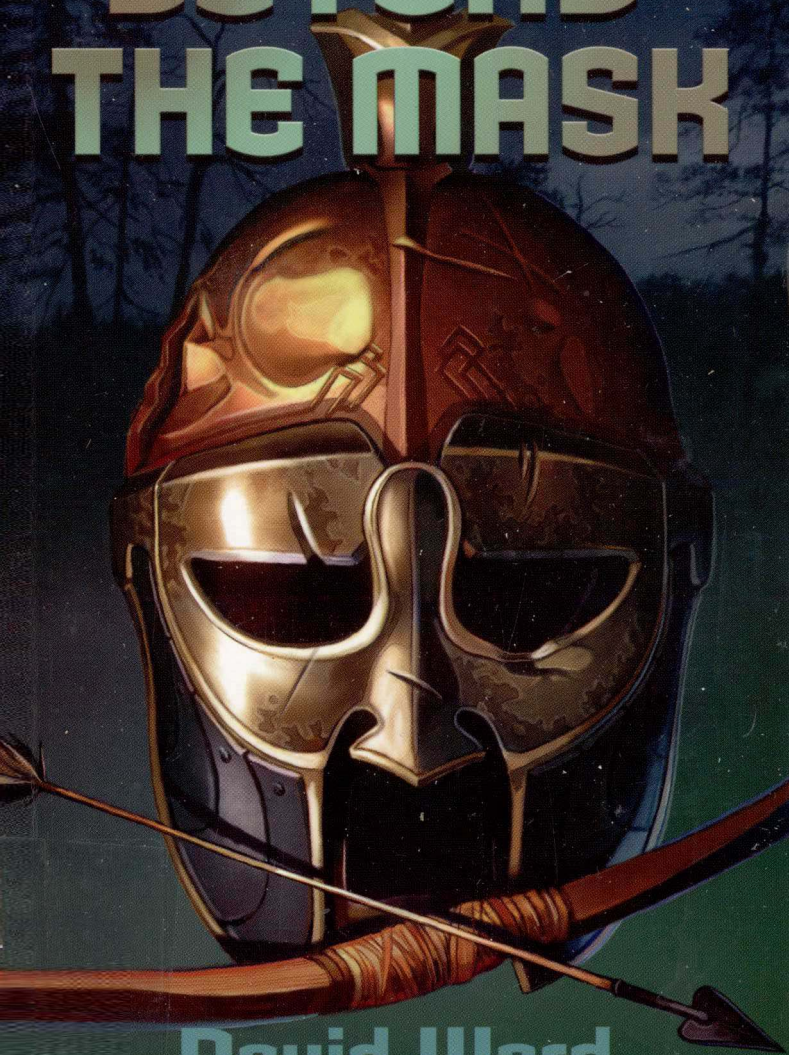


# BEYOND THE MASK



David Ward

**David I**

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**THE TITANIC**

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*For Tess*

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The raiders came on horseback. No less than twenty mounts trotted through the sparse trees and meadow, making their way to the unsuspecting village below. All were seasoned warriors — their war-cloaks were stained by water and sun, blood and time, and blended with the dark woods on either side of them. There was not a common helmet on their heads, but rather a foul collection taken from the fallen in past battles. It was the way of a reckless, merciless army. It was the way of Outside.

“We come too late,” Thief whispered. “This will be a slaughter. We should leave.” He held a hand in front of his mouth to hide his cloudy breath. It was cold in this land. Colder than Pippa had said.

I stuffed my numb hands deep into my cloak. Thief’s words rang ominously, but I didn’t answer. Pippa had brought us here without disaster and I would not go against her wishes so quickly. Not after coming so far. So long.

Her eyes watched the rough column of soldiers. “There is time enough to warn the village,” she said.

I weighed the distance between the first horses and the final slope. Dawn’s pale light break-

ing across the water, coupled with a half moon, lit the way for the riders. "Not much time, Pippa. There are ten of us, on foot. If we hurry we might be able to warn the villagers enough that they can defend themselves. But not to escape. There is little place to hide down there from men on horseback." Dark green trees, taller than any we had seen in Grassland, kept us hidden. A fog rolled in from the sea and rested above the near fields like hearth smoke. I pursed my lips. It *was* a cold place, with dampness everywhere, and yet alive with greenness and fresh earth. I was thankful for the warm cloaks we had found in the boat that had carried us here.

