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about 5,200 words

Journey 1: Securing Aurora

By McCall Jackson

Palace doors slammed open as royal guardsmen dawned in gray and gold garb dragged the prisoner Ezekiel Brim into the room. Upon her throne, embroidered in gold and flanked by councilmen, Queen Raina glared at the man before her. Heavy shackles made from centuries-old metal jiggled as the guard shoved the thief before their Queen. One of the soldiers slammed their foot into the back of Ezekiel's knee, forcing him to kneel.

"Ezekiel Brim," Queen Raina said, her voice booming off of the pristine cream walls. "The infamous thief who goes by every name except his own." Ezekiel refused to meet her eyes.

"You have caused great disdain across Sonne, petty thief; now you refuse to face your punishment." She rose and slowly stepped down from her throne. She grabbed Ezekiel's jaw, long nails digging into his cheeks and drawing blood. She forced the thief to meet her golden eyes.

“I do not like it when someone takes advantage of the poor people of Sonne. I have worked too hard to maintain this kingdom, and trifling miscreants like yourself are what divides us.”

Her eyes seemed to glow as they traced Ezekiel’s teal orbs. He scuffed. “What has this kingdom done for me, Sonne’s just full of ungrateful bastards. He began to grin. “I spit on your hard work.”

“You are not going to fool your way out of this. You have committed over a hundred crimes in the name of your selfishness.” The Queen stopped before she began to grin as well; however, her stare was more devious and knowing. Her lips quirked up, and she looked maniacal in a sense. She let go of Ezekiel’s face and turned to walk back to her throne. “But-- I’ll give an ultimatum dear thief, though--either choice you make will surely be a death sentence.”

#

On a bright sunny day, clicking sounded as three travelers emerged from a hill, their faces hidden beneath cloaks that shielded them from the sun’s wrath. They looked down upon the poor beggars they passed along the trail, apparent leftovers from towns long destroyed by the war. Sir Desmond, towards the left, was mounted on a brown horse with a white triangle mark on its head. He wore a yellow cloak donned with a golden sun crest. Princess Saylor, to the right, rode a pure white steed. She wore a royal blue cloak, finely embroidered with eccentric patterns. Ezekiel, in the middle, was the simplest out of the three. He wore a black cloak, no crest, no embroidery, and sat upon a black horse with white fetlocks.

The journey began in complete silence. Nothing was said amongst themselves or to the war-torn people they passed. It had been four hours since they left Raz, the capital city. Roads were brittle, and buildings were crumbling, but the trio could not stop to provide aid. No help would matter if they did not quickly finish their mission because the war's destruction would swallow the entire kingdom. It had first started on the outer banks of the kingdom but was swiftly moving towards the kingdom. A guild of criminals had managed to turn five villages to rubble, and the number was sure to grow. Leaving behind few survivors, no one knew who led this deadly guild. All Queen Raina knew was that they had to be stopped. While she trusted her sister and guard with the task of securing Sonne, having the lowly thief Ezekiel lead the expedition was a risky move. But who knows a criminal better than another criminal, Ezekiel thought. He sighed before glancing to his left. "Well, this is a lovely day to begin a journey, isn't it, Sir Desmond?"

Desmond cut his eye to him before saying, "Stop talking like that; you sound like an ass."

Saylor began to laugh. "If I remember correctly, you usually sound even more pompous than the thief here."

Desmond grunted, and his eyes remained narrow. Saylor ignored him as she continued to speak, "Ezekiel, how much longer are we from Aurora's town center?"

Ezekiel produced a map from the sack on his back. Opening it, he tried to make sense of it even though it was apparent he had no idea what he was doing. He cleared his throat. "Well--"

“I think we all know he can’t read that map, Princess Saylor,” Desmond said, as he continued to glare at Ezekiel. “One of us should have the map. We’re probably not even going in the right direction.”

Ezekiel huffed. “I’ll have you know, Desmond, that I have experience with map reading and have trained greatly for this mission.”

“You mean the mission that you’re only on to save yourself from prison?” Desmond asked. “You’re hardly prepared for anything we might face these next months.”

“I believe my sister picked you so that you could help us with such things, Desmond,” Saylor said.

