

PART ONE: RE-EMERGENCE

“It festers there in the unseen city. Far away, in the Dark Corner beyond the wall of flame, the Evil feeds upon itself, growing, ever growing. Waiting, ever waiting. People of Edgeland, never forget this. Never forget...” – from the **Books of Edgeland**.

CHAPTER ONE: THE BULLY

What an amazing South Uncer day! Way too nice, I thought, to sit most of the afternoon in the learning hall, where my sister Corrie and I were now headed.

But you know what, it would be an amazing day tomorrow, and the next day, and the week after that. We had plenty of time to enjoy it too, since our learning day only lasted three hours. And if any of us kids grew tired of all the “boring” beautiful days, then our Gray Tutor could always make it rain or snow. She could do just about anything.

The Bexel Road, which went right through South Uncer, ran alongside the Pebble River. Four miles or so outside the townlet, right off this road, sat our farm. Not many kids had to travel as far to the learning hall as we did. But we always made it there in plenty of time.

Closer to the townlet, the road bustled with activity. Travelers passed in both directions, some on foot, others on horseback. A few held the reins of their two-horse carts. Farmers and dairymen brought their stuff to sell in the marketplace. But we did not see too many kids.

“Maybe it’s because we’re late,” Corrie said, skipping a stone across the river. “Vall, did you hear me?”

I’d been walking ahead of her but stopped to wait. “Probably we’re *early*, as usual,” I replied. “But if you keep stopping to toss stones or pick flowers or stare at fish, then you can be sure Taffara will make examples of us for being late!”

Corrie grinned. “You’ve said the same thing for years, and for your information it hasn’t happened yet—oh, look!”

A barrellfish had poked the big bulgy eyes on top of its head above the surface of the river. Corrie bent down to stare at the clumsy thing.

“All right, I give up.” I sat down on the bank with a groan.

Wouldn’t you know, they wound up staring each other down for three minutes—which is actually not that long in the sport of fish-staring, unless you’re in a hurry. One time Corrie almost lost her balance. Finally the barrellfish turned and skittered away over the stones on the bottom.

“Yes, I won!” my sister exclaimed and raised both hands over her head. “Vall, did you see?”

I laughed. “You were wonderful. Absolutely amazing. Couldn’t have done better myself. Now let’s go.”

Corrie fell in step next to me. “So my record is still perfect.” Was that pride or bragging in her tone?

“No it’s not, no way. You fell in the river a couple of months ago. Or did you conveniently forget?”

“That wasn’t *my* fault! Mother’s horse came up behind me and snorted. You can’t count that!”

“Oh yes I can.”

The staring down of barrellfish being so darned important around here, we “discussed” it loudly way past the spot where the Bexel Road veered away from the bank of the Pebble River. We followed the river instead

of the road, so not too many people had to listen to the debate. But pretty soon we noticed someone looking at us from the other bank.

“Yo there!” the tall figure called with a wave.

Corrie frowned. “Oh no, is that who I think it is?”

“Keeth,” I said. “I haven’t seen him in four months.”

“Even *that’s* not long enough.”

Keeth was sixteen, two years older than me and three more than Corrie. Many times in the past we had played kickball, rock toss, and other games together. But he was a bully and after a while all the kids had gotten sick and tired of being around him. A year ago his uncle and aunt had taken him out of the learning hall to work on their farm. We’d all been glad to see him leave. Even Taffara, so patient most of the time, had sometimes lost her temper with him.

“Well, if it isn’t the Baytowner and his homely sister,” Keeth said, crossing the river. “I haven’t seen you in a while, *Vall*.”

I tried real hard not to get angry. But as Keeth came closer, Corrie started toward him with her fists clenched. I held her back.

“Let me go!” She tried to pull away. “Did you hear what he called us?”

I glared at Keeth and shrugged. “They’re just words, that’s all. What can words do to us? We don’t want to be late. Let’s not waste time here.”

“Are you a coward, Baytowner?” Keeth said. “Does your little sister have to do your fighting for you?”

“Come on, let us pass, Keeth. I have no quarrel with you.”

“Oh no?” he shouted. “Let’s see if we can fix that!”

He charged at me, fists swinging. Although taller and heavier than me, he was clumsy. I ducked the blows—all but one, which caught part of my shoulder—and stepped out of his way. Before Keeth could turn fully around I grabbed his wrist and flung him into the river. The bully fell hard. Water splashed up on the new shirt Mother had just made for me.

“That’s great!” Corrie exclaimed. She laughed out loud, until Keeth pulled himself onto the bank.

“You *will* pay for this, Baytowner!” he cried. “I swear you will!”

Something seemed weird about his face. It looked all twisted, and his eyes were...cold. At least, that’s how they made me feel. After glaring at us for a moment he spun and started back across the river. Near the center he slipped on a smooth stone. This time Corrie didn’t laugh.

“He...scares me, *Vall*,” she said in a quiet voice—most unusual for her.

I nodded as I rubbed my shoulder. So she had felt it too. “There *is* something strange about him. All of the kids find something to fight about once in a while, but not with such...hate. I suppose he scares me too.”

Keeth stumbled up a hill. Back in learning hall I’d tried to figure out why he always acted so angry. But we’d always wound up getting into a fight, and so I’d given up trying to feel sorry for him.

“Let’s go, *Vall*,” Corrie said. “Come on.”

But I waited until the bully had disappeared over the hill. Then I shook my head, and we hurried to rejoin the Bexel Road.