Pippa followed my gaze. The village was small. No more than ten small dwellings, nestled between the mountains and the sea. The homes clustered around a central path, with trees on either side hedging the village like cupped hands around a bowl. There were farms as well, but these were cleverly cut into the steep sides of the mountains like steps, difficult to get to, and spaced large distances apart. The easiest catch was the village, where there was food, water and whatever other spoils the raiders could drag away with them.

I lifted Pippa's chin. "Do you wish us to risk everything for a village you are not even certain is your own?"

Her eyes, so green, stared back with the confidence of a soldier. "Do you need to ask?"

A warm brown hand rested on my shoulder and Feelah knelt beside us. "Coriko. Why do we all have to go? Why not just two? The little ones do not need to see another battle. You and my Thief go. Yell and make noise, then run for the woods. You will be gone before the raiders arrive, and everyone will be up with whatever weapons they have." She shrugged. "Then at least we have done what we can."

Pippa raised her eyebrows. Thief nodded. I turned my attention to where Bran watched over the little ones. It was difficult for him not to be discussing plans. He was even getting better at speaking the language that united the rest of us: the language of warriors and slaves, the language of the Spears who had so long held us in thrall. How long ago that was. Spring and summer had passed. Winter, in all its bitterness, had kept us from exploring any further north, and our days were spent seeking warmth.

For over three seasons we had been in this country, searching in vain for the village that Pippa had been taken from when the Spears stole her and brought her to Grassland. Pippa was constantly remembering more: names of places, lakes, mountains. But they were like a map drawn by a child — confused and with

no understanding of distance.

I looked at my companions. We were a tired, ragged-looking company. Our clothes, soaked by the sea, bleached by the sun and beaten by the winter, were ill-fitting at best. The boat we had taken from Grassland seemed to grow smaller each day. I despised even looking at it any more.

Bran watched me with a furrowed brow. I signaled, *Come*. Keeping low, he scrambled to my side. "What will we do?" He used the Northern tongue — a language, I realized, that the people sleeping in the village below us might use.

"Feelah says two go down to warn the village. The rest stay here. I doubt the raiders will enter the woods, so you should be safe here. There is a direct path through the meadow to the fjord."

His eyes narrowed. "You mean *three* of us go down."

I grunted. "If one of the little ones cries, or scouts are sent to the trees, we need you to be *here*. You must take them into thicker woods or back into the boat. And you have no skill with a sword yet. You would just as likely cut *me* down as one of the raiders!"

Pippa interrupted us. "This is my village. At least, with all my heart I believe it is. Do you see that last building? The one closest to the sea?"

I nodded. "Past the village, beyond the rise?"

"Yes. I have seen it before — I am sure of it."



She took a deep breath. "Feelah's words are good. Not all should be in danger because of me. Coriko and I must go."

"I do not like it," Thief growled. "We have been in danger before. And this is not the first village we thought was Pippa's. This is no different than any others. Coriko and I should go. There may be fighting."

Pippa slapped the ground. "This is the village. I know it!"

Thief and I exchanged glances. I could not remember the number of times we had crawled through fields or crept into towns all along this coast, only to discover that we had not found Pippa's home. And we could not ask where it was, since her memory of the name had left her. It was a name she knew she would remember if she *heard* it, but that was no help to us now.

When the number of our days since leaving Grassland passed one hundred and fifty, I stopped hoping in names, and trusted only in letting Pippa see as many villages as we could. She would have to see it, and yet there seemed no end of little towns along this coast. Summer had turned to fall and then winter, and still we had not found it.