Isn’t this nice, Ezekiel thought, a year-long journey with these two. When the Queen presented him with her ultimatum, he thought becoming a knight would be just as torturous as a life-long prison sentence. Ezekiel didn’t know it meant he would be acquiring two new traveling companions, going from a band of one to three. Desmond, Queen Raina’s most trusted guard, had been assigned to keep an eye on Ezekiel in case he tried to escape his punishment. Saylor was the Queen’s younger sister; she had jumped at the chance of leaving the capital in the name of adventure instead of having to hide behind the palace walls. Both were annoying, but Ezekiel would admit that having an extra set of hands would be useful. The only skills he had were in trickery. Ezekiel didn’t know how to read a map; he didn’t know how to use a sword either. He only knew how to talk his way out of things, but that still had failed him when he was arrested.

Desmond and Saylor were still arguing as Ezekiel’s mind drifted back from his thoughts. He was staring at the map blankly while the guard and the princess bickered childishly.

“If we are where I think we are,” Ezekiel said, interrupting them, “we should be at Aurora within the hour.”

He finally looked up to his traveling companions only to see them staring at him blankly. “Ezekiel,” Desmond said. “You’re holding the map upside down.”

After another two hours of riding, a brief redirection, and Desmond confiscating the map from Ezekiel, the group could see the tops of homes and churches just beyond the horizon.

“Welcome to Aurora,” Saylor said, “a village known for its friendly people and beautiful architecture.”

Aurora was one of the few cities Ezekiel hadn’t visited during his previous travels, though he had heard stories of the dazzling city amongst the tree line. Surrounded by luscious greenery, Aurora stood tall as cathedrals and towers donning pink flags traced the clouds. Centuries-old structures lay hidden away by the city’s cobblestone wall. It was menacing, meant to keep outsiders away; however, its golden gates were welcoming. Other thieves had said that the city’s architecture was all for show, hiding the poor farming community within. They said there were more shabby cottages and water-starved crops than there were attractive designs. However, despite all these rumors, Ezekiel had never seen the city for himself. Its guards were always on high alert, even more, cautious than the ones in the capital. It was the first village on their list to secure because it had always been loyal to the throne, getting the easier of the towns done quickly would leave them more time to secure the more stubborn ones. Aurora would be easy; they were only expecting to stay a night in the city if that.

“Stop, you heathens!” someone said. Aurora was supposed to be easy, yet Ezekiel was getting the feeling that it would be anything but that. As they reached the city entrance, dozens of guards armed with swords greeted them. They wore in the imperial golds of Sonne, but the pink sashes tied around their waists designated them as Aurora’s imperial unit. Their eyes narrowed, and the one who had given the command, their captain, had a furious look about him. One false move could easily end this journey early.

With a glance at his companions, Ezekiel could see that both Desmond’s and Saylor’s hands were grasping the hilts of their swords, ready to strike first instead of attempting to resolve the already tense situation. That can’t do at all, he thought. Ezekiel dismounted from his horse and held his hands out in front of him as he took a cautious step towards the guards. The captain of the soldiers tightened the grip on his sword as Ezekiel drew near.

“State your business here, travelers!” The captain said.

“Don’t worry, soldier, we are here on official business from Queen Raina herself,” Ezekiel said.

“How can I trust that you aren’t Scavengers in disguise trying to trick us into letting you in?”

Scavengers, so that’s what had them on high alert, Ezekiel thought. “You can trust us,” he said as he removed his hood and pulled his cloak aside, displaying the golden sun crest on his gray combat suit. Saylor and Desmond did the same.

“You’re a knight,” the captain said. He and his soldiers immediately lowered their swords before dropping to their knees. “We apologize, sir knight; we are very wary of outsiders right now.”

“Yes, I can see. I’m Ezekiel Brim, a knight under the Kingdom of Sonne. This is Desmond Gil, a palace guard, and Princess Saylor who had accompanied us for diplomatic reasons.”

“You mentioned that the city was having a Scavengers problem?” Ezekiel asked, but before the captain could elaborate on the situation, Saylor interrupted:

“Maybe we should move this conversation within the town’s borders.”

Once behind the city walls, the three were taken to a stone brick building that the guards used as headquarters. Saylor led the conversation. “We’re sorry for the intrusion, but we’re here to reassure Aurora’s loyalty to Queen Raina.”

The captain seemed confused. “Aurora’s citizens have always allied the crown. Go to war, and we will follow you swiftly.”

