later they would have to face the outside world. Sooner or later they would have to tell what had happened. Sooner or later someone would ask questions.

Many questions. Skylar guessed at once what he was thinking.

“Do we have to go today?”

“Yes.” The woman lowered her eyes.

“I thought as much.” There was no protest in her voice. No complaint. Only a sad acceptance. They both knew it was the right thing to do. And yet neither of them wanted to leave that house. Because within those walls the child was simply a child. Outside, he would become a problem to solve. A mystery to explain. A responsibility to discuss. Montar went to the door and took his cloak.

“I’ll leave after lunch.”

“Alone?”

“I think it’s better that way.” Skylar nodded slowly. The real reason was obvious. She didn’t want to be apart from the child. Not

even for a few hours. Montar smiled.

“I’ll be back soon.”

“I know.” For a few seconds neither spoke. Then the child grabbed a lock of Skylar’s hair and began tugging at it enthusiastically. The woman let out a small cry of surprise. Montar burst out laughing.

“There. Now you finally look like a real child.”

“Let go!” The little one laughed, or at least tried to — the result was a series of funny sounds that made them both laugh even harder. In that moment, watching Skylar try to free herself from the grip of those tiny hands, Montar felt an absolute certainty. Whatever that child’s destiny might be, whatever story lay behind his arrival, and whatever truth the village might uncover in the days to come, nothing could erase what had happened in that house.

For less than a day they had had the sense of being a family. And that feeling had been real — real enough to make everything else suddenly seem less important. Outside, the sun continued its climb through the sky of Kaledon. The countryside stirred with life, the farmers worked their fields, and the world went on its way, unaware of what was happening in that small house at the edge of the kingdom. No one could know that this child, who had arrived in silence on an autumn evening, would one day leave a deep mark on history.

No one could imagine the joys, the sorrows, the mistakes and the choices that awaited him. In that moment, though, none of that mattered. There existed only the present, the warmth of the hearth, and a fragile happiness that two people guarded with the same care one uses to shield a flame from the wind. Montar spent the rest of the morning trying to convince himself he was reacting rationally. Yet the more he watched Skylar and the child, the harder that conviction

became to sustain.

The truth was much simpler. Neither of them was thinking the way they would have the day before. Their hearts had already begun racing far ahead of their minds, and every hour spent with the little one made it harder to keep the necessary distance. Perhaps it was inevitable. Some bonds form slowly, over the course of years. Others take shape within a few instants, asking no one's permission. When the sun reached its highest point in the sky, Skylar prepared a simple lunch — bread, cheese, and vegetable soup left over from the night before.

It wasn't a feast, but neither of them seemed to mind. The child had by now become the center of every thought. Even the most ordinary actions ended up revolving around him. If he slept, they lowered their voices. If he stirred, they paused their conversation. If he smiled, every worry seemed to drift away for a few minutes. At one point Skylar paused to watch the little one as he clumsily tried to grab a spoon lying on the table.

He tried once. Then a second time. Finally he succeeded and lifted it triumphantly, as though he had conquered a fortress.

"Look at this," she said, laughing. Montar turned.

"I'm afraid he's prouder of himself than he ought to be."

"Now who would he have gotten that from?"

"Certainly not from me."

"Of course. Let's keep telling ourselves that." For a few seconds they laughed together — light laughter, without a shadow of worry in it, laughter that seemed to belong to a different life than the one they had lived until the day before. Then someone knocked at the door. Once. Three sharp knocks. Silence fell over the room at once. Montar and Skylar looked at each other. Neither spoke. The child, oblivious to it all, kept clutching his spoon like the most precious of

treasures.

The knocking came again, louder this time. Montar rose slowly. He could feel his heart beating faster. The moment he had tried to put off all morning had arrived. He crossed the room and reached the door. Before opening it, he cast a quick glance at Skylar. She held the child close to her. She didn't look frightened. She looked ready to fight. The image struck him almost as hard as the knocking itself. Then he opened the door. On the threshold stood Horan.

The farmer smiled.

"Are you going to let me in, or should I wait until winter?" Montar stood frozen for a moment before letting out a sigh of relief.

"By all the gods, you gave me a fright."

"That's a very warm welcome." Horan stepped inside without waiting for a formal invitation. Then he saw Skylar. He saw the child. And he stopped. The smile vanished.

"Montar..." The farmer nodded.

"I know."

"Care to explain what I'm looking at?" For the first time since this whole extraordinary affair had begun, Montar realized just how absurd the situation sounded. An unknown child. Appearing out of nowhere. At their door. No name. No family. No explanation whatsoever. Even said aloud, the story sounded impossible. Horan listened to the account without interrupting. When Montar finished, his friend was silent for several seconds.

"So someone just left him here?"

"Yes."

"And no one knows who he is?"

"No."

"And you kept him." Montar looked at Skylar. Then at the child. Finally he looked back at Horan.

“Yes.” The man sighed.

“I figured as much.” Those two words surprised them both.

“You figured?” Skylar asked.

“I’ve known you twenty years,” he answered.

“I know you. I know Montar. If the two of you had found an abandoned child, there was no world in which you’d have left him outside the door.” For the first time since he’d walked in, Horan smiled — not an amused smile, but one full of warmth.

“Honestly, the opposite would have surprised me more.” Montar lowered his eyes. Those words pleased him more than he was willing to admit, because all through the night he had been afraid he was making a mistake. Now, at least for a moment, that fear felt lighter. Horan approached the child slowly. The little one watched him with curiosity, then smiled at him. That same smile, once again. The farmer burst out laughing.

“There it is. Now I see how he won you both over.” Skylar smiled.

“It wasn’t hard.”

“I can see that.” For a few seconds no one spoke. It was Horan who broke the silence.

“You know the village is going to want answers.”

“We know.”

“And you know there could be trouble.”

“We know.” The man nodded. Then he looked at the child again.

“And yet I don’t suppose that’s going to change anything, is it?” Montar looked at Skylar. Skylar looked at Montar.

The story of Kaledon has only just begun...

Continue reading in the full novel.

[Get the full book on Amazon →](#)