Even Bran had played his part, melting in with the children of strange villages to ask questions or to steal food. We learned more at every

place, but our landings were becoming dangerous. The little ones were hard to keep quiet and even harder to keep fed. We needed a regular supply of food to lessen the risk of being caught. My hunting skills with a bow and arrow had grown strong, but there were days when no living thing showed a whisker or feather. Worst of all, Bran had returned with horrifying news at the last port: a ship with an orange sail had anchored in the bay and sent a small boat to the town. Bran had learned that black-cloaked warriors were seeking a group of youths, two boys skilful with swords, and two girls, one with dark hair, the other with hair like the sun. They were giving coins to anyone who had information. I trembled at the thought of the Spears finding us and taking us back to Grassland. It was also confusing to hear of Spears openly landing in an area they had raided before, though we knew that they traded their shards as well. Were they becoming less warlike, as Pippa hoped? I doubted it.

Nudging Pippa, I whispered, "Thief is right. Let us go down. This is no place for pretty-coloured dresses. It is probably not your village. Why should we risk everything? If the Spears have sent ships to find us, that can only mean that Marumuk has changed his mind about letting us leave."

“We don’t *know* that that’s why Spear ships are looking for us,” Pippa countered.

Thief pulled a face. “Marumuk has not sent them to bring us presents! He is angry he let us go. Maybe he no longer listens to Tia’s advice. Marumuk fears we will give away the secrets of Grassland.”

I knew more than anyone that my former master was angry with us. He had shown that disappointment the last time we confronted each other in the tunnels beneath Grassland’s mountain. And yet the powerful Marumuk — the greatest leader the Spears had ever known — had been persuaded to let us go. Even after spending all those months training Thief and me, and choosing us for his raiding parties. No, Marumuk’s secrets were safe. I could not imagine why he searched for us now.

“This *is* the village,” Pippa argued. “This is *my* village. And the people are in danger.”

“We waste time,” Thief warned. “Look! The raiders have made it halfway up the slope.”

Already the raiders had picked their way through the thinning trees and were urging their horses into a trot. The mist clung to the horses’ feet as if they were riding on clouds.

“Shut up, both of you!” Feelah commanded. “Listen to Pippa and go! Now!” She pulled hard on my braid, lifting me from the cold earth.

Grabbing Pippa, I pulled her deeper into the trees, calling over my shoulder, "Stay here. Wait for us. We will come back with news. Keep the little ones safe."

"You be wise, Coriko!" Feelah whispered.

The horses in the meadow had the advantage of short grass and bracken and little else to slow their passage. Pippa and I thrust branches from our faces, avoiding the sharp fingers of trees and the uneven soil where roots rose to trip us. The scent of earth filled the air and rain-laden boughs soaked our clothes.

"Faster, Pippa!" I gasped. The sound of jingling harness joined the pounding of our feet.

"I am!" Her words heaved with each breath. "I have not trained to be a soldier, as you have."

"Run!"

It was difficult to move freely with the burden of our cloaks. If it had not been so cold I would have shed mine long before. As it was, Pippa's legs kept getting tangled in hers.

I was not worried about being caught while we remained in the woods. The soldiers were after the village and would not waste time chasing children through trees. The danger would be when we came out into the open. It was never wise to flout an army when they were close enough to strike us. As we scrambled down the steep slope toward the village, the trees began to

thin. Soon there were few branches in our way and we moved faster through the low forest scrub. We passed a stack of piled wood and a cow grazing at the forest's edge.

"Farm," Pippa panted. Breaking through a final line of trees, we sped through a field of high grass, the uneven ground swishing noisily with our passing. A low stone wall appeared.

"Over it!" I yelled. There was no more need for silence. The earlier the townspeople woke, the better. The back of my foot nicked the top stone as I hurtled over, but I did not falter. Beyond the wall was a house with a thatched roof, still dark and asleep.

"Corki!"

I scrambled to a stop.

Pippa was caught on the wall by the bottom of her cloak, hooked firmly on a jutting stone. My knife was in my hand before I reached her. With a single stroke the cloak came free, leaving a patch of cloth stuck to the wall.

"Look there!"

Riders were streaming over the top of the hill and pouring down the slope in a waterfall of horses.

"We're too late!" I groaned. "We must go back, Pippa."

"Not yet." She pulled on my hand and we set off running even faster than before. Flame-light

flickered in the farmhouse as we passed, and a shadow played at the window.