Desmond interjected. “We aren’t questioning your loyalty, but we have learned that there are certain villages who are looking to fracture the kingdom and bring us to war.”

“Queen Raina decided that it would be best to send us to every city to ensure that you aren’t going to split away,” Saylor added.

The captain nodded along. “Aurora is loyal to Queen Raina.”

“Good,” Desmond said. “We are on a tight schedule. After a brief rest, we’ll be on our way. Where is your-”

“When we first arrived here, you called us Scavengers,” Ezekiel said. “Is this a recent development that has inconvenienced your people?”

The captain hesitated, surprised that the knight had even said anything at all. “Yes. Scavengers from the forest just west of us; they have been coming into town, stealing animals right out of people’s yards, as well as goods from the merchant stalls.”

Scavengers were nomadic people, feral outsiders, who seemed to hate themselves as much as they hated others. Ezekiel had rarely encountered people like this. It was always best to avoid Scavengers when you could, but with the number of people without a border growing, it was nearly impossible. “How many are there?”

“We’ve only ever seen twenty at a time, different ones with each attack,” the captain said. “We don’t know why they’ve suddenly started attacking us. With limited soldiers, it has been difficult to defend ourselves, and they’re unpredictable. They’ve managed to surprise us each time.”

“It’s very unusual, but it sounds as if they have settled close to the village, probably trying to start a permanent location of their own.”

“While our people will always remain loyal to the crown, it would be nice if we could receive assistance with this problem,” the captain said.

Ezekiel nodded. “Don’t worry, Captain, my colleagues and I are going to stay as long as it takes to help you with your Scavenger problem.”

There was shuffling behind him. “What?” Desmond asked.

“Ezekiel, we don’t have time to stay in Aurora, remember,” Saylor whispered.

“Yes, I do remember, but we are supposed to be reunifying a kingdom. I think helping the loyal people of Aurora is the best place to start.”

Effectively ending the conversation with them, Ezekiel stood and turned back to the captain and his knights. “We’ll need to discuss strategy, but I think we can resolve the situation by tonight.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Desmond and Saylor followed Ezekiel as he walked out of the meeting room. “You must be out of your mind? We have a schedule to keep and a kingdom to maintain,” Desmond said.

“Yes, but I also have a debt over my head. I’m supposed to be a knight, Desmond. Aren’t knights supposed to save the day?” Ezekiel smirks as he glanced at his friends. “This situation presents the perfect opportunity for me to show how knightly and good I am.”

“You’ve only been a knight for five days,” Saylor pointed out.

“Exactly! The faster I can prove to the Queen that I have turned a new leaf, the quicker I’ll be able to get out from under her thumb.”

Desmond gave Ezekiel a blank stare. “I don’t think you fully understand the conditions of your sentence.”

“I understand it fully,” Ezekiel said, “and I’m going to help Aurora’s people so that you can report back to the queen my heroic feats, and it will get me closer to being in her good graces and us closer to securing the kingdom.”

#

As the sunset fell, Ezekiel watched Aurora’s fighting men gather outside of the city. His stomach turned as he sized up the civilians the captain had rushed to gather. He began to realize why the Scavengers were able to have the upper hand over the city. With few knights, these men were not soldiers. Many of them carried shovels and hoes instead of swords, and only the captain and his command were mounted. Aurora was far from a poor city, but it was evident that its people had not seen battle.

“This is not going to end well, Ezekiel,” Desmond said.

“We’ll be fine,” Ezekiel said.

“We could be leading these people to an early grave. We don’t even know how many there are.”

“We’ll clearly outnumber them, and if we’re assuming that they are trying to establish a village, then they’ll have people and things they’d want to protect. I’m not looking for a war, Desmond, to chase them away.”

Desmond shook his head but said nothing else. Ezekiel glanced over to Saylor, who met his eyes with a disapproving look. This should be interesting.

Ezekiel faced the men standing in front of him. “Listen! For those of you who don’t know, we are agents of the Queen, and we have accepted the task of helping you drive away the Scavengers in the area.” He paused carefully, looking over the crowd. “We do not wish to hurt anyone; we just want to scare them away.”

While most of the men nodded, Ezekiel could tell some of them were reluctant. Ezekiel pushed their uneasiness aside as the group moved into the forest. I need to do this, he thought. I need to prove that I've been-- rehabilitated.