"Raiders!" I yelled. "Get up! Wake!"

The shadow disappeared and I heard the door open. Shouts broke out.

"The road, Corki," Pippa gasped. "We must take the road."

"They will catch us for certain if we do that! We will not even make it to the first home we reach."

"Yes we will!"

Our feet flew along the road. Hoofbeats sounded behind us, painfully close. Horses thundered along the road, gaining far more quickly than I liked. "They are charging," I panted.

"Almost there!" Pippa cried. A roughly hewn gate barred the way, twenty strides ahead of us. The wooden poles, made to keep animals within the village, were easy to clamber through. I hoped the gate would make the raiders pause before they smashed it down. The road disappeared and flowed into several muddy paths, most of which led to a string of dwellings. I heard the ocean crashing ahead and smelled salt in the air.

"What now?" I cried.

The village lay in stillness, hardly prepared for the doom about to break down their gate.

Pippa looked about helplessly.

"Get up!" I yelled into the silence. "Wake! Wake!"

There was no response for a moment. Finally a sleepy voice mumbled something from the nearest door.

*"Wake!"* Pippa and I yelled together. We ran to the house and pounded with our fists. I faced the gate. Despite the dampness, a dust cloud, stirred by twenty horses, announced the raiders' coming.

"Pippa, we must leave now! Back to the forest. We have done enough."

Her eyes were wide, yet she stood her ground. "No! There are people here, Coriko. Perhaps children, women, old ones. They deserve —"

A man bolted into the street, dressed only in breeches, swinging a large stick.

"Who are you?" His accent, although thick, was Northern. "You'll get no free food here! Be gone before it's truly light."

"Behind you!" Pippa pointed to the soldiers riding toward us.

"Raiders!" the man screamed and ran back into his house. Other voices, panicked, sounded from the homes now.

I waited no longer. I pulled Pippa into the shadows of the houses and ran for the trees that hedged the village. Here the mud disappeared and grass had taken root all the way to the woods. We were not alone. Pouring out from the backs of the houses, men, women and children

suddenly appeared, rushing to the forest. Some clutched bundles while others struggled to dress as they hurried through the morning grass. For a town that had seemed so unprepared, I was shocked at how quickly they made their escape. From the corner of my eye I caught sight of a figure on horseback charging from between two houses. People screamed and scattered.

"This way, Pippa!" We ran along the backs of the homes toward the end of the village. I had intended for us to leap straight into the trees once we were past the raiders, but a stone fence, higher than the one we had jumped at the farm, kept me searching for an opening. The land rose sharply again and I remembered the building close to the sea, the one we had seen from the heights.

The peak of a building came into view as we crested the hill. The wall now reached above my head.

"Back!" I tugged at Pippa.

She stared at the buildings. "No. This is right."

A single dwelling, made largely of stone, stood alone from the others, only a hundred steps from the beach. There was no time to take anything else in, for a robed figure suddenly filled the entrance.

"Come in, children. Quickly now."

I stopped and threw an arm in front of Pippa.



“Corki, this is right!” she whispered. “Keep going. It is a place of peace . . . I know it!”

“No, run for the trees.”

“If we go back we will face the horsemen!”

Someone smashed a wooden door to splinters behind us.

“Stay close, Pippa. Very close.”

The man stepped back to let us in. All over the inside walls, pictures stood out boldly and rows of benches filled the large room. I had never seen anything like it. It seemed a peaceful place.

The man hardly looked at us. What I glimpsed when he turned to beckon us farther in revealed a bearded, deeply lined face. He was dressed in a brown robe that reached to his ankles. At the centre of an adjoining room he stopped, and with a quick motion, kicked a large fur aside. A wooden door with a ring of worn metal was cut into the floor. He gripped the ring, grunted and raised the door. A stairway appeared, leading down into darkness. There was a strong odour, strange but not unpleasant, wafting up from the blackness.

“Quickly, children. Time is short.”

I held Pippa back. “We do not know him. What if — ”

“What else shall we do, Coriko?”

Hoofbeats sounded outside. I stepped around her and took the first steps down into the dark, Pippa close behind me. As the door swung closed