Tripping over tree roots and getting tangled in branches and vines, the group moved clumsily. The forest next to Aurora was big; though they didn’t know where they were going, it wasn’t dense enough to hide an entire population. They had waited until night, hoping that the darkness would help hide them from the Scavengers. Though, they would not be so lucky because, after thirty minutes of walking, the group stumbled across a set of ten or so half-thrown together huts made from branches, dirt, and leaves. As they walked past what Ezekiel assumed to be the entrance to this so-called village, he noted the attempts of what looked to be a farm, though all the crops looked wilted. A fence, half-finished, bordered some of the homes, vines were used to tie posts together, but the project seemed to have been abandoned with broken tools thrown next to it. They're struggling, Ezekiel thought. He shook his head at the sight as part of him questioned his intent on driving these people away. But, if we can chase them away from Aurora, then there will be no one pillaging the city. These people can find somewhere else. No matter how much he tried to convince himself, Ezekiel knew that his words weren’t true.

“Stop,” Saylor said. The group paused their steps abruptly, some stumbling into each other.

“What is it?” Desmond asked.

“There are people there.”

Ezekiel followed Saylor’s line of sight until he noticed a group of women huddled together outside a hut. They varied in race and age; however, they were all covered in filth; they wore rags and had unkempt, matted hair. Some of them clutched young children and infants, while others grasped pieces of wood, poorly sharpened into spears. They stood towards the back of the ‘village’ as if they were prepared to escape at a moment’s notice. Were they expecting us?

Just as the thought graced Ezekiel’s mind, Desmond shouts, “It’s a trap! There are others in the foliage!”

There are more than we expected. Ezekiel’s senses came alive. He had been so distracted staring at the disheveled group of women and children that he hadn’t seen the men using the thick woods around them as cover; he hadn’t heard the rustling of the brushes as they moved methodically. The other untrained men were just as surprised as Ezekiel, jumping as the male Scavengers leaped from their hiding places, spears pointed at the group as the Scavengers screamed.

Ezekiel watched Aurora’s men clung to their shovels and hoes. Some raised them as if they were ready to strike, while the captain’s horse and his knights became reckless at the sudden scare. He watched a man raise his hoe above his head about to bludgeon a Scavenger who had come too close.

“Stop!” He yelled, grabbing at the man’s arm. “If you attack him, then they’ll have reason to attack us. Look!” Ezekiel pointed at the men who circled between their families and the

intruding force before them. Though their spears were pointed at them, none of them had lunged out to attack.

“We can take them easily,” Desmond said.

“No, we aren’t going to shed blood here,” Ezekiel said.

“Then what are we going to do?” Saylor asked.

Taking in the situation. Ezekiel surveyed the fear on the children’s faces in their mothers’ grasp. No one, aside from Saylor, Desmond, and the knights, was equipped for battle, and if they were to attack, it would hardly be fair. They could easily wipe through the entire village and leaving a few of their ill-equipped men to die. Though more dead bodies, something Ezekiel wanted to avoid. Though he was a criminal, the sight of blood turned him green, and he had always tried to avoid trading blows. We’re supposed to be saving a kingdom, not killing off its displaced residents. The tension in the air was thick, and Ezekiel knew that it would not be resolved easily. Remembering the state of the huts, the fence, and the farm, Ezekiel realized their next move. We must retreat, or else this could be a nightmare.

As if reading his mind, one of the Scavengers yelled, prompting the others to follow. “Run!” Ezekiel yelled.

Moving simultaneously, Ezekiel and his party sprinted out of the village and towards the forest’s exit as the Scavenger men chased them. They pushed their intruders out of the woods, spears pointing at the backs of those lingering behind. As Aurora’s makeshift army broke the tree line back to their village, the Scavengers stopped at the forest entrance, not willing to leave their

village undefended long. Instead, they watched Ezekiel and his group returns down the hill back to Aurora.

Finally, deeming it safe to slow down, Ezekiel halted outside Aurora's gate to catch his breath. Looking back, he watched the Scavengers turn around and walk back to their home, satisfied that they had managed to scare off the potential threat.

Ezekiel's thoughts and emotions were running wild as he tried to comprehend everything that just happened when a hand reached out and yanked him to the ground. An angry Desmond hovered over him. "What the hell was that!"

Ezekiel was speechless.

"You've finally shut up, huh? Your little plan failed, and for all we know, those beasts could be preparing to attack Aurora ten-fold! All because you wanted to be a hero!"

"Desmond, calm down," Saylor said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "We'll stay in Aurora tomorrow and help the captain and his men plan for future raids."

"Raids, that wouldn't be possible if we had cut them down! They drew their weapons on us!"

"Yes, Desmond, it would've been so righteous to murder borderless men, women, and children just because they want to build a home. How diplomatic," Ezekiel said with a sneer as he stood up from the ground, dusting himself off. "If we go back to the Scavengers' village and try to talk to them instead of driving them away, then I'm sure--"

“Actually, Sir Ezekiel,” the Aurora captain said. “I think my men and I would like to hear Princess Saylor’s plan for protecting our people from the next raids.”

Surprised, Ezekiel turned to the man whose shoulders drooped sadly. He looked dejected, and for the first time, Ezekiel realized that everyone looked dejected. Dirt stained their skin, and their clothes were torn. Some had even appeared to have lost their tools. They look as bad as I feel.

“Don’t worry everyone; we can fix--”

“I think you’ve done enough, Ezekiel,” Desmond said before turning to the captain and Aurora’s men. “Everyone, return home and rest. We’ll be discussing our next move in the morning before my companions, and I leave.”

Watching everyone drag their feet back into the city, Ezekiel was left there alone and stunned. For the first time in his life, Ezekiel had been abandoned. Until this point, he had always been alone, and he had strived in this feeling; however, after days of travel, he had grown familiar with Desmond’s and Saylor’s presence, no matter how annoying they could be. Ezekiel felt the gut-wrenching sense of guilt. He was the one who pushed the others into going to that village, yet he was too scared of the potential bloodshed. Those men looked like cowards because of him. He had embarrassed himself, Saylor, Desmond, and the throne. Queen Raina gave him this ultimatum between knighthood and prison, knowing he would fail, and he had just proven her right. You’re a disgrace.

He sighed, wiping his hands down his face. If you give up now, you’re spending the rest of your life in prison. The Queen picked a thief to lead, but Desmond and Saylor will find you

and drag you back to the kingdom to be executed if you try to run. You have no other choice but to solve this problem. “I have to go back tonight,” he says. “If we leave without helping them, those people will lose what little they have.” Gods, why did I have to be caught-- life as a thief was never this difficult.

Releasing another sigh, Ezekiel looked back at the forest, the moon’s light reflected the spark of determination in his eyes. There were people who needed help, and this thief would be the one to save them.

He marched back to the forest alone, just as ill-prepared as when he had first entered it. He didn’t get far when he was faced with the end of a poorly made spear. “S-stop there,” a voice demanded though it wasn’t very threatening as it cracked during the delivery.

Ezekiel looked at the person holding the spear. He looked no older than thirteen, malnourished and covered in filth. The boy tried to look intimidating, but Ezekiel could see the fear in his eyes. He’s a child, scared by the uncertainty encasing his people, thrown into war too soon. It was as if Ezekiel was looking into a mirror.

He held his hand in front of him in surrender. “You don’t have to be scared. I’m unarmed, and no one else is with me.”

The boy hesitated before tightening the grip on his weapon. “How can I trust you?” “I’ve been in your position before, young and scared because the world has turned away from you. I’m sorry for scaring your people earlier, but all I want to do is help.”

The boy loosened his defensive stance. “What’s your name?”

“Ezekiel-- Yours?”

“Luka-- Can you really help us?”

“I want to try. If you could take me back to your village, I can share with them what I know.”

Taking a tentative step forward, the boy felt around Ezekiel’s pockets. “You’re not hiding anything, right-- This isn’t a trick to attack us again?”

Ezekiel grimaced. “I wish to correct my mistake by helping you all create a more sustainable village.”

Luka looked around again before taking a deep breath. “I’ll take you back to the others,” he said. “But if this is a trick, then the rest of our men are going to take care of you. It’ll be much worse than before.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

Though he seemed hesitant, Luka walked Ezekiel back to the village.

On their first steps into the Scavengers’ village, Ezekiel and Luka were met with harsh barks and pointed spears.

“Luka! What are you doing?” a man said, yanking the boy away from Ezekiel.

“How could you lead one of them here after what just happened?” another voice cried out.

Once again, Ezekiel could see women and young children filing out of their shabby huts, crowding themselves near the far side of the village. The men formed a wall between Ezekiel

and their families. While the others pointed their spears, the man who had pulled Luka away kneeled before him. “What were you thinking?” he asked desperately. “He was with them during their attack earlier. We allowed you to maintain the forest entrance to prove yourself to us-- Not get us killed!”

“He said he could help us,” Luka said.

“And you believed him--”

“I can help,” Ezekiel said, interrupting the angry man, though he was met with more spears inching closer to his face.

“We don’t need your help, outsider,” a Scavenger said.

Taking a deep breath, Ezekiel said, “You do need my help, actually. Tomorrow, two of Raz’s best are going to inform Aurora’s captain on how he and his knights can permanently defend themselves against your raids. If they’re successful, then your people will no longer have access to any of the goods you’ve been stealing. That means no food and nothing to use for barter.”

“We’ll be fine--”

“You won’t-- You outnumber the knights in the city, but once the townspeople are trained, then I fear the fate of your people,” Ezekiel said. The Scavengers were silent, but Ezekiel could tell by the weakening stances, they were thinking about what he said. “Tomorrow, come to Aurora before the sun is up-- I’ll be waiting at the entrance. We’ll talk to the captain together and see if we can lessen some of the tension between you and the city.”

And with those words, Ezekiel slowly backed away from the Scavengers before turning around and walking away. He knew they had no reason to trust him, but he hoped they would heed his words. Returning to the city entrance, he sat outside of its gates and prepared to wait there until dawn.

#

The sun was high in the sky by the time Saylor and Desmond made their way to Aurora's meeting center. Dark circles hung under their eyes as they had stayed up all night devising a plan to help the city.

"If it weren't for the knight, we wouldn't be in this situation," Desmond said. "We're just wasting time."

"Raina sent us to stabilize her kingdom. If we don't fix this mess now, then it likely would grow later," Saylor said.

Desmond huffed but said nothing else as they entered the same meeting room, but they stopped short. Their eyes widened, and Saylor gasped. To their surprise, the room was already packed with the captain and his knights, Ezekiel, and a group of Scavengers sitting at the table. No weapons were present in the room. As they were entering, one of the Scavengers' men, a presumed leader, shook hands with the knight's captain. Ezekiel, who seemed to have been overseeing the discussion, glanced up at his friends. "Desmond, Saylor, nice of you to join us."

Still in shock, Saylor stumbled over her words. "E-Ezekiel, what is this?"

"Well, after our disastrous attempt to scare away the Scavengers, I went back last night and arranged a meeting between them and the captain," Ezekiel said, the smirk on his face

showing that he was proud of himself. “The Scavengers and Aurora’s knights have negotiated a new system of how they can keep the city from being raided while also helping the Scavengers develop their city.” He then paused. “All without the need for more bloodshed.”

“Your knight is very convincing,” the Scavengers leader said.

“Yes, well--” Ezekiel walked over to his friends, wearing his traveling cloak and bag around his shoulders. “I’m glad I was able to assist you all, and I’ll be back eventually to make sure everything is still working out. Though it’ll be a rough start, I know that you two will ensure peace.”

He turned to address his friends. “Well, let’s get on the road, you two. We have a schedule to maintain, don’t we, Desmond?”

#

After several quiet miles on the road from Aurora, Desmond, Ezekiel, and Saylor continued on the road to their next destination.

“Well, Desmond,” Ezekiel was grinning. “I hope your report back to the Queen mentions my diplomatic feats.”

Desmond huffed. “It will-- After I go into a long detail of how you almost ruined them.”

While Ezekiel pouted, Saylor laughed at the two. “Don’t worry, Ezekiel, I commend your efforts despite the bumps along the way. I’ll also write to my sister about your knightly feats, but I will say, I never knew a thief knowledgeable in diplomacy.”

Ezekiel laughed. “I’m a thief, Saylor, we tend to have a way with words.”

Saylor laughed as Desmond frowned. Ezekiel's smile was bright as he faced the road, now confident enough to handle anything they may face.

Maybe knighthood won't be so bad.